Subaltern Communication for Social Change: The Struggles of Manual Scavengers in India

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SUBALTERN COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: THE STRUGGLES OF MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN INDIA

By
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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida
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This study aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse of Communication for Social Change (CSC) by expanding its theoretical scope beyond its current framework. The current theoretical framework of CSC is dualistic, with one-way modernization-diffusion paradigm on one end and the two-way dialogue-participation paradigm on the other. I argue that the understanding of both these paradigms in CSC discourse is based on planned and externally-driven approaches to social change. Such planned theoretical perspectives are insufficient for the purpose of explaining the autonomous struggles of marginalized, disadvantaged, and subaltern communities. I propose a third category for consideration in the theoretical framework of CSC, that accommodates bottom-up autonomous communication of subaltern communities for social change. Such subaltern CSC often may lack resources used in the planned approaches and are informed by subaltern cultures and practices. I argue that the study of subaltern CSC needs different theoretical perspectives than those which traditionally guide the field of CSC.

This study aims to explore and map some of the aspects of subaltern communication through the struggles of manual scavenging communities in Mumbai, Maharashtra. A sanitation worker manually handling human waste is called a manual scavenger. The subaltern communities of manual scavengers in India are fighting to end this caste-enforced practice and the discrimination and untouchability they are subjected to by the dominating
communities in the country. Their struggles also include fighting their economic conditions on a regular basis, being marginalized and deprived from education and wealth for ages. My study attempts to bring attention to their many struggles in addition to exploring the theoretical and practical aspects of subaltern CSC and contribute to the theoretical discourse on the subject.
DEDICATION

On the day of my defense, October 26, 2018, three manual scavengers died in a manhole in Thane, Mumbai. I dedicate my dissertation to all such workers in India who have lost their lives doing manual scavenging and those who are still doing this dehumanizing and fatal work. I am particularly thankful and owe this dissertation to all those manual scavengers who participated in this study.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................... vii

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................... 1

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................ 12
   The idea of social change................................................................................. 12
   Communication for social change: The theoretical landscape ....................... 18
   Subaltern communication for social change .................................................... 26
   Dalithood and manual scavenging: Subalterns in India................................... 43
   Research questions........................................................................................... 52

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY..................................................................... 54
   The study approach .......................................................................................... 54
   The study design .............................................................................................. 60
   The analysis ..................................................................................................... 73

4 FINDINGS ...................................................................................................... 80
   Demographic summary .................................................................................... 81
   A. Employment of manual scavengers ........................................................... 82
   B. Struggles of manual scavengers ................................................................. 99
   B1. Working as manual scavengers ................................................................. 99
   B2. Caste, community, and lack of opportunities ............................................ 110
   C. Subaltern communication for social change .............................................. 121

5 DISCUSSION .................................................................................................. 147
   On subaltern communication for social change ............................................. 148
   On the communities into manual scavenging ............................................... 157
   On the role of the government ....................................................................... 162

6 CONCLUSION ................................................................................................ 171
   Limitations ....................................................................................................... 175
   Implications for future research ..................................................................... 177

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................... 179
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDELINES ............................................................. 193
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS .............. 194
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Demographic information of the study participants ..................................... 82
Figure 2: Common employment types of the study participants ................................. 84
Figure 3: Common income scale of the study participants .......................................... 98
Figure 4: Membership of labor unions among the study participants ......................... 131
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: List of the regions in Mumbai where interviews were conducted ................. 69
Chapter 1

Introduction

Communication for social change (CSC) is the field of study that includes all the approaches to and applications of communication for enabling positive change in society. This dissertation study proposes a subaltern perspective of CSC and initiates a theoretical inquiry on the topic. It discusses “subaltern CSC” as a new theoretical perspective based on Antonio Gramsci’s (Green, 2002) theory of subalternity. The study aims to explore subaltern CSC through the experiences of manual scavenging communities in India and their ongoing struggles. Manual scavenging communities are subjected to a very dehumanizing work of cleaning human waste and this is done using the Hinduism-sanctioned caste system in India. The following sections will explain the significance of this study, its research objectives, and the methodological approach it takes.

The Need for a Subaltern Perspective in Communication for Social Change

The initial approaches to CSC (or “development communication” as it was referred to earlier) were based on the idea that modernization meant development, which could be caused by spreading persuasive messages through mass media (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). The modernization-diffusion paradigm of development communication led to the genesis of approaches such as social marketing, behavior change communication, and entertainment education, which are still very popular and frequently used. As some of the limitations of the modernization-as-development approach became evident to development and social change researchers and practitioners (Melkote & Steeves, 2001), they started looking for alternative approaches to social change and shifted towards more dialogic and participatory practices (Servaes, 1999).
The dialogue-participation paradigm endorses more grassroots approaches to social change and encourages the involvement of the people whose lives are getting affected the most (Cornwall, 2008; Feek, 2006; Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Some major approaches preferred now include community-based and community-led participatory projects, public dialogue, community radios, photovoice, and self-help approaches to social change. CSC scholarship now applies the theoretical framework of the dialogue-participation paradigm to study a range of social change events, practices, and issues. Such studies include that of development agencies and experts-planned social change projects, as well as autonomous people-led social movements, protests, and struggles. That is, the externally-planned community-based projects and the autonomous community-led efforts are studied using the same theoretical framework of dialogue and participation within the discipline of CSC.

In this dissertation, I question this dualistic theoretical landscape of the discipline of CSC with the one-way and top-down approach of modernization-diffusion paradigm on one end and the two-way dialogue-participation paradigm on the other. I argue that neither of these theoretical paradigms sufficiently explain the autonomous bottom-up community-led efforts and experiences of communicating for social change. While the one-way modernization-diffusion paradigm is clearly not used for studying bottom-up autonomous CSC efforts, the two-way dialogue-participation paradigm is extensively and inappropriately applied for the same (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Feek, 2005; Thomas, 2017). When it comes to their theoretical analyses, not much distinction is maintained between the two-way, externally-planned and -initiated projects and the bottom-up autonomous struggles of subaltern communities for social change.
However, the experiences of oppressed people, while autonomously struggling to challenge the conditions of their oppression, are very different from their experiences when supported by external change agents. External change agents can help in planning, facilitation, and supervision of social change endeavors but such external support is often missing in case of autonomous grassroots struggles initiated by oppressed communities. The disadvantaged social position of a change agent considerably affects her/his ability to cause social change. Socially oppressed people, therefore, struggle much more to cause the desired social change than change agents coming from comparatively privileged social backgrounds. The communication means, methods, and practices of subaltern communities may also be different from those coming from privileged and institutional backgrounds. We cannot assume that subaltern communities adopt the theory-driven approaches to CSC without any formal training on them. Thus, I argue that the theoretical framework of the dialogue-participation paradigm of CSC, which explains the two-way CSC projects planned and initiated by experts, is not sufficient to also explain the bottom-up autonomous and people-initiated and led CSC efforts.

Distinguishing autonomous struggles of oppressed people from the experts-planned and initiated social change programs will help understand the differences and nuances of both the scenarios. This dissertation attempts to bring attention to their differences and recommends the use of a fresh theoretical perspective to understand the cases of autonomous struggles of oppressed people. Thus, instead of considering only two broad categories of approaches to CSC, we can consider three broad categories of CSC practices for a better theoretical understanding: (a) expert-initiated, top-down, and one-way, dissemination of information/message approaches as explained by the modernization-
diffusion paradigm of CSC; (b) externally-initiated, two-way approaches to communicate with disadvantaged communities as explained by the dialogue-participation paradigm of CSC; and (c) people-initiated, bottom-up, autonomous efforts of subaltern communities to communicate with dominant communities for social change.

In this dissertation, I aim to explore the third category, of people-led CSC practices, and recommend a consideration of fresh theoretical perspectives instead of limiting the understanding to dialogue and participation only. I derive from Antonio Gramsci’s (Green, 2002) theory of subalternity to understand the agency of oppressed people to fight themselves for their causes. Whatever the conditions of oppression are, the oppressed people always have the potential to challenge and change their conditions (Green, 2002). I, thereby, refer to the CSC practices of subaltern people in their autonomous struggles for social change as *subaltern CSC* to distinguish it from the two *planned CSC* approaches described earlier. Subaltern CSC is, therefore, not just about dialogic and participatory communication, but about all the communication means and practices employed by subaltern communities as they fight their subordination by ruling/elite/dominant communities in society.

Subaltern CSC differs from the planned CSC in being subjected to and shaped by a constant oppression by ruling communities, as experienced by subaltern communities. In other words, the CSC practiced by subaltern communities is also subalternized. This situation of conflict between ruling and subaltern communities is an important aspect of Gramsci’s theory of subalternity (Green, 2002). A theoretical understanding of subaltern CSC, thus, needs to also consider the presence of this constant domination by and hegemony of ruling communities. Such an active consideration of oppressing communities
and their oppressive role is not an essential part of the planned CSC. On the other hand, subaltern CSC entails an inevitable consideration of people, practices, and conditions that can marginalize the subaltern voice and agency for CSC. This might be one of the major differences between planned CSC and subaltern CSC, that the planned approaches primarily speak to or engage with marginalized and oppressed individuals and communities, while subaltern CSC primarily targets the oppressive people or the ruling communities that need to be challenged. That is, while planned CSC approaches seek marginalized communities to be their primary audience, subaltern CSC seek to address ruling communities and make their subaltern voices heard.

Subaltern communities can be easily “muted,” their voices unheard, and their ability to express themselves limited. Hegemonic communities tend to dominate the means and platforms of communication as well. They have more availability of resources than others as they are the ones controlling them. Subaltern communities usually lack the resources, skills, and access that can help with their CSC efforts. Subaltern CSC is, therefore, likely influenced and shaped by the cultural practices of subaltern communities, which might be their only resources/skills to depend on. Subaltern CSC is about challenging their conditions of mutesness through whichever direct or indirect means available to them. It is about strengthening the subaltern voice against the powerful resistance from hegemonic communities using whatever resources available to subaltern communities.

However, as the conditions of subordination vary with different subaltern communities, their CSC may also differ in their approaches to counter their different challenges. Many factors such as their education, economic conditions, political
organizing, geographical location and access, histories of oppression, may affect a subaltern community’s CSC practices. Therefore, subaltern CSC may differ with different subalterns. Also, they may use not just one approach/practice for CSC, but multiple CSC approaches and practices. Subaltern CSC can, therefore, be not a single theory or approach but a complex mix and pool of many approaches to social change that are employed by subaltern communities. With such potential differences between subaltern CSC and planned CSC in consideration, I investigated the conditions of manual scavenging communities in Mumbai, India, and their struggles against their oppressive conditions to explore subaltern CSC in this dissertation.

**Manual Scavengers in India**

In this dissertation, I study the subaltern community of manual scavengers in India. Manual scavengers are one of the worst-affected and most-exploited communities as a result of the caste system in Hindu religion and culture. Manual scavenging, the dehumanizing practice of making a person manually clean human waste, is existing in India since a long time. The caste system in Hinduism also approves the practice of manual scavenging and prescribes it to select few caste communities that are considered the most low-born. They are the most excluded and exploited communities in a Hindu society, deprived of rights and dignity both. Even today, most of the sanitation workers and manual scavengers in India come from these communities (Mander, 2014).

Chapter 2 details the different forms of manual scavenging still existing in India despite its modernization and development. The sewer lines running under modern Indian cities are also cleaned manually by sanitation workers by entering them, most often without any protection. Poisonous gases coming out of decomposing human waste are fatal and
have claimed many lives. Despite two laws enacted by the Indian government to prohibit manual scavenging (the 1993 Act and the 2013 Act), the practice continues unchecked. A report claims that during 2017 sanitation workers died in sewer lines and septic tanks in India almost at the rate of one every other day (Nigam & Dubey, 2017). Indian society’s caste-endorsed apathy towards the plight of manual scavengers is a big reason for their continued exploitation and social exclusion. The selection of this topic for this study is an attempt to highlight the seriousness of the issue and bring more attention to this ongoing violation of human rights and dignity.

**Research Objectives and Approach**

I consider the struggles of sanitation workers engaged in manual scavenging as a case of subaltern CSC. In this study, I explore their subaltern experiences and narratives of communicating for social change. This is an attempt to carefully avoid the planned CSC theoretical framework and be open to understand their CSC through their perspective(s), a subaltern perspective(s). The objective is to understand what constitutes the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers and how they express it while communicating with privileged and ruling communities. The study also aims to explore how subaltern CSC and its effects change with more awareness and organizing among manual scavengers. This study also helps further understand the differences between subaltern CSC and the planned CSC approaches. The objective of this study is to build a theoretical basis to understand and study subaltern CSC in future. This is also an attempt to amplify the voices of manual scavenging communities as they are fighting their conditions of oppression.

This being an exploratory study, I take a qualitative approach of a narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of manual scavenging communities in fighting their
conditions. In a narrative inquiry, the participants don’t just respond to the posed questions, they tell a story, in a way they think is best to describe their experiences (Riessman, 1993). The approach not just enables the study of the content of the stories of participants, but also the styles and structures in which those stories are framed and narrated. The narrative approach requires the least interference from the researcher and enables the study participants to shape and structure their own stories based on the events they find most relevant and important to the topic under discussion. A narrative inquiry allows the subaltern voices of manual scavengers to define their own stories of fighting for social change (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993). It is only through their own narratives that subaltern CSC of manual scavengers can be understood the most. For this study, I have used the in-depth interviewing method to elicit the narratives of manual scavengers. The various narratives of the study participants together helped create a comprehensive understanding of their CSC experiences and practices.

Also, I approached the communities as an external researcher and not as a social change practitioner or expert. In order to avoid influencing their social change endeavors through my privileged subjectivity, I conducted the interviews in their own communities, their homes, or other spaces where they were comfortable talking about the individuals and communities that might be oppressing them. I also avoided visiting their work locations where their employers might notice my presence. Mostly, the narratives of the study participants were about their experiences of communicating for social change without any assistance from external change agents or experts.

The study was conducted in the metropolitan region of Mumbai within the state of Maharashtra in India. The region includes at least eight different municipal corporations
In urban regions maintained by municipal corporations, manual scavenging is mostly not practiced in the traditional form of dry toilets that need individual cleaning. The newer forms of manual scavenging include manual cleaning of clogged sewer lines and septic tanks, which is practiced by municipal corporations as well. Such work is sometimes also fatal as manual scavengers are not provided any protection against the toxic gases trapped inside sewer lines and septic tanks. A number of manual scavengers in Mumbai have lost their lives and continue to do so due to exposure to toxic gases while cleaning sewer lines and septic tanks (Khan, 2017; Ojha, 2017; Parth, 2014). The practice continues despite being banned by the Indian law in 2013 (Mander, 2014).

Mumbai city has a great diversity of communities engaged in sanitation work, varying a lot in their culture, religion, languages, and socio-economic and political conditions. Not all the sanitation workers in the city clean human waste. A lot of these workers are engaged in handling dry waste, collecting it from residential and commercial areas and transferring it to dump sites. Manual scavengers are only those sanitation workers who handle human waste and engage in activities such as cleaning of public, community and private toilets, sewer lines, septic tanks, open drains, railway tracks, and open areas where people defecate. Such workers, who can be called as manual scavengers, were approached for in-depth interviews for this study. The recorded interviews were transcribed, coded using the NVivo software, and analyzed.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 offers a detailed literature review on the topic. It is divided into four major sections. The first section gives a brief overview of how the idea of social change
developed in social sciences and how it is understood currently in the field of CSC. The second section describes the field of CSC and maps its theoretical landscape as it progressed from the initial phase of the modernization-diffusion paradigm of development to the recent phase of the dialogue-participation paradigm of social change. The third section of this chapter problematizes the lack of subaltern perspective within the theoretical framework of CSC and introduces Gramsci’s concept of subalternity. Here I describe idea of subaltern CSC and compare it with the current theoretical understanding of CSC. The fourth section of this chapter introduces the problem of caste in the hierarchical Hindu society in India and explains the oppression faced by Dalits, the most oppressed castes in the hierarchy. It also describes the caste-based practice of manual scavenging to which some Dalit communities are subjected. The chapter ends with the research questions for this study.

Chapter 3 explains the epistemological and methodological approach used in this study. The chapter describes why a narrative inquiry is selected as the research methodology for the study. It also includes a brief discussion of manual scavenging communities in Mumbai and how the participants for this study were selected and approached. The method of interviewing is very critical in a narrative inquiry, which is described next. This section also offers the details of my positionality in this context, which may have affected my interaction with the study participants. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and ethical considerations for this study. See Appendix A for the interview guidelines used for the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Chapter 4 summarizes the study findings from the coding and analysis of the interview transcripts. The first section of this chapter summarizes the employment and
work conditions of the study participants, as described in the interviews. The second section explains the challenges that the study participants said they face most in their personal lives. The last section of this chapter is about the subaltern communication and expressions of the study participants in their efforts to deal with their challenges. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the study findings and their theoretical implications. The dissertation ends with Chapter 6 that includes the conclusion of this study, a discussion of its limitations, and some recommendations for future research on the topic of subaltern CSC.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The Idea of Social Change

The understanding of social change that informs the field of Communication for Social Change (CSC) is about the human agency to take conscious efforts to cause desirable positive change in society. However, the discourse on social change is much wider, rich with a range of perspectives on what social change means and how it takes place in society. Applebaum (1970) explains that the “social” in “social change” depends on the level of human action involved, ranging from individual-level to larger cultural-level actions. Social change theories can also be classified according to the kind of “change” they predict – large-scale versus small-scale, long-term versus short-term, and minor change in process versus structural change (Applebaum, 1970).

Another aspect of social change, which is of particularly relevant here, is the human agency to cause change. In classical sociology, the idea of social change was more about finding explanations and patterns of the social order and its macro-level changes, and less about the human agency for social change. Social change was not thought of as an intentional activity by humans but as an inevitable outcome of human existence. An individual’s agency to cause social change was not given much importance. Social change was a byproduct of human activities. Society was often equated with a system or an organism or a mechanism following its own path or course of action, too large and beyond the scope of individuals.

August Comte and Herbert Spencer were among those who saw the social world as an organism, evolving from simple to complex phases with time (Applebaum, 1970; Noble,
This understanding of society as an organism was drawing from Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Other major evolutionary theorists include Henry Sumner Maine and Ferdinand Toennies who also perceived society to change unilinearly to a more complex form (Applebaum, 1970). As per the evolutionary theories, when the society is considered to evolve on its own with its changing conditions any human action for social change is rendered meaningless and unwanted. Conscious efforts to cause social change were thought of as disturbances to the society, the organism undergoing evolution to become its finer self.

Thomas Hobbes, Talcott Parsons, and Emile Durkheim were some of the leading proponents of the systems analogy. As society was a system to them, it was important to keep the system stable and functioning, that is, to maintain its equilibrium (Applebaum, 1970; Noble, 2000; Sztompka, 1993). The equilibrium theorists were mainly concerned about a loss of social order and equilibrium; chaos and anarchy can destroy the stability of the system according to them. People were expected to comply, fit in, assimilate in the system, and not disturb it. Fredrick Taylor perceived organizations similar to machines, in which people were to do the function of their parts (Noble, 2000). The human agency to cause social change was, thus, instead feared by these thinkers.

There were also some theorists like Karl Marx, Vilfredo Pareto, and Antonio Gramsci who saw society primarily in terms of conflict among different social groups and their conflict being the driving force of change (Applebaum, 1970; Coser, 1956; Green, 2002; Noble, 2000). While for the equilibrium theorists, restoring equilibrium and stability was the natural tendency of society, the conflict theorists believed the natural tendency of society was to experience conflicts and constantly undergo change. According to Marx,
those who can cause social change and bring revolution are the working class, the “proletariat” (Noble, 2000). He regarded economic conditions as the root cause of all social conflicts and the resulting change. Pareto saw social change as a mere circulation of power between two kinds of elite groups, traditional elites and progressive elites (Noble, 2000). He did not see non-elites as capable of countering the power of elites. Gramsci saw conflict to be mainly between the “ruling groups” that enjoy social and political power, and “subaltern groups” that get exploited and ruled (Green, 2002). For Gramsci, subaltern groups had the potential to transform the society.

Sztompka (1993) notes that the idea of human agency has been a slow one to develop in sociology, “gradually secularized, humanized and socialized” from its initial location in “the domain of the supernatural” (p. 191). Of less relevance here are the thinkers like Robert Merton who focused only on the unintended agency of people to cause social change (Sztompka, 1993). Anthony Giddens also conceptualized social change as an outcome of human agency to take actions that are often just part of their everyday conduct and mostly not change-oriented or intentional (Sztompka, 1993). These theorists sought to explain how “the social structure works ‘behind the backs’ of the social actors,” as Turner (2009, p. 8) puts it. Such social change in absence of an intention for it is referred to as “spontaneous social change” (Sato, 2006; Sztompka, 1993). The active and conscious intention and agency of common people to act for social change was not regarded seriously in sociology for a long time.

Max Weber first talked about the intentionality of individuals to cause social change and take relevant actions. He clearly distinguished “rational actions” from “traditional actions” that are rituals- or culture-driven actions, and “emotional actions” that
are impulse- or feelings-driven actions (Noble, 2000). Rational actions are, according to Weber, either driven by purpose/goal or by values. Even though Weber highlighted the intentionality for social change (Noble, 2000) relatively early, the idea got attention in sociology much later. Only recently the discussion on social change has focused on the active and intended, individual and collective agency and actions of humans. Sato (2006) defines “intentional social change” as “the kind of social change which particular change agent endeavors to bring about with specific intentions or purposes” (p. 2).

Some thinkers focused only on the agency of “Great Men” like “prophets, heroes, leaders, commanders, discoverers, inventors, geniuses” to cause social change (Sztompka, 1993, p. 191). Common people and communities were not seen as potential change agents. On the other hand, some thinkers focused only on the agency of social groups to cause social change. These include Amitai Etzioni who pointed out the collective agency and actions of groups he referred as “collectivities” to cause social change (Sztompka, 1993). Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg noted the potential of people to change systems and organizations through the process of creative and “collective learning” (Sztompka, 1993). Tom Burns and Helena Flam highlighted the agency of people to change social rule systems. Alain Touraine (2002) argued that social movements are the most critical collective actions that bring change to a society by attacking its established foundations. Saul Alinsky (1971) was among those who found both radical leaders as well as common people capable of driving change together through strategic action.

There are also some intentional social change efforts that are neither rooted in conflicts nor driven by common people. Positive social change can also be planned, coordinated, and executed by people, organizations, and institutions having power and
authority. Sztompka (1993) calls “the processes released intentionally, purposefully oriented toward some goals, designed and controlled by an agency equipped with power” as “planned” social change or the “imposed ‘from above’” processes (p. 22) (also see Weinstein, 2010). Planned social change started getting widely practiced by governments and funding agencies as the idea of “development” started getting popular. The initial conceptualization of development was based on diffusion theories that found Western\(^1\) notions of democracy, nationalism, and modernization to be progressive, promising, and worth promoting in other societies for their welfare (Chilcote, 1984). This evangelistic project of bringing the “modern” Western social, cultural, economic, and political practices, as well as technologies, to the “traditional” societies that were still existing within the “undeveloped” or “underdeveloped” nations can be referred to as modernization. The idea of modernization-as-development is also rooted in an evolutionary and unilinear perception of social change (Applebaum, 1970; So, 1990). Many scholars and practitioners still perceive modernization-as-development to be the only approach to planned social change.

Development approach did not always deliver the progress and prosperity it promised. The unending pursuit of capital growth does not ensure equitable distribution of resources and a transformation of society (Chilcote, 1984). Also, the approach was mistakenly based on an assumption that the Western model of growth will work everywhere and will be accepted/desired by the people elsewhere, which doesn’t always happen. The development model ended up creating a dependence of traditional societies on Western countries for development support (Rogers, 1976; So, 1990). The planning for

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\(^1\)“Western” here stands for Western Europe and Northern America. These regions are also called the First World.
the development model is also questioned for being very centralized, determined by a few development experts who are not approachable by local people whose lives get affected.

Lately, scholars and practitioners are also engaging in more participatory (or say democratic) approaches to planned social change. Participatory approaches are based in an understanding that the people at grassroots have the right and agency to get involved in and lead the processes that affect their lives. Approaches such as community mobilizing and organizing are rooted in this understanding of the capability of marginalized people to cause social change. Paulo Freire (1970/2005) suggested that the process of liberation of oppressed people begins with themselves as they start building a consciousness of their conditions of oppression. Social change, according to Freire, cannot be achieved without the participation of oppressed people. Like the development approach to planned social change, participatory approaches have also become popular. However, scholars have pointed out that an excessive emphasis on local people’s participation also sometimes results in a neglect of other important sites for the desired social change (Carpentier, 2011; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Waisbord, 2001).

The discourse of communication for development and social change, which is delineated in the next section, is mainly informed by the idea of intended and planned social change. As mentioned earlier, the field is driven by the idea of causing desired positive change in society. We can see a paradigm shift in the subject over time, from the idea of “modernization as development” to more participatory and dialogic approaches to communication for social change. The next section briefly describes this theoretical shift of communication for social change.
Communication for Social Change: The theoretical landscape

Over time, communication practices for social change have kept changing as have the theoretical perspectives accompanied by advancing technology and an improving sociological understanding of human society and its cultural diversity. Early scholars and practitioners perceived the role of communication only as assisting “development” work, as evident by the initial nomenclature: “development communication,” “development support communication,” and then “communication for development” (C4D) (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Today, while the nomenclature C4D is still in use, the terms like “Communication for Social Change” (CSC) (Thomas & van de Fliert, 2015) or “Communication for Development and Social Change” (Servaes, 2008a) are preferred more. As this shift suggests, the scholarship on the subject has progressed from the limited understanding exemplified in the West-influenced “development” agenda to a broader understanding of “social change” that encompasses diverse indigenous and grassroots efforts. In this study, CSC is regarded as an umbrella term that encompasses all approaches to and applications of communication for enabling positive change in society. This section summarizes the major paradigms of CSC theories and practices that have garnered sustained interest and application.

The modernization-diffusion paradigm of development. As mentioned earlier, the initial ideas of development were based on the Western perception of progress. The West perceived its own socioeconomic and political system to be the ideal, the best a civilization could be at that time, and considered any deviation from it as a lack of development. The Western pursuit of economic growth through urbanization and industrialization became synonymous with the idea of development. According to Lerner
(1958), and Rogers and Svenning (1969), communication plays a very important role in the process of modernization. Initial diffusion studies (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Ryan & Gross, 1943) found that modern values, methods, practices, and innovations can be spread in stages by the communication of influential information through opinion leaders.

Rogers and Svenning (1969) suggested that, in addition to influential opinion leaders, the information needed for the process of modernization can spread more rapidly by mass media. In other words, mass media can work as “magic multipliers” in the process of modernization, that is, development (Rogers with Svenning, 1969, p. 116). Schramm (1964) also found the amplifier effect of mass media to be particularly useful for the agenda of national development. Lerner (1958) claimed that mass media improve people’s exposure to new experiences and thereby improve their “psychic mobility,” that is the ability to empathize with a wider range of people, which helped people to adopt modern ways and thereby accelerate the process of development. (p. 52). Inkeles and Smith (1974) claimed, “the mass media were in the front rank, along with the school and the factory, as inculcators of individual modernization” (p. 146).

Mass media became the star of the modernization paradigm with their promising potential to spread modernization to accelerate the process of development. “The application of communication strategies and principles in the developing world” to help achieve “development or progress equivalent to Western countries” was referred to as development communication (Waisbord, 2001, p. 1). The modernization-diffusion paradigm initiated and dominated the CSC discourse for a long time and, therefore, is commonly referred to as the dominant paradigm (Rogers, 1978).
Under the modernization-diffusion paradigm, mass media were regarded very useful for persuasion, as the efforts were to convince individuals to discard their traditional values and practices and adopt the modern ones. The persuasion approach employed mass media messages to bring about the desired changes in audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2008). Mass media were used to disseminate predesigned messages to a target audience with the intention to influence their knowledge, attitude, beliefs, or/and behavior about a certain topic. The development goal was to achieve the desired changes in the addressed individuals. The individual-level persuasive techniques used for development communication are still widely used for various objectives such as health-related communication, social marketing, and entertainment education.

Mass media did not turn out to be as effective as projected by the modernization-diffusion paradigm (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Rogers, 1976). The access to mass media depended on the socio-economic condition of the audience. Even after making the mass media accessible through aggressive policies and planning, the Western top-down centralized mass media did not fit the needs and conditions of local people (Escobar, 1995). Moreover, mass media could not bring about much behavioral change in cases where the macro-level conditions were not favorable (Waisbord, 2001). These observations attracted further research attention to the opportunities and limitations of the role communication can play in the development process.

Melkote and Steeves (2001) explain that such efforts “resulted in the conceptualization of communication as a dynamic support to development projects and activities, termed development support communication (DSC)” (p. 62). The role of
communication was now to ensure “the creation of the human environment necessary for a development program to succeed” (Waisbord, 2001, p. 4). Another term that emerged at the same time and continues to be used is communication for development (C4D), that is the “intentional use of communication technologies and processes to advance socially beneficial goals” (Wilkins & Mody, 2001, p. 385). DSC and C4D were widening the theoretical perspective and scope to overcome the flaws of development communication.

The multiplicity paradigm and alternative perspectives. Development scholars started looking for alternative approaches as they realized that “the problem of development is a relative one… no part of the world can claim to be developed in all respects” (Servaes, 1999, p. 6). The idea of the possibility of “another development,” first proposed by Dag Hammarskjold Foundation in 1975, triggered scholarly interest in a variety of alternative approaches (Quarry & Ramirez, 2013; Servaes, 1999). Another development, that is, development on the parameters and goals other than those set by the modernization-diffusion paradigm, seemed appropriate to replace the dominant perception of development.

Culture was found to be a key factor in influencing people’s willingness to change. Development experts started becoming more receptive to local cultures, practices, and expertise. Another development accommodates multiple approaches to development, not just one single pre-determined, calculated, and expert-driven approach such as the one proposed by the modernization-diffusion paradigm. Thus, local communities within developing nations were now considered capable of helping themselves, using their own expertise and resources, instead of depending on external assistance. Servaes (1999) called this new trend of “multiplicity of viewpoints and associated methodological approaches”
or in other words, “multidimensional development” as the *multiplicity paradigm* of development (p. 5).

When development began to be viewed as a participatory and indigenous process, the role of communication for development also started to shift from a “hierarchical, bureaucratic, and sender-oriented” top-down and one-way process to a more “horizontal, participative, and receiver-oriented” two-way process (Servaes, 1999, p. 83). People’s “access” to communication and their “participation” are primary principles guiding this alternative approach (Servaes, 1999). “The emphasis was not on big media but appropriate media,” as Melkote and Steeves (2001) point out (p. 249). *Traditional media* or *folk media*, rooted in local cultures and being widely available to local people, appealed to those seeking alternative approaches. This phase of alternative perspectives also saw a critical reconsideration of the term “development” and a gradual and incomplete switch to “social change” from “development” within the CSC discourse.

**The dialogue-participation paradigm of social change.** The participation approach takes back the power of decision-making from development experts and brings it to the people. People’s voice and opinions regarding their own welfare have become important to defining the problem and determining its solution. People’s participation in their own welfare is also seen as their democratic right (Feek, 2006). The higher the participation of people, the more authentic a social change endeavor is considered (Cornwall, 2008). The objective is not to influence individual behaviors, but to empower the local people to challenge social malpractices, injustices, and inequalities. The solutions and actions coming from the local communities are also more rooted in the local cultural practices, and, therefore, promise to work better to address local problems than those
planned by external experts. The participation paradigm also improved the understanding of the role played by environmental factors such as the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions in hindering or supporting social change.

CSC theorists endorsing the participatory paradigm consider dialogic theory fundamental to the use of communication for social change (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes, 1999). An academic interest in dialogue as a way of gaining insights initiated long back, with Socrates and his disciple Plato (Christians, 1988). The recent dialogic theory derives primarily from Martin Buber (1923/1970) who claimed that humans understand themselves and their world only in relation to others: “Man becomes an I through a You” (p. 80). And this understanding happens only through a dialogic encounter between humans as “all actual life is encounter” (Buber, 1923/1970, p. 62). Buber (1923/1970) called such dialogue as the “basic word I-You” as against non-dialogic encounters referred to as the “basic word I-It.”

For Freire (1970/2005) as well, dialogue is a means of understanding the world, of conscientization. It is only after conscientization that oppressed people can get liberated from their oppression according to Freire (1970/2005). His idea of dialogue offers the opportunity to oppressed people to understand their oppression, that is to “name their world.” Dialogue, thus, becomes critical, an “existential necessity” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 88), for the liberation of the oppressed because “only dialogue truly communicates” (Freire, 1969/2006, p. 41). Freire (1970/2005) explains that such dialogue can only happen when the people engaged in it have love, respect, and trust for each other, have hope for a better future, and are willing to engage in critical thinking.
On a similar note, Hans-Georg Gadamer found dialogue as a process of creating understanding, or rather “communicative understanding,” among humans about each other (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004, p. 3). For Gadamer, understanding is “a dialogic and reciprocal experience of questioning texts and remaining open to being questioned by them” (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004, p. 3). Thus, when people engage in a dialogue, meanings are collaboratively “produced” by them rather than being merely “reproduced” by them. Through dialogue, when two or more different worlds intersect or when they reach an understanding or an interpretation of each other, Gadamer calls it a “fusion of horizons” (as cited in Kepnes, 1992, p. 29). Such a fusion, Gadamer claims as Buber (1923/1970) also hinted, “will lead to a fundamental change not only in the interpreter’s worldview but in his or her existential self” (Kepnes, 1992, p. 29).

Jürgen Habermas expected dialogue to serve as a means of enabling people of diverse viewpoints to be able to meaningfully interact with each other and move towards “a genuine consensus – a discursively achieved consensus” (Held, 1980, p. 256). Such a consensus can help create an emancipated world society established on democratic principles, “a self-effectuating or self-directing society” that works through public dialogues (Habermas, 2003, p. 87). He claimed that a consensus achieved under the “ideal speech situation” is a “rational consensus,” that is “the ultimate criterion of the truth of a statement or of the correctness of norms” (Held, 1980, p. 256). Such ideal speech situations can be achieved when participants are free to communicate truthfully and sincerely without any coercion and the discussion remains inclusive for all of them. The “free and equal participants” should also be open to the perspectives of others (Habermas, 1999, p. 58).
Mikhail Bakhtin’s approach to dialogue is commonly termed as dialogism (Holquist, 1990). His contribution to the discourse was unique as he conceptualized dialogue to have at least three participants – past speakers whose words or ideas are being used, the present speaker, and future speakers who will interpret, repeat, or respond to the spoken dialogue. In that, Bakhtin added a temporal dimension to dialogue and framed it as a social process that is never-ending regardless of the speakers. Therefore, a mere utterance is also authorship or co-authorship of the dialogue for Bakhtin. Such engagement in dialogue is impossible to avoid for anyone as, according to him, we are “in dialogue, not only with other human beings, but also with the natural and cultural configurations we lump together as ‘the world’” (Holquist, 1990, pp. 29-30). And we cannot avoid this dialogue because we owe that “answerability” to respond to the dialogue addressing us from our unique perspectives or “locations” in this world.

The dialogic theory supports the participatory principles of CSC. Jacobson (2007) strongly recommends that the quality and extent of dialogue should be regarded as a key indicator of participation in any social change program: “The effective evaluation of participation in interventions must focus singly on the extent to which participatory dialog is allowed to take place” (p. 2). International development organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation also conceptualize social change through participatory community dialogues that lead to collective action of the participants (Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, & Lewis, 2002). Servaes (2008b) concludes, “put simply, development programmes cannot produce change without an ongoing, culturally and socially relevant communication dialogue among development providers and clientele, and within the recipient group itself”
Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002) explain the importance of dialogic communication in participatory social change:

It has not been sufficiently recognized that participation and communication are different sides of the same coin. Only by creating communication processes in which people in the community enter into dialogue and analytical discussion among themselves will they participate and decide for themselves on changes that affect their lives and become active in implementing them. (pp. 69-70)

Thus, in this paradigm, theorists perceive social change to happen only through communication that offers a participatory and dialogic platform to local people. The role of CSC practitioners under this paradigm is primarily that of the facilitators – of a community’s participation in dialogue within itself and with concerned outsiders, in a manner that enables collective action. Community radios widely use dialogic-participatory communication to mobilize local communities and encourage their participation in addressing their issues. Development and social change practices that were so far primarily using modernization-diffusion approach are also slowly moving towards more dialogic-participatory approaches (Halvorsen, 2012; Tufte, 2005; Wang & Burris, 1997). The dialogic-participatory approach is fundamental to the current theoretical understanding of CSC. Today, hardly any CSC program can be designed without including participatory and dialogic approaches as and when feasible.

Subaltern Communication for Social Change

As discussed in the previous section, the dialogue-participation paradigm brings attention to the voice and agency of the marginalized communities of society and aims to empower them. In this section, I take this approach one step further and closer to the perspective of marginalized and disadvantaged people. I distinguish between the CSC autonomously practiced by marginalized people and that initiated by the agents external to
their communities. Here, I bring attention to the subjectivity of the persons, communities, or organizations communicating for social change and argue for more attention to subaltern perspectives. The section also explains Gramsci’s theory of subalternity, which informs this theoretical argument. Lastly, a subaltern CSC perspective is conceptualized that seeks to bring in the change agent’s subjectivity into the theoretical discourse of CSC.

**From the discourse of communication for social change.** Among the theoretical paradigms of CSC discussed in the earlier section, the dialogue-participation paradigm is the closest to accommodate the voice of disadvantaged and marginalized communities. However, this theoretical perspective informs and explains only those social change efforts in which two-way dialogic and participatory conditions can be established to work towards a goal. Most of the dialogic theorists mentioned earlier asserted that the possibility of dialogue depends on the precondition of having dialogic situations. Be it Buber (1923/1970), Freire (1970/2005), Gadamer (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004), or Habermas (1999), they clearly distinguished between what they recognized as dialogue and all other sorts of non-dialogic interactions. Habermas even named the presence of dialogic conditions as the “ideal speech situation” (Held, 1980). The dialogue-participation paradigm of CSC is, therefore, theoretically inappropriate to apply to and study the scenarios of CSC where dialogic conditions are absent or insufficient.

Marginalized people may often experience repressive powers over themselves. The repressive powers can remain very strong and effective at thwarting dialogic social change efforts by marginalized people in absence of any external authority supporting them. On the other hand, the repressive powers that usually dominate marginalized people may not be as active and effective when authorities such as governments, development agencies,
and external experts are involved in the efforts on the side of the marginalized. Thus, the subjectivity of change agents can have serious impact on the effectiveness of CSC efforts. Marginalized people experiencing repressive powers may lack the agency to achieve dialogic conditions that external authorities and change agents can help achieve.

In many cases of indigenous struggles, we find that the local people are discouraged from raising their voices against the injustice they experience. The radio stations of Bolivian mining workers faced brutal suppression in 1967 by a military dictatorship (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). The mining workers had to resort to armed defense to fight the repression. Apart from the political opposition, economic challenges also made the mining workers’ community radio stations hard to sustain (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). A marginalized community’s effort to engage in participatory social dialogue had to face issues and threats of all sorts. Radio Huayacocotla in Mexico was not even provided the license to operate at an AM frequency for a wider reach; the dominating local landlords pressured the government to limit peasants’ education, awareness, and organizing activities (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). The social change endeavors of marginalized people often face such repression and a denial of dialogic space and conditions.

In many cases, development and social change practitioners attempt to facilitate dialogic and participatory conditions among marginalized communities to empower them to solve their problems. However, there are also many instances of marginalized communities striving to change their oppressive conditions without any help from external change agents. The CSC employed by such autonomous efforts of marginalized people cannot be assumed to take place under dialogic conditions. The oppressed people may also be unfamiliar with the dialogic CSC techniques that experts are trained in. Thus, the
dialogue-participation theoretical perspective cannot be assumed to explain well the CSC in cases of autonomous struggles of marginalized communities where dialogic conditions often may not even exist.

Scott (1985) studied a Malaysian peasant community in search of “everyday forms of peasant resistance” and named the actions he observed as the “weapons of the weak,” which include “foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on” (p. xvi). Huesca (2003) also observed similar clandestine resistance methods among maquiladora workers in Mexico. While these workers could not officially organize themselves and be represented by their union, they resorted to informal and covert organizing through their social networks. Over 20 years of such organizing by the workers could win “a number of small victories in the areas of wages, health, and job security, but it continues to face repressive forces and an intimidating atmosphere that make the airing of grievances a risky activity” (Huesca, 2003, 259). These studies suggest that CSC methods and their effectiveness differ with the change agent’s socio-economic, political, and/or power position in society. Therefore, the communication approaches of marginalized people for their social change efforts are likely to be different from that practiced by the trained practitioners of CSC and development. The study of autonomous CSC efforts of marginalized communities needs fresh theoretical perspectives.

However, the current CSC theoretical discourse does not distinguish well between externally-initiated and facilitated social change endeavors for marginalized people and the social change efforts autonomously initiated by marginalized people themselves. As a result, the CSC employed in both such scenarios are analyzed using the same dialogue-
participation theoretical perspective even though they may have very different characteristics. Paying attention to the subjectivity of change agents who initiate, plan, or facilitate social change endeavors can help maintain this distinction. It is, thus, important to indicate who the initiator/planner/facilitator of a social change effort is even though it is highly participatory. To do the same, CSC efforts can be categorized as either “externally-initiated” or “people-initiated.” Also, people-initiated efforts should not be confused with people-led, community-led, or community-based labels that can also be assigned to the efforts initiated and facilitated by external change agents.

The theoretical framework of CSC categorizes all practices as employing either the “top-down and one-way” communication approach mostly used by the practitioners of modernization-diffusion paradigm, or the “two-way” communication approach endorsed by the dialogue-participation paradigm. Even the autonomous CSC efforts of marginalized communities are assumed to be using a two-way approach to CSC because marginalized communities are involved. However, as discussed earlier, the autonomous CSC efforts of marginalized people may not always result in a dialogue with the people they address. It is also likely that their communication efforts may not be reciprocated at all. It would, therefore, be inaccurate to assume the autonomous people-initiated CSC efforts to have two-way communication. Instead, the people-initiated CSC efforts can be best described as “bottom-up” approaches to CSC as against the terms top-down and two-way that are used to describe expert-initiated CSC efforts.

Differentiating between externally-initiated two-way CSC efforts and people-initiated bottom-up CSC efforts also helps break away from the limitations of the dialogue-participation paradigm and make room for fresh theoretical perspectives to study people-
initiated CSC efforts. This also expands the currently dualistic theoretical framework of CSC from two major categories to three major categories of approaches: (a) expert-initiated, top-down, and one-way CSC approaches as explained by the modernization-diffusion paradigm; (b) externally-initiated, two-way CSC approaches as explained by the dialogue-participation paradigm; and (c) people-initiated, bottom-up, autonomous CSC efforts of disadvantaged and marginalized communities that need fresh theoretical perspectives. In the following section, I propose Gramsci’s theory of subalternity (Green, 2002) as one of the befitting perspectives that can help expand the understanding of people-initiated bottom-up autonomous CSC endeavors. Further, I have also discussed how such CSC efforts can differ from the externally-initiated two-way CSC efforts.

Also, as against the use of passive terms like “marginalized,” “disadvantaged,” or “oppressed,” I propose to address such communities as “subaltern,” a term elaborated by Gramsci. The term “subaltern” offers an opportunity to build an understanding of CSC from the perspective of non-elites, of those who are dominated, and to also simultaneously acknowledge their agency to autonomously communicate for social change. The following description further elaborates the concept of subalternity as theorized by Gramsci.

**Gramsci’s idea of subalternity.** Gramsci first used the term “subaltern” to refer to the people at the inferior ranks in military, “in nonmilitary instances, in regard to positions of subordination or lower status,” and later also to refer to subordinated social “classes” (Green, 2002, p. 2). His idea of subaltern, as Green (2002) reports, developed slowly and ultimately included “slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups” (p. 2).² Thus, while the term is broad in its scope, it

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²As Green (2002) notes, Gramsci used the terms “subaltern groups” and “subaltern classes” interchangeably and did not differentiate between the two.
is also limited to the groups with compromised power positions in society. The idea of “subaltern” is coupled with the idea of those who dominate them and, thus, indicates the binary of the dominant-subaltern, ruling-subaltern, or elite-subaltern. Gramsci’s term “subaltern” also offers the opportunity to acknowledge, for any group experiencing subordination, its agency to have critical consciousness and solidarity to organize and revolt against domination.

After Gramsci, a group of South Asian scholars, also referred to as “subaltern collectivists,” borrowed Gramsci’s concept of subalternity to study the contribution of Indian subalterns, particularly Indian peasants, to the nation’s freedom movement (Guha, 1982; Guha & Spivak, 1988). Subaltern studies were mainly critical of colonialism and nationalism and their influence on the documented history of India’s freedom movement. They also mainly engaged in only historiography as their research methodology due to their focus on historical movements in the colonized India. Although subaltern theory became very popular and is mostly known through their works, in this study, I go back to the original theory of subalternity of Gramsci to keep the scope broad. Gramsci’s original conceptualization of subalternity is much broader than that of subaltern collectivists who mainly engaged with the postcolonial theoretical discourse. Also, in calling the subordinate groups “subalterns,” Gramsci consciously broke away from the theoretical confines of traditional Marxism, of the “proletariat” being the only potential revolutionary (Arnold, 2000; Green, 2002).

Gramsci’s theory of “integral state,” “the notion that the state constitutes both political society and civil society,” helps distinguish between the ruling and the subaltern groups more clearly (Green, 2002, p. 5). The political society constitutes “the idea of a
juridical-administrative state: government, the military, the police, the judiciary, and so on,” while the civil society includes voluntary organizations and institutions “such as trade unions, churches, cultural clubs, newspapers, publishers, political parties, and the like” (Green, 2002, p. 6). The ruling groups do not just dominate in the political society but also in the civil society as they “manufacture, organize, and maintain consent by promoting their hegemony—that is, their ideology, philosophy, ways of life, and so forth” (Green, 2002, p. 7). The political society and the civil society have a “reciprocal relationship,” that is “they support and reinforce each other,” to maintain the ruling group in power in both the domains (Green, 2002, p. 7). The ruling group tries to use its influence in the civil society to gain political power and uses it to maintain its influence in the civil society.

The subalternity of a group or class, thus, manifests itself in both, the political society and the civil society. In addition to political subordination, Gramsci (Green, 2002) also pointed out how the subaltern groups are subordinated further due to their misrepresentations in literature, historiography, and the intellectual discourse. Also, subalternity is not uniform for everyone. According to Gramsci, “subalternity exists in degrees or levels of development” (Green, 2002, p. 10). Not all subaltern groups are equally subaltern. They also differ in their “level of political organization” (Green, 2002, p. 10). While some subaltern groups are “most marginal and peripheral,” others can be “most advanced” and closer to overcoming their subordination (Green, 2002, p. 10). As a subaltern group progresses from a stage of undeveloped class consciousness to higher stages of class consciousness and organizing, it gains more autonomy and possibility of gaining power in society.
Gramsci suggested six phases of development for subaltern groups, starting from “the making of a subaltern class” and ending with their “assertion of complete social and political economy” (Green, 2002). On the same lines, Pankaj and Pandey (2014) explain the idea of *differential subalternity*, also known as “differentially positioned subalterns” or “subalterns within subalterns” (p. 8). As against the “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) explained earlier, more organized subaltern groups shift to “weapons of the organized,” with “a greater willingness to engage in open conflict, to take legal action against those in power who violate their rights, to use their organisation’s clout to influence political and policy processes, and to assert themselves as citizens” (Kabeer, Milward, & Sudarshan, 2013, p. 261). Social movements, which are larger expressions of social dissent, are also among the weapons of the organized. Touraine (2002) explains social movements to be “organized conflicts or as conflicts between organized actors” (p. 90).

Subalternity can also be of multiple kinds and multiple conditions of subalternity may exist simultaneously for an individual or a group. The concept of *multiple subalternity* (Pankaj & Pandey, 2014) is similar to that of *intersectionality* of social categories of marginalization. Green (2011) suggests that “Gramsci recognized that subalternity was not merely defined by class relations but rather an intersection of class, race, culture, and religion that functioned in different modalities in specific historical contexts” (p. 395). McCall (2005) explains intersectionality as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (p. 1771). The manifestation of multiple subalternity is categorically different from that of a single dimension/modality of subordination.
Also, as Green (2002) points out, a disorganized condition is not a determining element of subalternity. “In Gramsci’s conception, organization alone will not resolve group marginalization; only the transformation of the relations of subordination will resolve group marginalization” (Green, 2002, p. 18). Thus, a subaltern group remains subaltern even if it is well organized and has gained some autonomy, until it gains complete political and social power and transforms the oppressive state and society. That is, subaltern groups sometimes do have some agency to challenge and change their oppressive conditions. Subalternity is not necessarily a complete absence of voice and agency as Spivak (1988) suggested in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*; it is relational and dynamic (Nilsen & Roy, 2015).

Of relevance to this study is the subaltern groups’ agency to communicate in their struggle with ruling groups, mediated by their subjectivity and conditions of subordination. Gramsci’s phases of development of subaltern groups indicates that subaltern groups do take actions for social change and, therefore, also communicate for social change. Apple (2011), a co-editor of *The subaltern speak: Curriculum, power, and educational struggles* (Buras & Apple, 2006) that illustrates through many case studies that the subaltern can and do speak, comments, “we know that the issue is not whether ‘the subaltern speak,’ but whether they are listened to” (p. 8). Subalternity is not about subalterns not speaking for themselves; it is about subalterns remaining unheard, neglected, and marginalized, and even repressed sometimes when they speak for themselves.

Gramsci’s explanation of the reciprocal relationship between political society and civil society and their collusion in maintaining the hegemony of ruling groups indicate how challenging it could be for subaltern groups to communicate for social change. Guha, a
subaltern collectivist, asserts that the subaltern and the ruling groups differ in their “mobilization patterns, instruments and nature of mobilization” (Pankaj & Pandey, 2014, p. 11). This observation also implies a difference in their approaches to social change. This difference can be owing to many factors such as their subjectivities, available resources, cultural backgrounds, social and political structures, or how they are heard/unheard by the society. It may also result in a difference in their communication approaches, abilities, experiences, and effectiveness. Thus, CSC by the people and organizations from dominant/ruling/elite groups may be characteristically different from CSC initiated by subaltern people, that is subaltern CSC.

**Subaltern communication for social change.** Subaltern CSC is the autonomous communication of a subaltern group in its attempt to subvert the ruling/elite group’s domination over it, and to seek transformation of an oppressive society. It originates from within subaltern groups, and not from outside experts or facilitators as is the case in the traditional paradigms of CSC. While external experts may help at some stage of a subaltern struggle for social change, the struggle exists independent of them, subalterns being the primary actors. As the subalterns communicate for social change, they face opposition by the group(s) ruling them. Subaltern CSC is therefore also subjected to and shaped by the domination, the hegemony, and the coercion of ruling groups through various means and methods. That is, the subalternity of a facilitator of change also subalternizes her/his CSC practice. Subaltern CSC is therefore also an acknowledgment of the subjectivity of a facilitator and its influence on CSC and its outcomes. Simultaneously, subaltern CSC is about raising new questions such as “Can we hear the subaltern speak?” and “What happens when the subaltern speak?”.
The challenges of subaltern communication for social change. The ruling group’s domination plays a large role in undermining subaltern CSC by suppressing it through various means.

Gramsci suggested that the ruling group rules more through manufacturing “consent” than the use of direct force in post-feudal or capitalist societies (Femia, 1975). “The most important face of power, the ‘normal’ form of control” that the ruling group uses is hegemony, that is “the predominance obtained by consent rather than force of one class or group over other classes” (Femia, 1975, p. 31). The manufactured consent does the job of suppressing subaltern efforts for social change, as any revolutionary idea starts appearing “unreasonable, unrealistic, or even dangerous” to the subaltern who now want “to pursue their goals in a manner that does not threaten the basic order or orderliness as such” (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 13). Gramsci warned subalterns of this mentality, this forma mentis, which ends up supporting the leadership of ruling groups in civil society (Buttigieg, 1995). The pervasiveness of the ruling ideology does not leave much room for any alternative consciousness; as Marx and Engels (1932) put it, “‘ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas’” (as cited in Femia, 1975, p. 31). A subaltern is left ill-equipped to mount opposition to the ruling group as “the very framework for his analysis of the existing system is fixed by the dominant vision of the world” (Femia, 1975, p. 33).

The scholarship on muted group theory also confirms that the dominance of one group over another is such that it renders the dominated group “mute,” that is, restricted in its self-expression. The people from dominated groups feel mute because “their native language,” which is devised by dominant groups, “often does not provide a good fit with their life experiences” (West & Turner, 2014, p. 511). The “articulations for the muted
groups are indirect and broken” because “what they say first has to shift out of their own worldview and be compared to the experiences of the dominant group” (West & Turner, 2014, p. 513). The muteness of the dominated group is exacerbated further by the dominant group’s deafness, as the muted group’s spoken “words which continually fall upon deaf ears may, of course, in the end become unspoken, or even unthought” (Ardener, 1978, p. 20).

A civil society has a range of material organizations that help maintain ruling groups’ hegemony and the consenting *forma mentis* of subaltern groups. Gramsci’s list included such organizations as “libraries, schools, associations and clubs of all kinds, and the pervasive activities of the Catholic Church,” and the “seemingly innocuous [ones], such as architecture, the layout of streets and their names” (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 26). The publishing industry, however, was for Gramsci (n.d.) “the most dynamic part of the ideological structure” that creates and maintains the ruling group’s hegemony in civil society (as cited in Buttigieg, 1995, p. 26). Subaltern voices and CSC are undermined by being sidelined in the language of civil society and in its material organizations, especially the mass media that have the capability to influence the public and policy but align with dominant discourses.

The agenda setting theory also suggests that mass media have the potential to set the agenda for the public and ultimately for policymakers, through their ability to “select” issues and events to cover (gatekeeping) and to “portray” them in a manner of their choosing (framing) (West & Turner, 2014). In their study of the U.S. media, Herman and Chomsky (2002) conclude that agenda setting “is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors’ and
working journalists’ internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution’s policy” (p. xi). Subaltern CSC, thus, stands challenged as it faces this ubiquitous hegemony of ruling groups.

**Traditional versus subaltern communication for social change.** Subaltern CSC appears to differ in several aspects from the traditional approaches to CSC. The practitioners of CSC are not necessarily concerned about oppressive forces that can thwart their social change initiatives. Social conflict, which is an inherent characteristic of subalternity as subordinated groups constantly experience and resist the domination of ruling groups, is not a primary concern for traditional CSC theorists and practitioners (Coser, 1956). The legitimacy and expertise of external CSC practitioners may not be questioned the way subaltern groups are undermined and trivialized by the hegemony of ruling groups. The mere presence of external authorities in a social change endeavor may be powerful enough to counter some of the disadvantages that subalterns face in their absence. As a result, CSC theorists and practitioners may not be as concerned about oppressive forces that concern subaltern communities.

On the contrary, autonomous subaltern CSC operates in conditions of extreme vulnerability, powerlessness, muteness, and suppression, unmediated by any external help. The conceptualization of subaltern CSC would be, therefore, incomplete without a theoretical consideration of social conflict(s) that explain the concerned situations. Thereby, subaltern CSC also requires to be characterized by a constant comparison of subaltern groups with ruling groups, of “us versus them,” of “the oppressed versus the oppressor.” On the other hand, such binary conceptualization of opposing groups and their conflict are not critical aspects of the traditional CSC approaches. External experts always
need not, and may not frame their targeted problems in the “us versus them” or “the oppressed versus the oppressor” binary framework.

For traditional CSC paradigms, the arena of social change is an affected community itself. Community members are asked to participate in the exercises of helping themselves, to find solutions which are mutually agreed upon, and to act for the welfare of their community. The focus of CSC practitioners is on encouraging community members to get involved in social change initiatives, to engage in dialogues, and to take the ownership of their welfare. In such cases, the “two-way” communication means the communication between CSC practitioners and community members, initiated by the CSC practitioners. Mostly such social change exercises are about taking “within-community” collective actions, for example, to work on issues such as public health, unemployment, alcoholism, poor education, and violence.

On the other hand, the primary arena of social change for subaltern CSC is external to subaltern communities; it is the civil society and the political society dominated by ruling groups. Subaltern CSC is an attempt to assert an autonomous subaltern voice in a society that renders them mute, and, therefore, is primarily directed to the “outside community” people, especially to the ruling groups in society. Such communication can, thus, best be described as “bottom-up” and not “two-way.” Also, subaltern struggles are often more political in nature as compared to externally-planned social change projects because the objective is to challenge and subvert the hegemony of ruling groups. Subaltern groups are often seen demanding human rights, justice, equality, inclusion, access to opportunities, an end to exploitation, etc.
Owing to these differences between the subaltern approach and the traditional approach to CSC, people’s approval and support for them may also differ. It may be more challenging for subaltern social change initiatives than those of external practitioners to gain people’s acceptance owing to the conflict involved with ruling groups. Traditional CSC and subaltern CSC may also differ in the availability of resources, expertise of their facilitators, and their access to opportunities. While external practitioners working with development agencies often have substantial funds and training in community organizing and CSC skills, subaltern facilitators often lack them. Also, while external practitioners tend to plan their social change programs and monitor them well, subaltern facilitators lack the resources, skills, and control of events to pre-plan and monitor subaltern struggles. Subaltern facilitators are involved not because of their resourcefulness or expertise in social change, but because of their lived experiences of marginalization that disturb them enough to demand change.

These differences are critical enough to result in different kinds of outcomes for these approaches of CSC. These differences also point out the need to apply different theoretical frameworks to understand and analyze subaltern CSC approaches. As subaltern CSC has remained theoretically underexplored so far, this study aims to take a step forward in the direction of theory-building for subaltern CSC (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

**Practical challenges of studying subaltern communication for social change.** One of the major challenges of studying subaltern CSC is identifying subaltern groups. Different societies are formed of different and complex socio-economic, political, and cultural scenarios, and also have social groups that do not fall into distinct categories. As Buras and Apple (2006) note,
we too often neglect the fact that subaltern status has increasingly been claimed by a larger number of groups, some of which may occupy both dominant and subaltern positions… that struggles over recognition can and do go on equally among dominant groups. (pp. 31-32)

Each case of subalternity needs a careful study of the historical and existing hegemonic conditions in a society. It is only after understanding the hegemonic forces in a society and identifying the subjects of their domination that one can assign the status of subalternity to the dominated.

Another major challenge is to define what makes someone a member of a subaltern community and what makes someone an outsider to it. Unlike organizations that mostly have well-defined guidelines for membership, the membership of communities is not formally defined and can often be a complex subject. Even the members of a community may have contradicting understandings of what makes someone an insider as “consensus is not necessary for a community to exist” (Murphy, Franz, Choi, & Callaghan, 2017, p. 23). Murphy et al. (2017) suggest that communities are active and always changing as their members keep defining and redefining what constitutes their communities. Jovchelovitch (2007) defines a community as “a field of tensions and interrelations that remains an unfinished whole, while always open to be changed from within and from without” (as cited in Murphy et al., 2017, p. 24).

All the members of a community, thus, need not have similar stories and experiences, however, they can “grasp the storylines of others, so that their behavior can be coordinated without sacrificing any differences that emerge” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 24). It is through their “collective existence,” the “mosaic of stories” of the community members, that a community can be understood (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 23). The stories and narratives of the community members “supply the solidarity necessary for unity”
within a community (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 23). Murphy et al. (2017) suggest that while communities can be ambiguous to define for outsiders, their members “seem to know who belongs and who does not” based on some “boundaries and parameters [that] may not be objective, and thus obtrusive, but are known and influential” with the communities (p. 24). It is, therefore, only through the interpretations and explanations of its members that a community and its boundary conditions can be understood. As Murphy et al. (2017) point out, “[e]stablishing a community, accordingly, is an interpretive activity” in which researchers may engage (p. 24).

For the purpose of this study, I have considered the subaltern struggle of manual scavengers in India who traditionally come from the most oppressed caste communities in Hinduism. The next section briefly explains why manual scavengers can be regarded as a subaltern community in the country.

**Dalithood and Manual Scavenging: Subalterns in India**

This section explains the historical processes of injustice and marginalization that are still affecting the lives of manual scavengers. Manual scavenging was one of the many dehumanizing duties assigned to the most oppressed caste group in Hinduism, now referred to as Dalits.

**The caste system.** Hinduism, a religion followed by about 80 percent of India’s population (Census of India, 2011), has adopted a hierarchical social system of caste since ages. The Hindu caste system divides people into four categories: *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya,* and *Shudra* (Mani, 2005). The division was initially supposed to indicate a traditional division of work in society; however, early on it turned into a hereditary system of division of communities. *Brahmins* are considered the highest, traditionally assigned to
do all the intellectual and literary work such as that of priests and teachers. *Kshatriyas* were the earlier warriors and kings, and *Vaishyas* included the trading and business communities. *Shudras*, considered to be “born in sin” are at the bottom of this hierarchy, were traditionally assigned to do all the manual labor and serve those above them in the caste hierarchy (Mani, 2005, p. 53). In addition to these four castes, there are those who are without any caste, the *Atishudras*, the outcastes of a Hindu society. These outcastes are regarded as the lowest of all. Traditionally they were restricted to do only those jobs that were considered polluting and demeaning by Hinduism such as picking up and disposing dead animals and human waste, digging graves, and flaying dead animals (Shah, 2004).

*Shudras* and *Atishudras* were supposed to be demeaned, derided, and denied wealth, knowledge, armaments, and dignity. They were burdened with many responsibilities and duties but given few rights and privileges (Ambedkar, 1936; Mani, 2005). Ambedkar called the caste system a “graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” (as cited in Chakravarti, 2003, p. 7). *Atishudra* were also considered polluting, and, therefore, untouchable by *Savarnas*, the four castes described above (Shah, 2004). “Their touch, and sometimes their shadows and even their voices are believed to pollute caste-Hindus” (Shah, 2004, p. 118). In the current form of Hinduism one cannot change her/his caste from that s/he is born into. Although modernization and constitutional means have helped break the rigid structure of the caste system to an extent in the current India, we can still notice Hindus employed mostly according to their caste-based occupations (Deshpande, 2011; Teltumbde, 2010).
Dalits of India. Atishudras, who are at the very bottom of Hindu caste system, are the subalterns of the Hindu society. They prefer to call themselves “Dalit” which in the Marathi language means to be “broken or reduced to pieces” (Molesworth’s Marathi-English Dictionary, 1831, as cited in Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, pp. 3-4). Dalits, “the real subaltern in Gramscian terms” (Zene, 2011, p. 88), stand at the intersection of multiple disadvantages or have multiple subalternity, been marginalized in both civil society and political society. Mandal (2010) claims that “there is no field of life in which the dalits are not subjected to discrimination and exclusion by the non-dalit sections” (p. 150). The caste system includes by design all the means and mechanisms to marginalize Dalits, socially, culturally, educationally/intellectually, economically, and politically. The higher castes use violence as and when their hegemonic means of suppressing Dalit assertion fail.

In a traditional Hindu community, which can still be seen in rural areas, Dalit families live separately at the outskirts and have restricted access to the village and its resources (Ambedkar, 1948/1979; Deliége, 1999). Even in urban areas, Dalit communities mostly live physically segregated from other caste communities, in separate areas and colonies, in ghettos. Dalits are also exploited at work as they are paid meagerly, often in kind rather than money (Ambedkar, 1936; Deliége, 1999; Sainath, 1999/2003). Thus, they remain dependent, in debt, landless, and, therefore, available to serve higher castes. Dalits are also traditionally denied the right to political self-representation. Even though affirmative action was institutionalized in the modern India to ensure the political participation of Dalits, its implementation suffers. Also, Dalit women, who were considered to be sexually available to higher caste men and were frequently exploited by them, are still getting exploited. Being economically marginalized, Dalit women need to
work and are often employed by higher caste men, which further leaves them vulnerable to sexual violence.

**Being Dalit in modern India.** Even though Dalit communities have more opportunities in the modern India – to educate, work, socialize with non-Dalits, or participate politically– their struggle for justice and equality is far from over. The Dalit population, which is about 16.6 percent of the country (Census of India, 2011), has higher than national average rates of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition among women and children, anemic and underweight children, and infant and child mortality (Dubey, 2016; Singh & Swain, 2014). Also, Dalit population has lower than the national average rates of immunization of children, of availability of safe drinking water, of sanitation facilities at homes, and of children’s school enrolment (Boroohah & Iyer, 2005; Dubey, 2016; Singh & Swain, 2014). In rural India, where the economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, Dalits face the highest rate of landlessness as compared to any other social group (Anand, 2016). Untouchability is still practiced in multiple forms despite being prohibited throughout the 71 years of the existence of independent India. Dalits continue to face discrimination in both urban and rural labor markets and have limited options for switching from caste-enforced vocations. The situation is also coupled with a biased approach on part of the Indian news media towards the concerns of Dalits; Dalits are grossly underrepresented in this critical profession (Teltumbde, 2010).

**Manual scavenging communities.** The communities among Dalits that are traditionally engaged in manual scavenging are considered one of the lowest of all even among Dalits and remain among the most oppressed (Srivastava, 1997). Manual scavenging, the job of manually removing human waste, makes manual scavengers
“literally go down the drains every day” to keep Indian society clean and habitable, as Narayanan (n.d., as cited in Mander, 2014) puts it (p.10). There are a small number of non-Dalits as well engaged in manual scavenging but about 95 percent of manual scavengers are Dalits (Mander, 2014). The Dalit communities that are forced into manual scavenging, experience the worst form of untouchability and extreme violation of their rights (Asian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2009; Mander, 2014). Even after converting to different religions such as Islam and Christianity, the burden of manual scavenging and the stigma of untouchability remain with the people of these communities (Pathak, 2015; Shahid, 2015). The situation represents differential subalternity among Dalits, manual scavengers being the subaltern within subaltern (Pankaj & Pandey, 2014).

Different forms of manual scavenging. Traditionally, manual scavenging was carried out to clean dry latrines or insanitary latrines, that is those that lack water for flushing. In rural areas where dry latrines still exist, “manual scavenging is a women-centric inhuman practice” (Shahid, 2015, p. 248). Dalit women in rural India can still be found manually collecting human waste daily from household and community dry toilets to dispose of it somewhere else (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Shahid, 2015). Not being provided any equipment to do this work, they manage to pick up waste with the help of brooms, metal plates, or broken mudguards. The waste is collected in wicker baskets or buckets and carried by manual scavengers on their heads or shoulders.

Female manual scavengers in rural regions are very poorly compensated in exchange for their labor and dignity, and this compensation is mostly in kind rather than cash (Mander, 2014; Shahid, 2015). There is a tradition of giving leftover food and used clothes to these women in exchange for their service, a humiliating as well as insufficient
compensation (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Sarfaraz, 2017). In addition, manual scavengers are expected to observe the rules of untouchability themselves, ensuring that they do not touch other people (Khurana & Ojha, 2009; Shahid, 2015). In a feudal manner, the responsibility of a manual scavenger’s client households is usually taken over later by the younger members of her own family (Shahid, 2015; Singh, 2009).

With India’s development, manual scavenging has developed into multiple forms today. Indian Railways, one of the biggest and busiest train networks in the world with about 230 million passengers traveling daily, needs manual cleaning of human waste disposed on railway tracks from the toilets installed in trains (Singh, 2012). Sewer lines in urban areas are also cleaned manually in absence of automated machines at many locations in the country. A government report suggests that about “770,000 people either work as sewage cleaners or are supported by them” (Parth, 2014, para. 9). Also, in absence of sewer lines, septic tanks are used to decompose human waste and they are also cleaned manually. As per the 2011 Census of India, 38 percent of urban households in the country rely on septic tanks for waste disposal (Dasgupta, 2016). Many households also directly release their sewer waste into open drains that are also cleaned manually (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In complete absence of any sanitation facility, people resort to open defecation, another practice that needs manual scavenging (Counterview, 2014).

Usually, the work of cleaning tanks, septic tanks, sewer lines, and open drains is a men’s only job as it is more demanding physically and needs one to step inside wet waste (Singh, 2012). Most of the workers enter wet waste without anything on their bodies except an underwear, often getting injured by sharp objects, broken glass, and insect bites. The work of cleaning septic tanks and sewer lines is also fatal; the poisonous gases from the
decomposing human waste can result in asphyxiation of workers and their sudden deaths (Ali, 2017; Singh, 2017; Venkat, Tadepalli, & Manuel, 2017). Even at sewage treatment plants managed by local government agencies, sanitation workers are sometimes made to enter sewer waste without safety equipment, which is fatal (Singh, 2017). Regardless of the various forms, avenues, conditions, and experiences of manual scavenging, the practice in any form remains a gross violation of human rights.

Manual scavenging was legally abolished in India as late as 1993, 46 years after independence. However, the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, proved ineffective in ending the practice of manual scavenging and liberating the workers trapped in this dehumanizing practice (AHRC, 2009). The number of manual scavengers in India has been increasing in the last few decades, and is estimated to be more than 1.2 million in 2006 (Pathak, 2015; Shahid, 2015). This number refer to only those manual scavengers who clean dry toilets and do not include those who clean sewer lines and septic tanks. As a report by WaterAid India (Khurana & Ojha, 2009) puts it, “Manual scavengers have an absurd existence. Officially, they don’t exist but in reality they do” (p. 5). The latest Act passed by the government, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 is more encompassing in its definition of manual scavenging (Mander, 2014). However, the 2013 Act remains unimplemented in multiple states and is rarely used to report the employers of manual scavengers as offenders.

**Work conditions and challenges of manual scavengers.** While dealing with human waste, manual scavengers are mostly left unequipped to maintain the needed hygiene. They often face health issues such as breathlessness, coughing, asthma, parasitic
infection, fever, nausea, anemia, allergies, skin ailments, hair loss, dysentery, diarrhea, gastrointestinal disorders, jaundice, typhoid, malaria, and tuberculosis (Khurana & Ojha, 2009; Mander, 2014; Shahid, 2015). Their average life span (50 years) is also shorter than the average (68 years) in India (Counterview, 2014; Mitra-Jha, 2016). Women who work as manual scavengers during pregnancy experience severe issues such as frequent miscarriages, and children born with disability or having stunted growth (Singh, 2012). Manual scavenging communities also have a high rate of tobacco consumption and alcoholism (Singh, 2012). Additionally, manual scavengers’ children face discrimination and are treated as untouchables in schools, which results in a high rate of dropout (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Singh, 2012).

In urban areas the workers who handle wet waste are mostly employed by municipal corporations responsible for managing sewer waste (Counterview, 2014). In rural areas as well manual scavengers are often employed by local governments, called *panchayats* (village councils) (Counterview, 2014; Khurana & Ojha, 2009; Singh, 2012). The sanitation workers\(^3\) employed by government agencies mostly work temporarily or on contract, awaiting permanent employment (AHRC, 2009; Bathran, 2016; Counterview, 2014; Singh, 2012). According to a study by *Janvikas*, only 11 percent of sanitation workers are permanently employed by the government, about 43 percent are on contract, and the remaining 46 percent are casual workers (Counterview, 2014). In the hope of getting permanent jobs, those working temporarily or on contract, continue to work at

\(^3\)The term “sanitation workers” refers to all sorts of workers engaged in cleaning jobs, including those who handle dry and wet waste, and those who sweep. Only some of the sanitation workers dedicatedly work in manual scavenging, that is in handling human waste. However, it gets difficult to differentiate who does manual scavenging and who doesn’t, as the workers who sweep streets also have to manually clean human waste in areas where people openly defecate (Bharathi, 2017). Like those doing manual scavenging, most of the other sanitation workers are also from Dalit communities.
extremely low wages for government agencies for years; this hope keeps them mired in an exploitative situation (Singh, 2012). Hiring manual scavengers indirectly through contractors also works well for the government, absolving it from its responsibilities as an employer.

There is hardly any compensation offered for workers’ injuries and deaths by the government or the contractors it hires to get the job done (Ali, 2017). Out of the 1,327 death cases of manual scavengers in sewage and septic tanks which Safai Karmachari Andolan has documented, only 25 families have received the compensation promised by the Indian government (Singh, 2017). Even though the sewage and septic tank cleaning has killed and is still killing a large number of manual scavengers all over the country, the issue remains under-reported, under-discussed, and under-researched (Venkat, Tadepalli, & Manuel, 2017). Most of the literature on manual scavenging still refers to only the traditional practices that are dominant in rural India, completely ignoring the problem of sewer deaths (AHRC, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Khurana & Ojha, 2009; Singh, 2012).

Those employed privately are further exploited and underpaid (AHRC, 2009). When manual scavengers try to shift to other occupations they sometimes face social opposition, threats of ostracism and violence (Human Rights Watch, 2014), and are forced to return to manual scavenging in absence of support from “both private and governmental agencies” (Singh, 2009, p. 523). It is also challenging for manual scavengers to get credit from financial institutions and this pushes them to private moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates (Counterview, 2014). When the people from manual scavenging communities seek employment, they are offered only sanitation jobs regardless of their
education. The stigma of manual scavenging haunts them wherever they go. The settlements of sanitation workers are mostly separate from those of other communities, both in rural and urban areas, continuing the social segregation imposed by the caste system (Bharathi, 2017). These allotted settlements to sanitation workers are mostly on the outskirts and lack in “basic amenities, infrastructure and services such as water, garbage lifting, healthcare, etc.” (Counterview, 2014, para 4).

Sanitation work, especially manual scavenging, remains linked to the caste-based practice of untouchability in India. As a sanitation worker puts it, “We clean the whole city. But there is no one to clean near our house” (unnamed, in Bharathi, 2017). Sanitation workers in urban areas face an additional disadvantage as they are often migrants, brought to cities to clean them because local Dalit communities have shifted to other occupations. The immigrant workers in urban areas are treated as outsiders, remain socially excluded, and denied rights such as affirmative action (Bathran, 2016). It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that for manual scavenging communities “discrimination that extends to all facets of their lives, including access to education for their children, makes it more likely they will have no choice but to continue to work as manual scavengers” (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 6).

**Research Questions**

Firstly, this chapter has provided an overview of the major theoretical paradigms of CSC. Secondly, it focuses on the bottom-up subaltern perspective of communicating for social change with the help of Gramsci’s idea of subalternity. The chapter introduces the idea of subaltern CSC and argues that it is likely to differ from the current understanding of CSC and therefore calls for a new theoretical explanation. Lastly, it describes the
situation of manual scavengers in India who come from Dalit communities and are one of the most oppressed communities in the country. This study considers the struggles of manual scavengers as a case of subaltern CSC. By exploring the challenges and experiences of manual scavengers, I aim to explore subaltern CSC and to understand how it differs from the traditional understanding of CSC currently held.

I have three specific research objectives for this study. My first objective is to explore subaltern CSC, that is the autonomous approaches of subaltern communities to communicate for social change, and to study its various aspects including its methods, audience, the conditions under which it operates, and its outcomes. This also helps identify critical differences between subaltern CSC and the traditional approach to dialogic and participatory CSC. My second research objective is to explore the subaltern experiences of communicating with ruling groups and understand how they feel about their experiences and agency to communicate. This helps understand the subjectivity of the change agent and its relevance to the discussion of subaltern CSC. My third research objective is to understand how the practices and experiences of subaltern CSC vary with the differential subalternity of the communicators. This helps to understand the limits and extents to which subaltern CSC can be applied as a theoretical concept to diverse subaltern groups.

These research questions are explored through a narrative inquiry with the manual scavenging communities in Mumbai. This study aims to understand their experiences of communicating for social change through their perspectives and stories. The next chapter describes the methodology used in detail.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This is an exploratory study to understand the subaltern perspectives, experiences, and approaches of communicating for social change. The study focuses on the experiences of the manual scavenging communities in India in their struggles to counter the oppression they face. Unlike historiography as a methodology that the subaltern collectivists used to study subaltern groups (Chakrabarty, 1988), the perspectives, experiences, and practices of manual scavengers in the present time need not be indirectly read from the documentation of elite. This study explored the worldviews and life experiences of manual scavengers directly through their standpoints. The methodology was designed to bring out the subaltern narratives about communicating to challenge their exploitative conditions. The study considered these life narratives of manual scavengers as valid knowledge source and based its conclusions on them.

In the following section, I discuss in detail the methodological approach that facilitated such exploration of the subaltern narratives. The next section explains in detail the study design and how it was conducted. The last section describes narrative analysis techniques used.

The Study Approach

In search of a subaltern perspective of communicating for social change, this study took an approach that allowed subaltern voices a great level of authority to narrate their own stories and determine how they should be interpreted. In this section, I explain why I based my study on a constructivist epistemology that enabled a qualitative exploratory study of the subaltern Communication for Social Change (CSC) of manual scavengers.
With the help of a constructivist approach, the study could also employ a narrative inquiry that allowed subaltern narratives to shape the study findings to a large extent and ensure the authorship of manual scavengers in a study about them, their voice, and agency.

A **constructivist epistemology**. A constructivist epistemology considers interpretative explanations of reality that are based on experiences as valid knowledge sources (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) explains constructivism/constructionism as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Constructivist epistemology is, therefore, based on the understanding that meaning is neither “discovered” nor “created,” but “constructed” (Crotty, 1998) through a “social process” (Best, 2008). That is, meaning is neither objective single-version truth to be discovered independent of the human interpretation, and nor is subjective and completely about an individual’s interpretations detached from the context. As per the constructivist epistemology: “All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception” (Crotty, 1998, p. 54).

Also, as different people can construct their meanings differently, the constructivist epistemology, therefore, regards all their perspectives, which are based on their experiences, as equally valid. Therefore, there is not one single truth or meaning out there to be measured or discovered, but multiple perspectives and interpretations of reality and truth depending on people’s individual experiences. Crotty (1998) concludes, “[w]hat constructionism drives home unambiguously is that there is no true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations, to be sure, and these stand over against interpretations that
appear to serve no useful purpose” (p. 47). In context of subaltern CSC, therefore, this study took a constructivist approach to look for subaltern interpretations of reality and create an understanding of the subaltern perspective based on subaltern narratives. To do the same, this study acknowledged subaltern narratives as valid knowledge sources and based its findings on the narratives told by manual scavengers.

**A qualitative approach.** A qualitative approach helps explore human experiences and narratives, as against quantitative approach that “emphasize[s] the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). Berg (2001) also finds the quantitative approach wanting in some cases: “Certain experiences cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers” (p. 3). On the other hand, qualitative research is about “meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things” (Berg, 2001, p. 3). The perspectives, experiences, and practices of manual scavengers in fighting their oppression could, thus, be best explored by a qualitative approach.

Frankel and Devers (2000) find qualitative research designs to be inductive, emergent, flexible, dynamic, non-linear, and non-sequential. This also indicates that a process of construction of knowledge is at the core of the qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also contend that, “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p. 3). The idea of a qualitative research being like a “bricolage, quilt making, or montage,” and a qualitative researcher being like a *bricoleur* or quilt-maker also points out the constructed nature of knowledge resulting from it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). This study that explores subaltern CSC without any major guiding theory and/or established relationships among relevant constructs, could, thus, be best
pursued through such qualitative and constructivist approach of *bricolage* or quilt-making of knowledge about the CSC of manual scavengers.

**A narrative inquiry.** One of the fitting most qualitative research methodology for this study’s purpose of exploring the subaltern experience of communicating for social change is a narrative inquiry, as the methodology “begins with an ontology of experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.44). Murphy et al. (2017) explain that “the term narrative is derived from the Latin *narrare*, that is, to know; however, [in a narrative inquiry] an intimate type of knowing is proposed, with knowledge tied to how persons or communities create their identities” (p. 1). Narrative inquiry is a methodology “that takes the story itself as its object of enquiry rather than simply accounts, reports, chronicles, or a few brief words” (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010, p. 5). The methodology is also called to be a systematic “way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Narratives, or stories,⁴ are the “discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offers insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, as cited in Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010, p. 2). In a narrative inquiry, the form and narration of stories also become important as attention is also paid to how a story is told. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain why stories are also important:

> [p]eople shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (p. 479)

⁴Although the terms “narrative” and “story” are often used interchangeably, Riessman (1993) maintains a distinction between the two terms: ‘Narrative’ is an encompassing term of rhetoric, whereas ‘story’ is a limited genre” (p. 41). Emden (1998b) also points out that a narrative is “more than a single story…. [T]he term [‘narrative’] embraces the collective ‘stored wisdom’ of people’s individual stories” (p. 35).
By telling her/his stories, “[a] person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). People’s stories and their narration are very crucial for understanding them and their experiences.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that acknowledges and values the constructive nature of personal experience, as Riessman (1993) explains: “Human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narrativization, how events are plotted, and what they are supposed to mean. Individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” (p. 2). These narratives are “constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (Riessman, 1993, p. 5). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) claim that “the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Narrative inquiry is, therefore, in line with constructivist epistemology that regards constructed and interpretative subaltern experiences as valid knowledge sources, sufficient to provide answers to the posed research objectives. The methodology supported the research objective of this study to explore the subaltern experiences and narratives of the people engaged in manual scavenging.

As narratives are interpretative and constructed, different individuals in the same community can come up with different narratives about the same incident (Murphy, 2015). In a narrative inquiry, “all narratives… must vie for relevance, since none is more valid inherently than the other” (Murphy, 2015, p. 92). Also, these individual narratives cannot be studied alone and in isolation; “narratives, in other words, are a collective endeavour” (Murphy, 2015, p. 92). The diverse narratives, which may even conflict sometimes, together offer a “variable and multifaceted” explanation (Murphy, 2015, p. 92), or say a
of knowledge created by multiple individual narratives. Bruner (1987) argues that it is important to put the individual stories of a community together to understand the structural aspects of their lives in that community: “life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories” (as cited in Emden, 1998a, p. 31). Richardson (1990) calls such a narrative as a “collective story”:

> The collective story displays an individual’s story by narrativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual’s story…. Although the narrative is about a category of people, the individual response to the well-told collective story is ‘That’s my story. I am not alone.’ (as cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 13)

In this study, a narrative inquiry helped connect the individual stories of manual scavengers in Mumbai and create a collective story of the challenges they face and how they attempt to counter these challenges.

Roof (1993) connects stories with their socio-cultural context: “[P]eople’s stories are never just their stories. Stories connect us with the larger stories, with the cultural narratives that shape our shared meanings” (as cited in Emden, 1998a, p. 32). Emden (1998a) argues that “contextuality goes to the heart of narrative inquiry: everything becomes related to everything else in the expression of life’s meaning” (p. 30). Multiple and diverse narratives of manual scavengers, thus, together helped create a holistic understanding of not just their CSC efforts and practices for countering their oppression, but also their experiences of the societal barriers they faced.

The narratives and stories for a study can be available to the researcher in different forms such as “field notes of the shared experiences, journal records, interview transcripts, others’ observations, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors,
and personal philosophies” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). In the case of manual scavengers in India, their narratives of practicing their subaltern agency and struggling against their oppression had not been sufficiently documented to carry out a systematic narrative inquiry through secondary sources. Moreover, the manual scavenging communities in India could be directly approached and interviewed for their first-person accounts of life stories for this study. This study, therefore, used the in-depth interviewing method to elicit the narratives of manual scavengers. The next section explains how the interviews were conducted for this narrative inquiry and how the participants were recruited.

The Study Design

This section explains some practical aspects and challenges of conducting interviews for a narrative inquiry and how they were dealt with in this study. It also describes the population set considered, the sampling techniques used, and the ethical considerations relevant to this study.

Method. Interviews for a narrative inquiry need to be conducted in a manner that encourages participants to share their stories, to trust the interviewers with their stories. Such interviews are not always structured but are dialogical, and are “co-constructed… situationally relevant, and intended to gain insight into persons’ lives” (Murphy, 2015, p. 93). Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) call the techniques of producing narratives for a narrative inquiry as “performative/generative methods.” The performative/generative methods they prescribe for a constructivist approach involve “much less separation between the researcher and the narrator, as the narratives are socially constructed from semistructured interviews or conversational interactions” (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl,
2007, p. 151). Riessman (1993) also suggests the interviews for a narrative inquiry are “conversations in which both participants – teller and listener/questioner – develop meaning together, a stance requiring interview practices that give considerable freedom to both” (p. 55).

The interviews for this study were conducted in such conversational manner as I got equally involved in the participants’ discussion about their work and life conditions, challenges, and the ways in which they try to counter them. During these discussions, I also shared my knowledge, perspectives, and thoughts about what they told me. This gave a chance to the participants to sometimes challenge and correct my understanding, help me see their perspectives, and make me pay more attention to their intended meanings. Using a conversational style of interviewing helped the study participants to understand the gaps between our perspectives after which they sometimes rephrased themselves, shared more details, and explained more than they would otherwise, only to help me understand them better.

Riessman (1993) also explains that “narratives, especially those about important life experiences, are typically long, full of asides, comments, flashback, flashforwards, orientation, and evaluation” (p. 43). Therefore, interviewing for a narrative inquiry requires “giving greater control to respondents” (Riessman, 1993, p. 55), to deviate from the questions posed and narrate various experiences that they find relevant and worth sharing, as “narratives often emerge when you least expect them” (p. 56). The participants of this study often digressed from the topic being discussed to share past stories and experiences that may not be always connected, or raise new concerns they cared more about. As a narrative inquirer prepared for such responses as Riessman (1993) predicts, I did not
interrupt such digressions and allowed the participants to change the course of discussion and spend more time talking about the topics that concerned them the most. The technique helped me come across even those stories of manual scavengers which I would not have asked for otherwise. It also helped me learn that some questions that I considered important in this context were not equally important or relevant to the participants.

This narrative inquiry of the struggles of manual scavengers in Mumbai was, thus, carried out using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allowed them to share as many personal stories as they found relevant. Based on the research objectives mentioned earlier, some of the interview questions that were posed to the study participants included how they got into sanitation work, what their experiences as manual scavengers had been, and how they dealt with their conditions. The participants were also asked about their family backgrounds and how their identities affected their lives. In addition, the participants were asked about their experiences of challenging their oppressive and exploitative conditions (see Appendix A for a detailed list of the questions and probes to guide the interviews).

**Gaining world entry.** A considerably important aspect of narrative interviewing is the researcher’s ability to gain “entry” into the “world” of study participants to create dialogic conditions and, ultimately, witness their life narratives. Murphy et al. (2017) explain that the “world” of narrators is primarily “the constellation of meanings that hang together in a particular form, for a while, and express a person’s existence with others” (p. 5). The narratives of the narrators are their worlds, their “meaningful domains” put in words (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 5). And it is only through gaining an entry into their worlds
that their narratives can be witnessed: “World entry is not a luxury but a vital part of interpreting narratives properly” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 39).

There are many aspects of building trustworthy relationships with study participants and gaining an entry into their worlds. One approach to build a strong relationship with study participants is through explaining the research objectives and processes continually to them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Erickson (2012) also suggests that “[t]he best way to achieve trust with participants in the research relationship is by being trustable as a researcher – forthright and specific about what will be involved in participation in the study and respectful of the character and rights of those who agree to participate” (p. 1457). Before the interviews, I described the research objectives of my study and my background to the participants in detail. I also explained the purpose of the interviews and their right to anonymity, confidentiality, and to withdraw at any moment. Often the participants asked for more details about me during the interviews. They were particularly interested in knowing my caste and class background and what I was gaining from these interviews. I always answered them honestly and gave them the information they wanted.

However, mere trustworthy relationship does not ensure world entry, as Murphy et al. (2017) explain, “[w]orld entry, and thus access to storylines, is not a matter of simply adopting the proper tactics…. Specifically, individuals and communities must be engaged in dialogue” (p. 6). Thus, world entry is not possible until researchers and study participants engage in a dialogic form of conversation.

A dialogic approach. As discussed earlier, it is not always easy and/or feasible to engage with someone in a dialogue (Buber, 1923/1970; Freire, 1970/2005; Habermas,
1999). Freire (1970/2005) found some qualities such as love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and a willingness to engage in critical thinking, to be also necessary for dialogue to happen. Murphy et al. (2017) also suggest that these are important factors, however, they claim that “[w]hat really promotes dialogue is reflection” (p. 38). Despite a difference in the worlds of the people engaging in a dialogue, they can do it through a genuine effort to understand each other, that is, through “reflection”:

Through reflection, insight can be gained into the influence of frames, and how a person’s or group’s particular storylines can distort the meaning of other narratives. This reflection, accordingly, permits dialogue by revealing that interlocutors can learn from one another and confirm very different storylines. With this revelation, they begin to recognize that accurate knowledge does not come from imposing one storyline on another, but rather by dealing with narratives in their own terms, that is, in truly embracing the otherness or difference of stories. (Murphy et al., 2017, pp. 38-39)

Dialogue is an effort to understand others’ stories as they are intended; it is “[s]triving to uncover authorial intent” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 32). A world entry by engaging in a dialogue is, therefore, also an “epistemological entrée” (Murphy, 2014; Murphy et al, 2017). Also, Gadamer pointed out that those engaging in a dialogue remain “firmly planted in their [own] cultural moment,” that is, they remain grounded in their own world as they explore other people’s worlds through dialogue (Kepnes, 1992, p. 26). A dialogue, in this sense, is “achieved at the intersection of different worlds,” of those engaging in a dialogue, of “I” and “You” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 39). The dialogic approach is also consistent with a constructivist epistemology that finds all the different experienced realities as valid and acceptable source of knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, the interviews for this study were conducted using such dialogic approach to enable reflection by both me and the participants over each other’s narratives to understand their intended meanings, and acknowledge the difference in these
narratives. Often I came across such differences in my narratives and their narratives of their storylines. A dialogic approach in this case helped me gain entry into the worlds of the study participants and access their storylines. Such interviewing helped me see how their storylines were different than mine and to retain them carefully during the analysis of these interviews (provided in detail in Chapter 4, Findings). Mostly the storylines of study participants were prioritized over mine as this study is primarily about the subaltern perspective of manual scavengers. However, my narratives that were mostly informed by a theoretical knowledge of societal factors oppressing manual scavengers, also helped me understand why our narratives differed and how to interpret this difference (see Chapter 5, Discussion, for my observations).

**Power and identities.** The issues of power and identities influence narrative inquiries and need critical attention as well. In this study, the difference in my background of a privileged caste and class as compared to the manual scavenging communities in Mumbai was an important aspect that sometimes made it harder to gain entry into their worlds. I sensed hesitation in some participants when they asked about my background and learned that I am from a relatively much privileged background as compared to them. Also, as most of the sanitation workers handling wet waste were men, the gender difference between me and the male participants also added to the gap. I noticed this difference only when in one of the group interviews some female participants from a manual scavenging community were present and they trusted me much more than all the other participants so far, were far more comfortable in talking to me, and shared many personal stories. These differences of class, caste, and gender placed me as an obvious outsider (a relatively elite one) for the manual scavengers I engaged with for this study.
While the difference in the backgrounds of the researcher and the participants remained one of the limitations of this study, trustworthy relationships and dialogic environments could still be built under such conditions. As Murphy et al. (2017) suggest: “[T]he ability to engage in dialogue changes all relationships, even those with professionals” (p. 40). They explain that researchers can genuinely participate in dialogues with study participants, and contribute to them as well, just as other participants do, and, also, researchers “slowly can become a part of a community and raise issues that would have been impossible to broach at an earlier time” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 40). Although I cannot claim to have become a part of their community, in many of the interviews for this study, I felt that I managed to overcome the limitations due to our different backgrounds, and engage in trustworthy and dialogic conversations with the study participants.

Additionally, I want to bring attention to this statement by Merriam et al. (2001) that “power is something to not only be aware of but to negotiate in the research process” (p. 413). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also note that “the researcher-participant relationship is a tenuous one, always in the midst of being negotiated” (p. 72). Mullings (1999) suggests researchers to “seek, what [can be referred] to as positional spaces, that is, areas where the situated knowledges of both parties in the interview encounter, engender a level of trust and co-operation” (p. 340). According to Merriam et al. (2001), positionality is “determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’” (p. 411). And these positions can shift. As participants know more about a researcher and her/his positionalities and find the researcher trustworthy, they start opening more to her/him and sharing their deeper thoughts and feelings. As mentioned earlier, I ensured such transparency to the study participants and provided all the information about my background and work that they
asked for. Some participants were also interested in understanding my positionality on the problem of manual scavenging. I gave them as much information as feasible to clarify my positionality to them.

*My positionality.* I clearly indicated to the study participants my association with Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA), a pan-India community-based organization involved in the advocacy against manual scavenging. Since mid-2015, I have remained in touch with SKA. I have visited SKA’s head office multiple times, met and interacted with its members, its national convener Mr. Bezwada Wilson, and attended SKA’s events during my visits to India to familiarize myself with the organization’s objectives, challenges, and approaches. I also got the opportunity to visit different manual scavenging communities in Delhi, Nagpur, and Mumbai with the SKA team members and know the communities and their ongoing struggles better. Mr. Wilson has also contributed to this study by reviewing it at various points to ensure that it is in line with the movement against manual scavenging. My current positionality on caste and manual scavenging is, to a large extent, shaped by this engagement with Mr. Wilson, the SKA members, and their positionalities on the subject.

My position in relation to manual scavenging communities in Mumbai is also of an outsider as mentioned earlier. Being an outsider, I approached their communities as a researcher and not a social change expert. Despite being aware of this, both during my initial field visits through SKA and during this field study, majority of the members of manual scavenging communities were open to engage in dialogues with outsiders like me who they found sensitive to their struggles and respectful to their voices. Thus, although I

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5The final drafts of this dissertation could not be reviewed by Mr. Wilson or any other SKA member before publishing. In case of any error or misrepresentation, I take the full responsibility of the same.
did not turn into a part of their communities, the study participants trusted me with their stories and voices, and shared them for this study.

**Population.** As mentioned before, I have explored the conditions of manual scavengers in the city of Mumbai in Maharashtra state in India for this study on subaltern CSC. Despite the denials by the Government of Maharashtra, manual scavenging still exists in various forms in the state (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Khan 2017; Nagpur Today, 2017; Ojha, 2017; Patankar, 2015). A study reported in 2015 that more than 63,000 households in the state are dependent on manual scavenging for their livelihood (Patankar, 2015). None of the identified manual scavengers in the state have received the one-time cash assistance promised for rehabilitation (Patankar, 2015). There are also enough cases of government officials in Maharashtra demanding bribes from manual scavengers to offer them non-scavenging jobs reserved for Dalits (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sanitation workers in urban areas are hired to clean manholes and septic tanks without any safety equipment, which sometimes results in their deaths as well (Kapil, 2018; Khan 2017; Nagpur Today, 2017; Ojha, 2017). In one and a half years between 2017 and 2018, more than 600 people have died due to manual scavenging in India (Kapil, 2018). A study on manual scavengers in Mumbai, the capital city of Maharashtra, estimated that “an average of 20 sewer workers die each month from accidents, suffocation or exposure to toxic gases” (Parth, 2014, para. 10). It is in this city, Mumbai, where the sanitation workers engaged in manual scavenging were approached for participation in this study. The scope of this study was the entire Mumbai Metropolitan Region, which includes the areas covered by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (previously known and popular as the Brihanmumbai Municipal
Corporation, BMC), the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC), and six other municipal corporations (MMRDA, 2013).

**Sampling.** Within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, some sanitation workers engaged in manual scavenging were identified and approached for interviews. See Table 1 for a list of all the different regions in Mumbai where the interviews were conducted. I have used a mix of different sampling techniques such as convenience sampling, reputational sampling, and snowball sampling to approach the study participants. Such sampling techniques are not representative of the population but give a preliminary exposure to some of the characteristics of the population. In this study, all these three techniques helped me identify and recruit the sanitation workers engaged in manual scavenging as participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of interviews conducted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central Mumbai</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Central Mumbai</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thane</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navi Mumbai</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasai Virar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: List of the geographical regions in Mumbai where interviews were conducted

In the context of ethnographies, Schensul and LeCompte (2013) recommend using convenience or reputational sampling in exploratory studies. Convenience sampling is selecting study participants from the population on the basis of their availability to the researcher. I used convenience sampling to connect with the communities of manual scavengers in the vicinity of my neighborhood in the city, the North Suburban Mumbai (see Table 1). First, I identified some slum and semi-slum neighborhoods close to my place
with the help of Google Maps. As also mentioned in the following chapter, the names of some neighborhoods clearly indicate the religious and/or caste identity of its residents. I looked for the nearby localities on Google Maps that had names reflecting Dalit cultural and religious identity. Also, the localities in Mumbai inhabited by economically poor working class people appears on Google Maps as dense, with small houses built very close to each other, narrow and crooked roads, indicating slum or semi-slum like housing infrastructure. My familiarity with the city of Mumbai, the setup of some of its neighborhoods, and an understanding of how the neighborhoods are named helped me tremendously with this kind of sampling.

After identifying some Dalit neighborhoods using this method, I visited them to look for sanitation workers. I entered these localities without having any prior knowledge about them and without having anyone to introduce me to the community members. I approached and asked some people who appeared to be residents if they knew about any sanitation worker living in their community. Often the residents at the front side of a community were better off and were not into sanitation work. They did not know much about the residents doing sanitation work. In such cases, I kept entering the localities further until I came across smaller and visibly poorer houses. In two such cases, the people living at the rear end of such localities turned out to be sanitation workers themselves. In one case, the locality was too big, comprising many different communities and ethnicities. It took me an hour and a half of walking and asking around, and as I was about to give up, I found a lane that was entirely inhabited by sanitation workers. I then asked for those sanitation workers who cleaned manholes or open drains, that is, those who did manual scavenging. Sanitation workers mostly knew the men in their communities who did manual
scavenging. Most of such convenience sampling was fruitful and helped me connect with some manual scavengers whom I could not have reached through known contacts.

Reputational sampling is selecting study participants based on the recommendations of trusted community members or experts (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). The researchers may request community experts to recommend some community members suitable to participate in her/his study. The community organizer of Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) in Mumbai and some local community leaders were approached to identify and connect with the manual scavenging communities in the city. Sometimes, the community members I approached independently also helped identify other sanitation workers who dealt with wet waste. Such reputational sampling helped me identify and connect with some manual scavenging communities that were far away from my place and would have been out of reach otherwise, for example the communities in Navi Mumbai, Vasai-Virar, North Central, and South Central Mumbai (see Table 1). Also, using this technique of sampling, I approached the participants with an introduction through their trusted community members.

Snowball sampling is another technique of convenience sampling in which a participant can refer another person with similar attributes to participate in the study and so on (Berg, 2001). I used this technique as well to connect with more manual scavengers although it was the least used technique as, throughout the sampling, I ensured not to revisit a community once an interview was already conducted there. For each interview, I tried to locate and visit new communities to recruit new participants. However, on rare occasions, the study participants referred me to other sanitation workers they thought did manual scavenging and would be interested in participating in the study. Among them, some
workers qualified and agreed to participate in the study and I went ahead and interviewed them as well.

The study was designed to conduct individual in-depth interviews. However, often more than one manual scavengers were interested in joining the conversations with me. They did not understand the idea of individual interviews much and did not give the needed privacy for the same. Even those participants in a community that I approached first preferred to talk to me in the presence of their friends and family members. Instead of not interviewing them in such cases, I went ahead and conducted group interviews. As I started conducting group interviews, I also noticed that participants in group interviews talked more than those in individual interviews. In group interviews, participants often got clues from others’ stories and shared more stories. Often one of the participants in a group would share an experience others were careful not to mention. The participants also sometimes added to the stories of other participants, confirmed them, supported them, and, in some cases, also challenged them and shared conflicting stories.

New participants were approached and interviewed until a “saturation” was reached, that is, “until each new life story appears to confirm the main elements of the previous stories” (Elliott, 2005, p. 40). The study was also cross-sectional, that is, the study participants were approached only once. During a period of about 6.5 weeks in 2018, I visited 20 different communities of sanitation workers in Mumbai and interviewed 49 manual scavengers through 8 individual and 14 group in-depth interviews. All these study participants were male and above the age of 18 years. In addition to the manual scavengers, 19 other people from their communities participated in these interviews, making it a total of 68 study participants. These secondary participants included were either the non-manual
scavenging co-workers of the study participants or their family members like wives and siblings. The total duration of audio recordings of the interviews is about 16.3 hours and the average interview length is 45 minutes.

**Ethical considerations.** The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Miami Institutional Review Board. I read out all the sections of the consent form to the participants and sought their oral consent to participate. An oral consent was preferred because as predicted, some of the participants were completely illiterate. A response to the interview questions indicates their consent to participate in this study. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in English. All the sensitive information that could reveal the identity of the participants or their confidential details was removed from the transcripts.

In order to make the interviewing least disturbing to the study participants, they were mostly conducted in their leisure time after work. Another reason for not approaching them during their work hours for interviews was to not disturb their relations with their supervisors and colleagues because of my presence and the conversation we had through interviews. Interviewing the participants at their homes also ensured a comfortable environment to them to talk freely.

**The Analysis**

The most important aspect of a narrative inquiry is what is referred to as “narrative competence” of the researchers or professionals (Murphy et al., 2017). Narrative competence is the researcher’s ability to “read correctly the world that is revealed by a person’s or community’s narratives” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 3). Researchers should be able to read and interpret the narratives “as they are intended” by participants (Murphy et
al., 2017, p. 60). This ability of researchers to “read [narratives] in the manner that authors write” is also what Habermas’ (1970) term “communicative competence” stands for (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 60). The analysis of narratives is thus an important stage at which researchers need to be careful to maintain the authorship of narrators and the integrity of their narratives, while interpreting and representing them.

In this narrative analysis of the subaltern perspective of manual scavengers in Mumbai, I have attempted to maintain a narrative competence in reading their stories as intended, and to maintain their authorship as much as possible. Using a dialogic conversational form of interviewing also helped tremendously with this agenda as many of the important statements of the participants were clarified by me through more questioning during the interviewing itself. In addition, during the analysis, I rechecked my conclusions and compared them against my field notes to make sure that I am not reading the participants’ stories differently than intended. In case of contradictions, the narratives that did not seem plausible have not been used for the analysis. I also considered other meanings of the statements being analyzed and their alternative interpretations. In cases where alternative interpretations appeared possible, I revised my conclusions to accommodate them. In addition, I used a negative case analysis to analyze contradicting statements and incorporate them in my conclusions.

In narrative inquiries, stories guide the analysis: “Stories are themselves analytical and show theory” (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010, p. 6). Different aspects of the stories such as its structure (the “what” of a story) and the storyteller’s performance of narrating the story (the “how” of a story) interest different researchers depending on their study objectives (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Elliott (2005) identifies two major types of
approaches to narrative analysis. The first approach is as explained by Mishler’s (1995) framework, which says that any of these three aspects of narratives can be analyzed: the content, the structure, and the performance of narratives. The content “describe[s] past events” and explains the value or “meaning of those events and experiences in the lives of the participants” (Elliott, 2005, p. 38). The structure is the way “the story is put together,” that is its form, and the performance is about “the interactional and institutional contexts in which narratives are produced, recounted, and consumed” (Elliott, 2005, p. 38).

The second approach is as classified by Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber (1998), that is, narratives can be analyzed for content and/or form, using a holistic approach or a categorical approach. A holistic approach “seeks to preserve a narrative in its entirety and understand it as a complete entity,” while in a categorical approach “short sections of the text are extracted, classified, and placed into categories for analysis” (Elliott, 2005, p. 38). Based on the “narrative structures and narrative devices,” researchers “make selections, have opinions about what is significant and what is trivial, decide what to include and what to exclude, and determine the boundaries, or beginnings and endings, of their accounts” (Elliott, 2005, p. 13). That is, the narratives define the approach needed to analyze them.

Moreover, although narrative analyses emphasize the “how” aspect of the narration, “it is unlikely that any researcher in the social sciences would examine the form or social function of a narrative without also paying attention to its content” (Elliott, 2005, p. 38). Depending on their objectives, narrative inquirers may choose to focus on more than one aspect of a narrative - its content, structure, and performance. Such an approach is particularly relevant in a study like this, which aims to connect the experiences of
participants with their social contexts. As Elliott (2005) puts it: “what is being attempted is an analysis of society that focuses on the role of narratives and their contribution to the cultural fabric of society” (p. 51).

For this study, I used a categorical approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998) for coding the interviews using the NVivo software. As majority of the interviews were conducted in groups and the participants often interrupted, added to, or challenged each other’s stories, a categorical approach suited the analysis the best. Starting with a few basic categories based on the theoretical discussion in the literature review, the coding was continued using an open coding approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). An open coding is “the initial, unrestricted coding of data” on the basis of a preliminary reading of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). The idea is to “open up the inquiry. Every interpretation at this point is tentative…. Whatever is wrong in interpreting those lines and words will eventually be cancelled out through later steps of the inquiry” (Strauss, 1987, as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 251).

The initial categories used for coding included “consciousness,” “family background,” “caste,” “work conditions,” “violation of rights,” “supporting entities,” “communication,” “social change outcomes,” and “future plans.” As I began with open coding, more categories, such as “employers” and “education,” became evident and got added to the list. Most of the original categories developed subcategories, for example, “communication” could be sub-classified as “communicating with employers,” “communicating through mediators,” “subaltern communication outcomes,” and “subaltern communicative expressions.” Also, some of the original categories such as “future plans” did not remain much relevant (see Chapter 4).
In addition, I used the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare, distinguish between, and clearly define the categories, and also to see overlaps and merge the categories when deemed apt. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend the method to help gain a comprehensive overview of the range of categories and their subcategories, and to understand their connections with each other. The method helped me tremendously to arrive at the categories and their subcategories that I have presented in this chapter. I have also done what Spiggle (1994, as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) refers to as “dimensionalization” of each category, that is, a check of the variations within each category along any relevant dimension. For example, the “subaltern communication outcomes” of the participants varied depending on their level of organizing.

**Maintaining quality.** In order to main the quality of qualitative studies, scholars have suggested some techniques of evaluation. Unlike quantitative research in which case reliability of a result means the ability to get the same result if the study is repeated, *reliability* in qualitative research is not that relevant as the research processes are often non-repeatable (Golafshani, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined reliability in qualitative studies as the *dependability* of a study (as cited in Golafshani, 2003). While the contexts, realities, and opinions of people may change with time, the dependability of a qualitative study can still be ensured by noting the relevant contexts and events that affected the participants’ thinking and responses at the time of a study. In this study, I have described the events and problems that the participants felt most concerning at the time of interviewing, for example, implementation of a biometric attendance system at municipal corporations (see Chapter 4).
Validity is another test of quality of research to make sure that the study has found or described what it claims to find or describe (Golafshani, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). However, qualitative studies are mostly evaluated based on their credibility (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). The narrative account that looks or sounds believable and has most of the elements of continuity in the stories to arrive at their conclusions is regarded as credible/plausible/persuasive in a narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain that a plausible account is “of which one might say, ‘I can see that happening.’” (p. 8).

According to Riessman (1993), “[p]ersuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants’ accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered” (p. 65). As mentioned before, I considered such alternative interpretations of the participants’ stories and statements and revised my conclusions accordingly to accommodate them. Negative case analysis, that is an analysis of deviating or conflicting statements of participants and their incorporation in conclusions, was also used to strengthen the credibility of study findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Another test of credibility commonly used in qualitative research is triangulation (Golafshani, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define triangulation as “the comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest” (p. 274). In this study, I used triangulation by comparison between the accounts of different participants to assure the credibility of the findings. As mentioned earlier, I also triangulated the participants’ accounts by comparing them to my field notes as well.

Another way for the researcher to maintain the credibility of a qualitative study is by disciplining subjectivities (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013, p. 321). “Subjectivities are
biases or points of view that derive from the researcher’s own race, class, gender, position of privilege, or past experiences” (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013, p. 231). A researcher should be able to identify her/his subjectivities and make them explicit so that they do not lead the researcher to “overlook, alter, or suppress evidence” that conflict with her/his subjectivities (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013, p. 322). By outlining my positionality with respect to manual scavengers in Mumbai, I attempted to identify my subjectivity and be open to conflicting narratives of the study participants.

Some other aspects of narratives that can be assessed for their validation can be their 
coherence as Riessman (1993) suggests, or adequacy as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call it. A coherent narrative strengthens the same goal of the narrator through different means such as content and performance. I recorded in my field notes when I felt during the interviews that the narratives of the participants were not coherent. These notes helped me verify the accounts of participants during data analysis and disqualify those accounts that seemed incoherent.

This chapter explained why a constructivist and qualitative approach was taken for this study, why narrative inquiry was selected as the preferred methodology, and how the inquiry was conducted. A constructivist epistemology and a dialogic approach helped gain an entry into the world of the participating manual scavengers, access, and understand their narratives. A narrative analysis helped interpret and connect the individual narratives of the participants to make sense of the collective narrative of manual scavengers in Mumbai. In the end, the chapter also summed up some techniques used to evaluate and ensure the quality of this study. The next chapter discusses in detail the study findings and gives some stories of the study participants that help illustrate their “collective story.”
Chapter 4

Findings

The first section of this chapter gives a brief summary of the demographic details of the study participants. In the following three sections after that, I have summarized the most common themes found in the narratives of the participants under distinct categories. These categories have been selected based on their universality in representing the conditions and experiences of the study participants. The first section, “(A) employment of manual scavengers” gives an overview of the employment conditions of the participants and describes how they ended up doing manual scavenging. The participants reported a variety of employment arrangements and employers in the city involved in subjecting them to manual scavenging. The major three categories discussed under this section include the types of employment arrangements for “manual scavenging,” the types of “employers” hiring manual scavengers, and the range of “salaries” the workers received.

The second section, “(B) struggles of manual scavengers,” is about the common challenges and struggles that these manual scavengers narrated. The major problems that the participants talked about experiencing were common to most of them. These concerns that they prioritized and spoke the most about are summarized in this section in two major groups: (B1) the categories about work-related concerns are under the title “working as manual scavengers,” and (B2) the categories about concerns related to personal lives are under the title “caste, community, and lack of opportunities.” Work-related concerns of the study participants include categories such as “safety and impact on health,” “income,” “job insecurity,” “lack of facilities,” and “inability to demand rights.” The concerns of the study participants that are related to personal lives include categories such as “caste and
untouchability,” “education of children,” “moving out of manual scavenging,” and “availing welfare.”

The last section of this chapter, “(C) subaltern communication for social change,” summarizes how the participants coped with their challenges and expressed their subaltern voice. The section also summarizes how the participants felt about their challenging situations. The categories that are discussed under this section include “communicating with employers,” “using mediators,” “outcomes of subaltern communication,” and “subaltern communicative expressions.”

**Demographic Summary**

Most of the participating manual scavengers were either native of Maharashtra (19), Haryana (17), or Andhra Pradesh (7) (see Figure 1 for a graphic comparison, and Appendix B for a detailed list of the participants’ demographic information). Regardless of their native or caste, most of the participants (19) were second or third generation migrants to Mumbai. Most of them talked about their caste and majority of them were from Dalit communities (23). Among the non-Dalit participants, most belonged to Vadari community (6) that comes from Andhra Pradesh region and traditionally does the work of stone crafting. The education level was on an average low among the participants as many of them had started working since childhood or adolescence. Most of the participants were either completely uneducated (16) or were educated till Class 5 to Class 10 (15).

About half of the study participants had prior generations of their families doing sanitation work (19). Most of such participants were Dalits (12). The remaining half of the study participants who were the first from their families to do manual scavenging (16) were

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*A more detailed discussion of Vadari community and its place in the caste hierarchy is given in Chapter 5.*
also mostly Dalits (10). These first-generation manual scavengers entered the sanitation work due to their desperate condition in absence of any source of income. The common reasons were such as migration from rural area to the city in search of work, demise of their fathers, or lack of sufficient income from the professions they were already practicing.

*Figure 1:* Demographic information of the study participants
(The figure is not exhaustive and includes only the most common types under each category. Also, it does not include the participants who were not manual scavengers.)

**A. Employment of Manual Scavengers**

Now imagine that there is a tank here and this is a toilet. And this water is not passing. The tank is full. And the gutter ahead is empty but the water is not going forward. So in that case, our job is to make it pass from there. So we get inside that. Whether the tank is full or empty, we have to get down in it…. We will get the water pass through it…. Once the water drains, then we dig out whatever material, soil is inside.
A participant explained one of the ways in which manual scavenging is practiced in urban areas like Mumbai. This section describes the various ways in which the participants were employed and were required to do manual scavenging. It also lists out and describes different kinds of employers that hire sanitation workers for manual scavenging. Lastly, the gross differences in the salaries these workers get are also discussed in this section.

**Manual scavenging.** Manual scavenging was practiced in all sorts of places in the city of Mumbai. Although the participants did manual scavenging as part of their work, they mainly referred to themselves as “sanitation workers.” They distinguished among themselves on the basis of the departments or employers under whom they worked. The main practice of manual scavenging was noticed for the maintenance of these three kinds of infrastructure – (i) sewer lines and open drains running under the public area that was maintained by the city corporation (15 participants), (ii) slum and semi-slum settlements in the city that had community toilets and their sewer waste was released in open drains (the work is called Dattak Vasti) (7 participants), and (iii) residential apartments that released their sewer waste through the main corporation sewer lines (15 participants) (see Figure 2). Apart from these particular types of employment, all sorts of sanitation workers were open to random contractual work as well for extra income. This temporary workforce particularly included those contractual corporation workers who would collect trash and clean streets (the work is called Jhadu Khata) (9 participants). Almost nowhere the employers provided their sanitation workers the entire safety equipment and attire needed and mandated for such wet-waste work, thereby making it “manual scavenging” and not just some regular sanitation work.
(i) The Drainage work. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) (now named Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai) employed sanitation workers in the “Drainage” department to clean and maintain sewer lines and open drains carrying sewer waste. Most of the employees in the Drainage department were not trained as divers and were expected to work in shallow sewer lines and open drains. The BMC sometimes used suction machines to clean sewer lines, however, these machines could not clean choked gutters around the bends as this participant claimed: “Machine can clean only at the main spot. The machine cannot go further inside.” Drainage workers had to often enter sewer lines to unclog drains filled with human waste, and this could not be done without coming in physical contact with the waste. A participant complained, “we have to put our hands or legs inside. We have to do it. It cannot be done otherwise. Our job is entirely of waste only.” Working in sewer lines was often very close to what this participant described:

When we go inside (the sewer lines), the circumference in it is very small. We cannot even turn there. We have to manage somehow, we have to sit like this, like that, the space there is very less. Then there is a bucket, there is a rope attached to it from the top…. We have to dump soil in it, we have to put it using our hands. And we cannot see anything in the dirty water. Our hands get injured by glass pieces, injections, everything from the hospital sewer lines.

Some participants who reported getting hand gloves and masks for safety while doing the drainage work complained about their poor quality: “They have given us gloves, they have given us masks. We do have masks but there is some problem in that while working…. Then we remove it.” Another participant claimed that the gloves were such
that “once you put hands inside a gutter, it goes bad in one day. Just in one day! It is of cloth. We have to bring it home to wash it. Then what is the use?” Also, the workers did not get hand gloves as frequently as needed, as this participant complained: “If we wear those hand gloves once then they spoil completely. Then we have to throw them away. Then they don’t give them again. Then we work with [bare] hands only.” Most participants experienced similar problem using the BMC’s hand gloves as this participant did:

We twist a wire like a rope and insert it in the [clogged] pipe and keep rotating [for unclogging]. Then it unclogs easily. And if we wear hand gloves and then rotate it, the cloth of the hand gloves will get stuck in the wire. Then neither the wire will move forward nor our hand will come out of it.

Another participant reported that the masks were plain cloth masks and did not have oxygen supply for working in sewer chambers where oxygen level is usually low: “they give a cloth mask. It doesn’t save us at all.” Instead, wearing these masks made it tougher for the workers to breathe as this participant experienced when he used a mask provided by the BMC:

I could take out just two bucket soil, that’s it. I started struggling to breathe. I cursed it, took off the mask and threw it in the gutter. I took my head out [of the gutter], breathed, and then worked inside and came out after two hours…. That mask is only for walking on roads, or in hospital.

The raincoat provided by the municipal corporations was such that “once you wear it, it is of no use anymore.” The participants complained that “even if we move our hands a little bit, it tears.” Another participant complained about the shoes they got: “We get the shoes of one size only. Then suppose he wears number 9 and I need number 7, then will I wear number 9 shoes?” Also, these things were not available to all the workers employed at the municipal corporation. While one worker reported getting a raincoat every two years, another complained, “I never got anything so far in four years.” One participant told that
when they asked their supervisors for anything for protection, they would say that they also “don’t have the stock.” Another participant claimed, “we should get full safety from the government, we never got it neither we will get it.” A participant questioned: “There are a lot of bugs and spiders in it… we have no protection…. We are also human beings, isn’t it right?” In absence of enough quality and quantity of protective equipment for sanitation workers employed at the drainage departments of municipal corporations, many participants reported having to work without them. Because of lack of protective equipment, the drainage work of municipal corporations that makes workers deal with sewer waste manually becomes manual scavenging, and the workers employed to do the drainage work become manual scavengers.

However, in the recent past, many permanent workers had stopped entering sewer waste owing to the public pressure to impose the legal prohibition. When these permanently employed Drainage workers could not be sent inside sewer lines, the BMC hired temporary workers for the drainage work. The BMC would approach its contractors to find such workers for manual scavenging, as a participant claimed, “if the permanent people are unable to do the work, then they ask 2-3 workers like us…. The company person (contractor) contacts we people.” Neither permanent nor temporary employees were provided proper protection to use while doing manual scavenging.

Very few BMC workers were trained in diving and given the entire safety attire and oxygen mask to work in deep sewer lines, of 15 to 300 feet depth. I found only three professionally-trained “Divers” at the BMC who claimed that there were no other trained drainage divers like them in the entire state. Even they worked with bare hands as the BMC did not have the right kind of gloves that they could use, as one of them complained:
we cannot even work wearing the hand gloves…. Our entire work is based on touch. We have to figure out whether this is a stone or this is waste, then we have to fill the bucket. We cannot figure it out using hand gloves. In that water we cannot see.

Rest of the other few employees who were hired by the BMC as Divers to work in deep sewer lines were working at the time of this study without any training, safety equipment, and oxygen mask. The colleague of one such Diver complained, “they haven’t given him hand gloves, mask or oxygen etc. yet. It has been one year now. One year since he got promoted [to the job of Diver]. Otherwise he was a laborer like us.”

A comparatively much smaller governmental organization Public Works Department (PWD) also hired drainage workers to maintain their offices and the residential apartments for their employees. These workers were required to maintain the entire infrastructure such as the plumbing system, doors, windows, and the drainage system at the assigned colonies and offices. These employees were also not provided any safety equipment for cleaning choked gutters. One of these participants recalled the conditions under which he had worked the previous day:

The water was so deep around us (hand up to his chest), and all the ‘butter’ was floating around us…. The gutter was full of all the feces. And as we were cleaning it, people were flushing their toilets from above, someone’s shit, someone’s piss, warm warm, everything fell on our bodies.

Thereby, the PWD workers doing the work of cleaning drainage can also be considered to be manual scavengers. The PWD workers I talked to were scheduled to clean a choked gutter at the Collector’s office the next day. Like usual, they were to work without any protection, this time in the government office responsible to stop manual scavenging.

(ii) Dattak Vasti. The BMC also indirectly hired sanitation workers for the cleaning of slum and semi-slum settlements. This work was called “Dattak Vasti”. Dattak Vasti workers were required to collect trash from door-to-door, clean the lanes in the area, clean
community toilets, and clean choked drains and gutters to make sure that the toilets and bathrooms in the area functioned properly. One participant complained about the workload in Dattak Vasti:

In Dattak Vasti work, everyone is after us. There is a lot of pressure on us. If anyone complains they come immediately. Whoever supervisor is there, he comes immediately – why have you not removed the trash? If we have come back home, he will call us and ask us to come back there, even if it is an off day. This is how it is. They trouble us a lot.

Male Dattak Vasti workers did all these activities while female workers only collected trash and cleaned lanes. Women did not enter drains, sewer lines, and tanks anywhere in the city.

Dattak Vasti workers also mostly worked without any protection. Only one participant working in Dattak Vasti reported being given all the needed protection: “[the contractor] gives gloves to wear on hands, a mask to wear on face, and the jacket that we wear, a red colored jacket, he gives that. And he gives gumboots to wear on feet.” Another participant working in Dattak Vasti shared that he was given a cloth mask which is not much helpful when oxygen supply is low, as discussed before. Another Dattak Vasti worker told that they were given only T-shirts, red jackets, and cloth-made hand gloves for the sanitation job. One more participant shared that he got only a jacket and nothing else from his employer for Dattak Vasti work. He shared, “we got to know that they sanction everything for us, soap, oil, gloves, boots, but they (the contractors) don't give them to us.”

One participant, who was also smaller than an average-sized person in the country, reported that he was given no protection and was made to enter narrow drains between walls on both sides because no machine or average-sized worker could reach there. The place was such that it had “no space even to stand there. People [had] constructed houses everywhere.” The participant shared, “nobody else can enter it. Nobody else goes, only I go inside.” As most of the Dattak Vasti workers were also not provided enough protective
equipment and were asked to clean sewer waste, they should also be considered manual scavengers.

Different areas that needed the Dattak Vasti work had different drainage systems. The lanes in these areas were too narrow for a BMC’s suction machine to enter. At many places the workers needed to enter open drains for cleaning while at some places they said that they could clean drains without entering them. A disgusted participant contended, “if you now see that gutter [we clean], you will ask us if we are humans or what to enter that waste!” Wherever drains were too deep and Dattak Vasti workers could not clean them, corporation drainage workers were called for the work. A few Dattak Vasti workers were even required to clean community toilets and their attached sewer tanks while others reported no such responsibility.

(iii) Residential apartments. The housing societies of residential apartments mostly hired their sanitation workers directly. These sanitation workers were also asked to clean manholes and sewer tanks whenever needed, in addition to the regular work of trash collection, removal, and the cleaning of common areas in the premises. The sewer tanks for apartments were commonly at least 5 to 10 feet deep and required sanitation workers to enter them for cleaning. This participant’s experience of working at residential apartments sums up what most other participants doing this work also shared:

There are 14 wings (of buildings) like that. To do the work of 14 wings… I mean in that you have to understand how many apartments are there, which apartments’ trash is to be collected. And after that the society does not cooperate with sanitation workers. As the gutter gets full, it spills over and floods. After it gets full, we have to get down in it. There is a pipe inside it and we have to clean it from inside there and then empty it. I ask the society people to give me hand gloves, shoes, mask, they directly refuse it. They say that they don’t have it, you get it from your money. What does the society give us? 200 Rupees. We take out so much waste.
Most of the study participants who worked at housing societies did not get any protective equipment from their employers and worked without it. One participant complained about his employers, “they haven’t given us anything” for protection. Another participant working at residential apartments reported, “we don’t wear anything. XYZ nothing. And till date we enter [the manholes] there and they don’t give us anything.” Only one participant reported that even though his employers did not provide him anything for protection, he bought gloves for himself before cleaning gutters. On the other hand, one participant said that “they give [protection] somewhere, and somewhere they don’t give…. [But] if we wear gloves on our hands, we cannot work.” The protection that some employers gave wasn’t always enough to protect the workers entirely during manual scavenging. A participant reported that “there are some gumboots kept there at the society that anyone who needs can take. We somehow manage with them.” Except those used gumboots, nothing else was provided to the workers there. As none of the participants working in residential apartments were provided all the needed safety while cleaning sewer waste and had to do manual cleaning, they can also be regarded as manual scavengers.

(iv) Random contractual work. In addition to these three major kinds of employment needing manual scavenging in Mumbai, some workers reported taking up random full-time, part-time, or temporary contracts from housing societies, commercial property owners, government organizations, and even the BMC for cleaning septic tanks, sewer tanks, sewer lines, and open drains. A participant who depended on such contractual assignments of manual scavenging shared how he was surviving:

I do the work of buildings, and chambers, gutter lines, and the big tanks like septic tank, I take up that work also. Then I enter inside it to work. Some tanks are 5 feet deep, some are 7 feet deep. Some tanks are also 10 feet deep…. If someone calls, we need to go. Someone calls us to this place, the
chamber needs to be cleaned. Someone asks to go to that place and do the work of a chamber for 500-700 Rupees. Now we have to do it out of helplessness. We don’t want to run out of cash, so we will have to work…. It has been 10-12 years.

This kind of random manual scavenging work was irregular, involved different employer(s) for each assignment, and was usually offered through known and trusted contacts, as one participant admitted, “we don’t get it easily. If someone knows people, then only they get it.” Another participant explained, “if someone’s gutter gets clogged then it doesn’t always happen that he would call us. He can hire someone else who can do it at a cheaper price.” Many sanitation workers, manual scavengers or otherwise, were open to these kinds of opportunities to make quick extra money. Contractual Jhadu Khata workers also often engaged in such part-time manual scavenging assignments to make extra income. The workers engaging in random contractual assignments also worked without protective equipment, thereby, making it manual scavenging.

(v) Jhadu Khata work. As mentioned earlier, the workers hired by municipal corporations to sweep public areas and collect trash from public trash cans were referred to as Jhadu Khata (translates as “broom account”) workers. Many Jhadu Khata workers took up random contractual work of manual scavenging in their free time, as this participant did: “In the morning I do pass time work. I clean gutters and all.” All the other Jhadu Khata workers participating in this study also confirmed that they cleaned gutters through random contracts in addition to their regular job duties. They also should be considered as manual scavengers as they hardly worked with any protective equipment.

Also, on rare occasions, even the Jhadu Khata workers cleaning streets and public trash cans reported coming across open defecation or improperly discarded feces. In absence of any equipment to deal with such kind of waste, they also had to clean it
manually. One participant shared, “we have even picked feces with our hands. If we remember that day, we still get upset.” Another explained their situation:

The feces comes in contact with your hands, it can touch anywhere on your body. Some people throw garbage from a distance, some women, when we are collecting it…. Some people throw bags full of shit…. If we leave it at the road, it will stink and the public will shout.

(vi) Public toilet work. The sanitation workers hired only to clean public toilets in public areas or community toilets inside slum or semi-slum communities were also sometimes required to clean the attached drains, sewer lines, and tanks. One participant described his duties at his previous job:

I used to clean a public toilet, even the ladies’ toilet, bathroom, I used to clean them. I used to live in the public toilet only…. And if a toilet would clog then I had to unclog the gutter outside too…. The Corporator called me and gave me the work of another public toilet as well.

The participant also shared that he did all the cleaning without using any safety equipment, thereby, making it manual scavenging. In addition, some of such toilets lacked adequate water supply. In such cases, the toilet users left them dirty and the sanitation workers had to clean the unflushed feces. One worker complained about having to fetch water from a distance to clean the public toilet he was working at. His friend described: “There would be a drum of water and he would have to fill a bucket and bring it again and again from such a distance to the toilet to wash it.” Another friend complained about him not being able to take even a day off: “He doesn’t take a leave. If he takes a leave, then next day it will be dirty and it will need more water. He will not be able to work that hard. He is an old man.”

Employers. The sanitation workers that engaged in manual scavenging were employed by a variety of employers – governmental organizations and corporations, non-
profits, contractors, and residential as well as commercial property owners. This section explains the arrangements under which such employers hired the workers.

(i) **Government organizations.** Government bodies such as the BMC, the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC), and the PWD employed most of their workers through contractors. In fact, all the sanitation workers in the PWD were hired through contract now. The entire work of Dattak Vasti was also run on contracts, sponsored by municipal corporations. While the sanitation workers in an area remained the same for years, the contractor that bid to employ and manage these workers kept changing every six months. The sanitation workers were asked to report to the contractor and collect their payments from her/him. Owing to this contract system, the BMC, the NMMC, and the PWD were no more answerable to the contractual workers even though these workers were often stationed at their offices.

However, the BMC and the NMMC promised to permanently employ their contractual workers at the Drainage departments and Jhadu Khata in some years. The promised waiting time ranged from six to 12 years but sometimes employees didn’t get permanent appointments even after 12 years of service. There was no such promised permanent job offered to Dattak Vasti workers or the PWD workers.

Also, the permanent employees at municipal corporations would get one member of their family employed in their place when they retired or if they died before retiring. Some workers referred to this system as the “PT case.” Sanitation workers sought the contractual jobs at municipal corporations in a hope for a permanent government job with the security of a pension, a higher salary, and a job for a family member in their place. Many permanent employees at the BMC were also provided residential spaces. A
participant talked about the huge demand for such contractual jobs at the municipal corporations and questioned the undue advantage they took of needy applicants:

the BMC people will accept a worker after nine years of service. Then they will open the [permanent] jobs for them. We pay 800 Rupees each for the exam. At least there are tens of millions of people here like us who have paid the fees. At the rate of 800, how much the government is benefitting from it?

At the PWD, all the drainage workers were contractually employed. However, their contractor saw them just once a month, only to hand over their salaries. Their entire work was supervised by PWD officers and they were also stationed at PWD offices. A participant of this study who worked at the PWD had completed 25 years of service at the same office, without getting any benefit such as a pension fund, paid leaves, or salary raise as per the government standards. This is his story:

When they hired me in 1993, then the contract system had [just] started. They even had our names in the register. When we all finished working for six months each, they hid that register…. If they had kept that record of our service of six months, we would have been permanent by now. They hid that register.

The contracts for Dattak Vasti were awarded to the bidding contractors through the area corporators, who were ward-level representatives at municipal corporations elected by citizens (TNN, 2017). Corporators were responsible for being available to citizens for urgent public infrastructure-related problems, and for guiding municipal corporations’ development projects and funds in their wards (TNN, 2017). This made Dattak Vasti workers also answerable to corporators in addition to their contractors. Although the money for the workers’ salaries came from municipal corporations, they did not take any responsibility of Dattak Vasti workers.

(ii) Contractors. As one participant shared and I also observed throughout this study, the contract system started in sanitation work in 1993 when the government
liberalized the Indian economy, and had become widely practiced by now. A participant employed at the BMC claimed, “BMC hasn’t remained like it used to be. Half of it has gone to the contractors. Nobody pays attention to it.”

Big contractors who had financial security were taking contracts for the work of municipal corporations and Dattak Vasti. These contracts were awarded through a lottery system. A bidding organization didn’t need to have any prior experience of sanitation but was required to have at least about three years of experience of social service as a registered non-profit organization. Contractors also needed to have a license for sanitation work. Women’s non-profit organizations were preferred while awarding these contracts.

Small contractors catered to residential societies where financial security was not much needed. They also carried license for sanitation work. Sometimes more than one contractor would also be involved like in this case:

Three contractors are involved in between. Three agents eat away their commission in between. The society people say that they have already raised the salary amount and paid them. But the contractors say that when the society people will raise the amount, then your salary will increase.

Some of the small contractors were also from the communities of sanitation workers, having worked in past or still working as sanitation workers as well. One such participant who was a small contractor was still working as a sanitation worker. He complained about the requirement of large amount of money as security deposit to win bigger contracts. He had to limit his work to small contracts despite having all the required safety equipment and following all safety measures.

(iii) Housing societies. Housing societies of residential apartments also directly or indirectly hired sanitation workers on contract. A participant explained, “in [some] societies, four people work. In some, eight people, sometimes two people. As per the
society… there are small societies as well. They work according to the size of the society.” There was no external monitoring and regulation of these contracts and they could be easily violated. One participant working at housing societies complained about not getting the entire promised amount: “After getting the work done they back out on that.” Another participant shared his experience:

In the last monsoon, I cleaned the drainage of all the buildings. They still haven’t given us some of that money…. Now he is saying that you have to clean not just 250 manholes but more than that, that is what is written in the contract. I told him if there is even one more manhole extra there, let me know. You should count them all. They did not do that.

Big housing societies hired the workers indirectly through contractors, as mentioned earlier in the case of the participants that had three different contractors involved in their employment. Unlike municipal corporations, such societies did not change their contractors every six months. However, as some participants shared, they also preferred to keep changing their contractors and sanitation workers every few years in order to avoid legal responsibilities. One participant was getting fired from such work after eight years of service, another shared a story about a coworker being fired after 18 years of service at the same housing society.

(iv) Random contractual work. The random work of manual scavenging was through short-term informal and verbal contracts that were also sometimes not observed strictly, as this participant revealed: “Before we clean, they promise a certain amount. Then later they go back on that.” One participant who did not get paid for a previous job was told while giving next assignment, “do this work. We will give you all the money together.” During this second assignment of cleaning a septic tank, three of his coworkers died. He never got any money from the employer.
The employers giving random assignments of cleaning manholes could be either owners of residential and commercial properties who did not hire sanitation workers for long-term work or the contractors responsible for cleaning sewer lines and open drains facing a shortage of workforce. Often the contractors for municipal corporations and Dattak Vasti hired their own contractual workers temporarily for additional sanitation work that was not part of their regular jobs. A participant, who was a contractual worker at the BMC for Jhadu Khata, described this trend on being asked if he did manual scavenging:

All of us do it. I also do it. I come back [from work] and do it as my secondary job…. It is private. I mean under the BMC. Because it is the BMC paying us the salary. Now in monsoon, the thing is they have to clean the gutters by April. They have to clean everything. So we clean the gutters in lanes, gullies, and on the roads.

**Salaries and survival.** The permanently employed workers at the municipal corporations earned about 25,000 Rupees a month, far more than all sorts of contractual workers. Among the contractual workers, two salary ranges were noticed. The contractual workers at the Municipal Corporation mostly reported getting a payment of about 550 to 600 Rupees (USD 7.4 to 8.1) for an eight hours shift. By the month end, a contractual worker at the BMC or the NMMC could earn up to Rupees 12,800 (USD 172.8) for 26 days of work or Rupees 13400 (USD 180.9) for 27 days of work after deductions of about Rupees 200 to 600 (USD 2.7 to 8.1) for insurance and pension funds. All sorts of contractual workers did not get a single paid leave.

However, this range of salary was mostly provided to only those contractual workers who were part of a labor union and were organized. Rest of the contractual workers who were not represented by any union got a monthly salary of about Rupees 5,000 to

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7Converted at the rate of USD 1 = Rupees 74.08 as on October 31, 2018.
6,000 (USD 67.5 to 81) for the same work. This is at the rate of about 200 Rupees (USD 2.7) a shift, less than half of what the unionized contractual workers got. Such workers include Dattak Vasti workers, drainage workers at the PWD, and those working at housing societies. Most of the participants earned this least range of income (22 participants) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**: Most common income scale of the study participants (in Rupees)

In the Dattak Vasti work, there was also a system of the workers collecting 20 to 30 Rupees (USD 0.27 to 0.4) from each household in the slum or semi-slum area they cleaned. Some participants said that they collected this money once every month, while some other participants said that they collected this money as and when they cleaned choked gutters. As one participant described, the arrangement was like a charity: “someone gives 20, another gives 30. It is like this. It is like a gift from them.” The money then got divided among all the sanitation workers employed there. I met two Dattak Vasti workers who were not getting their salaries from their contractors and this collection amount was their only income. The friend of one such participant complained:

He cleans half of the area. Other three men clean the other half. So they get 5,500 Rupees each. He doesn’t get a single Rupee. They tell him only to collect 20 Rupees from each home, for collecting their trash…. He does the job of three men alone and he doesn’t get the salary for his labor.

In case of a financial emergency, contractual sanitation workers had very few alternatives. Only a few participants said that they could borrow money from their contractors who would later deduct the amount from their salaries. However, many
participants who were contractual workers said that they had to depend on private moneylending. These workers could not approach banks for loan as they didn’t have a salary slip to prove their employment, a requirement in case of bank loans. Private moneylending could cost up to 5 to 10 percent interest per month, far more expensive as compared to bank loans at 12 to 15 percent interest per annum.

**B. Struggles of Manual Scavengers**

This section describes the common struggles and challenges that the participant talked about experiencing. The first part explains the challenges they often faced during and regarding their work. The second part of this section is about the challenges that participants faced in their personal lives.

**B1. Working as Manual Scavengers**

The interviews gave a glimpse of the challenges of all sorts of sanitation workers in Mumbai in addition to an overview of the specific challenges of those doing manual scavenging. This section describes those work-related concerns of the participants that they talked about the most and, thus, that appear to be their priorities. These include their concerns about their safety and health, their income and sustenance, job securities, some facilities at work that they sought, and their inability to demand their rights.

**Safety and impact on health.** As mentioned earlier, sewer waste can have many poisonous gases that often result in asphyxiation and death of sanitation workers who enter it without oxygen masks (Singh, 2017; Venkat, Tadepalli, & Manuel, 2017). Many of the participants mentioned death cases of such workers known to them directly or indirectly. Despite the dangers to health and safety, most of the participants reported working without the needed safety equipment. Some of them received safety equipment occasionally as this
participant did: “If their inspectors come any day to check us, we are given those [safety equipment] only on that day to wear.” However, the equipment they received never included oxygen masks. The only participants who reported getting oxygen masks were the three professionally-trained permanently-employed Divers at the BMC. All the other participants talked about masks made of cloth that did not help in low-oxygen sewer chambers.

In absence of standard safety protocols and resources, the participants reported using a variety of informal and unreliable methods to protect themselves. Some participants drank alcohol and some drank soda to protect themselves from poisonous gases inside sewer waste. One participant recommended, “after drinking soda, my eyes won’t burn. And I won’t be bothered by the gas in the toilet. Every person should do this. Not everybody knows this solution.” Another claimed, “it is important to drink alcohol to do that work in there.” However, this would not protect them when the extent of poisonous gases in the waste is high. One participant also recommended using salt to tackle with the poisonous gases: “Once we put salt in the tank and mix it, the stench will go away.”

Many participants said that they would leave manholes uncovered for 1 to 2 hours so that poisonous gases escaped before they entered. One participant warned that some manholes should be opened carefully:

In those chambers, it (the cover) shouldn’t be lifted directly. If it is lifted directly, it will explode. It is hot inside. First they have to loosen it a bit and release its gas. The gas should escape. Like that it should happen for 1-2 hours…. It shouldn’t be entirely opened, only somewhat.

However, this is also an unreliable method as one participant had lost three of his colleagues from poisonous gases even when they had left the septic tank uncovered for some time before entering.
Also, some participants depended on candle tests, that is lowering a lighted candle inside a sewer tank to check if it has any oxygen in it. One participant explained the candle test:

If I put it (a burning candle) inside and if there is a quick gas, it catches fire immediately. If not, if the candle extinguishes once it goes inside then get that there is one more gas inside it. It is of a different (dangerous) kind.”

On the other hand, others said that the candle test was too dangerous and could result in an explosion. One participant warned: “the one (manhole) that is not used anymore and the one that is full already, if we light a matchstick over it, then there can be fire.” One of the Divers at the BMC also explained, “there is a gas inside. There is a kind of gas inside which is such that even if you put one pebble inside, it will explode.”

Some participants said that when they entered manholes, they and their supervisors preferred having backup sanitation workers wait outside to help them in case of emergency. One participant explained, “one person stands outside and one person goes inside.”

However, as observed in many cases of sewer deaths, even the backup workers who entered manholes to help their colleagues ended up dying along with them when hit by poisonous gases. This practice, instead, has made casualty much higher as workers die in groups while cleaning sewer waste. A participant described such a case of two sewer deaths that happened the previous year in Mumbai:

We know that case. Those boys had turned black…. There was a septic tank close by. And there is a chemical company. There was this gas from the chemicals in there (in the sewer line). In that, first one boy went, worked, and came outside. And then his mobile phone dropped. When he went to take out the mobile phone, he got trapped inside. The second boy who went inside to take him out, he also died. First that boy died and then the other boy.

The participants reported frequently getting ill. Many of them had experienced suffocation, illness, and hospitalization because of the poisonous gases inside sewer waste.
Even the Divers at the BMC who worked using oxygen masks found the work dangerous. One participant admitted,

I have suffered a lot. Not just some injuries but we get sick also a lot of times in that work. If we fall sick, then we have to stay admitted to a hospital for 10-15 days…. It makes our condition very bad. If you do the work of sewer one day, you will not get up for 4-5 days.

In absence of protective attires, they frequently got injuries on their hands and legs by sharp objects inside sewer waste such as glass pieces, used injections, blades, sharp metal pieces, etc. “People also leave knives and all inside it,” warned a participant. One participant complained of bugs bites on his legs when he entered sewer waste: “It has such big bugs! Once we take off pants and enter the water they bite us.” Some other problems commonly experienced by the participants are infections, fever, headaches, burning sensation on skin, hardening and cracking of hands, loss of appetite, and a persisting stench of sewer waste on their hands and bodies. A participant bothered about the persisting stench on his hands used to clean them with acid, “what we use to clean toilets,” he told. One participant claimed, “the life of a worker like us is shorter.”

Income. Most of the participants found their salaries to be insufficient for a survival in an expensive metro region like Mumbai. To meet their household expenses, they took up secondary jobs and petty contractual jobs as discussed before, in addition to their primary jobs as sanitation workers. One participant questioned on being asked why he did it:

After all the deductions, I get only 10,000 Rupees in my hand. In 10,000 whether I should buy grocery for my house, or I should pay the rent, or pay the light bills, or I will pay for the medical expenses of my wife and kids, or I will pay my own medical expenses, or food expenses for myself? It won’t suffice. Because these days the house rent is minimum 5,000. Light bill, regardless of what you are using, is at least above 500. The grocery needed at the house costs at least 4,000. One has to spend money on the children regularly. Their school fee, tuition fee.
Another participant described the pressure: “When we leave in the morning from home, we think that whatever little work I get, I should be able to bring back some money home.”

The salary of Dattak Vasti workers, about 6,000 Rupees a month, was lower than even the minimum wage for unskilled sanitation workers in the state, that is 8,646 Rupees per month (Labour Law Reporter, 2017). One participant questioned, “what will happen in 6,000 for a poor man?” The workers at the PWD reported that even though their salary was just 6,000 Rupees, they were charged Goods and Services Tax (GST), the new tax system introduced by the government recently. “They don’t even pay for our leaves. They deduct that amount,” complained another participant.

Some participants who were contractual workers also complained about not getting their payments on time. A participant complained, “the salary is not on time. Nothing is on time…. But their work should happen on time.” Another participant reported a delay of up to two months in getting his salary. “We have to beg for our own salary all the time,” he said. One participant expressed his disappointment: “After working for an entire month, I have not received my salary. Everything got wasted.” Municipal corporation workers also reported that they had also not received the bonus amount from the previous year. Their arrears from a salary raise last year were also unpaid yet.

As a result of their financial conditions, the participants admitted that they found tough to even manage the school fees of their children. One of the participants who had four children could not afford to send even a single child to school that year. In another case, the participants complained that they could not afford the additional expenses that schools demanded occasionally in addition to the school fee. Those who wanted to quit
manual scavenging and start another profession also could not do anything because of a shortage of enough savings.

**Job insecurity.** A lack of job security was another major concern among the participants. Apart from the sanitation workers permanently employed at the municipal corporations, no other sanitation worker had any kind of job security. As mentioned earlier, the contractual workers at the municipal corporations were promised permanent jobs after some years of their service, however, they also seemed to be struggling to get the promised jobs. After a recent court judgment in a 10 years long case, the court ordered the BMC to appoint 2700 contractual workers permanently but only about 200 of them had been appointed so far. One participant expressed his hopelessness after years of service and waiting for a permanent job offer at the NMMC: “we lost the opportunity to get permanent now. Even if I live to see it, it will come only by the time I turn old.”

The participants doing Dattak Vasti work wondered why they could not be offered permanent jobs while their salaries come from the BMC. In absence of any intervention from the government, they had no job security at all. They were in a constant fear of losing their jobs. One participant described how the employers usually treated them: “If you fall ill, don’t come to work since tomorrow.” Another participant expressed his insecurity:

> This is actually a running work. By running I mean that you can lose it anytime. This is a temporary work. I mean you can lose this work anytime. Now they are building apartments everywhere. We will lose the job. That is how it is.

The participants who worked at residential apartments were striving hard to keep their contractual jobs. Their employers would make sure to let them know that they could be easily replaced. “If not you, then we will get someone else like you,” they would threaten. One participant believed, “the day they get someone to work for lesser, they will
Another participant revealed that he and his friends were about to lose one of their major work contracts. He believed that the employers were firing them because they didn’t want to continue hiring the same workers for too long for the fear of having to comply with labor laws. Their performance was not a problem:

We are losing a site now…. Now we have been working there since 8 years. They people are changing us. They say you have become very old now. New people have to be brought in. Did you get it? We have uniform and all. They say that they don’t want to hire for a lot of days. They want to keep changing in every 5 or 6 years.

**Lack of facilities.** The participants working at municipal corporations were not getting medical insurance from their employers. They were getting charged for it. Also, many participants who work for the BMC and the NMMC reported that even though the money for their pension fund and medical insurance got deducted from their salaries, they had not received the relevant details yet. A participant reported that he was being charged for the pension fund since 2013 and he had not received any detail yet in 2018 despite new contractors coming every six months: “Our pension fund is deducted since 2013. Do we have any proof of that? Nothing.” Another participant complained about facing deduction for medical insurance, “my money is going waste. They deduct it without our permission…. No matter how much we shout or do anything, nothing happens.” The participants were unable to avail medical benefits even after paying for them. Most of the participants had to resort to private medical treatment in absence of the details of the medical insurance they were paying for. Some participants also reported that the medical insurance facility for them was stopped shortly after it started; “everyone lost the money that was deducted.”

A few participants who had received their insurance cards were required to go to a distant private hospital for treatment instead of nearby municipal corporation hospitals for
insurance-covered treatment. The travel was not always possible for them and their family members, as this participant complained: “I don’t want to go there. I want to get my treatment here. I have nobody to travel with me to that hospital.” As a result, they also resorted to private treatment somewhere nearby and could not avail the medical insurance that they paid for. Those who sometimes availed the medical facility reported that despite having insurance they had to first make the payments at the hospital and later claim the bill amount, as this participant explained: “It is a long procedure. First we have to pay the bills, then we have to show the medical certificate, then they pay the expenses.” This required a lot of running around and paper work that the participants preferred avoiding, as this participant did: “It gets troublesome later on. Do this, do that, go here, go there. So instead of this running around, we pay whatever medical expenses are there.”

Some participants working at the BMC reported that they were not given any facility or allowance to commute to the area they were assigned even if it was far away from their offices. “We have to carry everything everywhere and walk,” complained one of them. The workers at the NMMC complained that they were charged for their uniforms as well, which should be provided by the employer. They complained, “we are charged a lot.” The workers at the PWD reported that they didn’t even get soap to clean themselves after manual scavenging. “If we find any soap in the trash anywhere, we pick that up and bring and wash our hands with it,” shared one of them.

All the participants except one reported that they were not compensated even if they got injured during work. In case of only one participant, his employer not just paid cash compensation to his injured workers, but ensured medical treatment to them. Except this participant, all other participants shared negative experiences. One participant quit his work
of Dattak Vasti after his foot got injured by a shard inside the sewer waste; he described his experience: “When my foot got injured, they did not take me to a hospital. So I came here and my parents took me to a hospital. I took my salary and left the job at that time.” He was also upset that the contractor refused to pay any money for his treatment. “You should be careful while entering [the gutters],” his contractor said to him. Another participant shared the story of a few Jhadu Khata workers at the BMC who were killed while cleaning roads by the vehicles driving by. As per his knowledge, the BMC did not pay any compensation to the families of these deceased workers.

Among the permanent employees at the BMC, not everyone was allowed the PT case, that is a job for a family member in his/her place after retirement or death. While Jhadu Khata workers and the Divers were allowed this benefit, Drainage workers were not provided the opportunity. They were told that they didn’t need the job security for a family member anymore, as this participant reported: “Additional commissioner and commissioner, both of them are saying that if the work can be done with the machine then the labor should not be sent inside. Do not give them the PT case.” However, as discussed earlier, machines could not do the entire work and the workers had to enter sewer waste. Some participants claimed that this PT case employment system had been recently discontinued for everyone regardless of his/her department.

Contractual workers at the municipal corporations and Dattak Vasti were also denied identity cards and the copy of their work contracts. This left them vulnerable, to be denied their rights if they met with an accident during work. As one participant explained, suppose I have climbed up, I am working at the third floor, I have neither my ID proof here, nor I have my name in the register, and also there is no record at the office. Even if I fall and die, they will say that I was doing a private work. Whose employee is he? No, no. He was doing a private work.
These workers had witnessed such cases in the past and had seen the police being bribed not to investigate the matter. One participant questioned this practice of not documenting workers’ employment, “our names are not even there in the register. Who will give us medical expenses?” Not having copies of the records of their terms and conditions of employment also left them unequipped to ask for their rights as in this case:

Government send money properly for us but it doesn’t reach us. The earlier contractor pocketed all the money. He didn’t give us anything. He didn’t even give us records. If we have the records then we can get that money.

**Inability to demand rights.** Many participants believed that asking their employers for their rights could result in them losing their jobs. One participant working at the BMC described the situation of workers like him: “We are only pawns…. All the officers decide how to use the pawns, how to make most of them.” The contractual workers at the BMC and the NMMC could not report their problems to these municipal corporations directly. “If we go directly to the BMC office then we are not allowed inside,” shared one participant. Another participant was reported by a BMC officer to his contractor. Workers were asked by the corporations to interact with their contractors only because they were their actual employer. The contractors also sometimes refused to take the responsibility of the workers as they would be replaced in six months. “Our case is such that nobody cares for us,” concluded a participant.

There was hardly any system to monitor how a contractor was treating his employees. He could make them do the work that was not part of their jobs and even violate the law, as this Dattak Vasti worker was used by his contractor who did not provide any safety equipment: “he (contractor) sends us anywhere. If a gutter is choked, he will send us there. Anywhere…. And sometimes the chamber is also deep inside.” A contractor could
make the workers do manual scavenging without any protection and even fire them whenever he pleased. There was no mechanism for the contractual workers to report an improperly functioning contractors to the BMC or the NMMC. In absence of any complaint reporting system available to workers, the contractors who broke law and violated labor rights continued to function and get contracts from the municipal corporations.

The participants reported that an area corporator was open to listen to the problems and concerns of sanitation workers and they could approach her/him sometimes. Two permanently employed workers of BMC also admitted that they went to a corporator once to report their concerns. However, this role of a corporator appears more like a charity act. One of these participants admitted, “we cannot put across our demands [to the corporator]. We are government employees. That is for the private people.” No participant mentioned that corporators were responsible for acting on the reported concerns of sanitation workers of any sort. One participant reported that the corporator in his area would gift raincoats to the sanitation workers at the BMC “whenever he feels like doing it,” otherwise the workers didn’t get any. Another participant told that the workers in his area had received some trash carts from their corporator as gift.

Some participants who worked at housing societies also revealed that they felt scared of rich, educated, and high caste people and that was the reason they could not do much to demand their rights. One participant described his fears: “These people are at a high caste, they are at a higher level, and if they do anything to me, then what will my family do? There is only one earning member in the family.” Another participant opened up and talked about his employers: “When I look at them, I feel scared. They are like this.
They harass us.” He went on to explain, “we have to get scared, what can we do? I have little children at home.”

**B2. Caste, Community, and Lack of Opportunities**

The participants shared a lot of stories of the challenges they faced in their personal lives owing to the stigma of manual scavenging and caste, owing to the communities they lived in and their poverty, and owing to the informal nature of their work and their low level of education. This section describes these challenges and experiences that the participants talked most about.

**Caste and untouchability.** As mentioned earlier, majority of the participants were from the Dalit castes that were traditionally forced into manual scavenging (See Figure 1). A participant who was from a Dalit caste asserted, “whoever is from our caste is doing the cleaning job only.” Another Dalit participant shared, “the people from my community are mostly in this line (sanitation work) only.” Many other Dalit participants also reported that in their communities, “everyone’s work is the same,” that is, of sanitation. One participant asserted that “be it Gujarati or Marwari (region-based identities), they are people of lower caste.” Another participant claimed that only Dalit people did the work of manual scavenging until very recently. It was only because of the rising unemployment in India that non-Dalit people had started doing sanitation work lately. And even now about “90 percent people [from manual scavenging Dalit castes] do this work only.”

Some participants also reported that, to an extent, sanitation work is done by other communities as well these days. Mainly, the participants who worked in municipal corporations and were with their coworkers from other castes during these interviews claimed that sanitation work was not caste-based anymore. “There is no caste in Mumbai.
Everyone works [in sanitation] here. Brahmins also do it,” they would claim. In one such case, when the Dalit participant left the room for some time, his non-Dalit coworkers said that Dalits were doing sanitation work much more than other communities. “They people have been doing this work since long,” one of them told me.

A Dalit participant explained, “the work that we are doing now, initially our forefathers did it. So that label stays…. They will give us only two types of job, to sweep and to clean the gutters.” One more participant explained this trend: “Whatever work our earlier generations did, say my grandfather did, as my grandfather fell ill, my father started doing the same work. He thought that okay, my father is unwell, let me do it.” The children of manual scavengers would also start doing manual scavenging as they grow up. This story of a participant of when he was in class seven represents this trend the best:

My father was doing this choke up work only. Once I came back from the school and brought food for him and I saw that my father was inside a gutter. And I am watching him from a distance. It took him from 1 pm till 4 pm and he still could not clear the choked gutter. I mean that food was kept like that only. Then I asked my father to come out, I bathed him…. Then I said that now you eat food, let me see it. Somehow I did it, on top of it I could see all the shit and everything floating. Somehow I unwillingly took off my school dress and dived straight inside holding my nose. I entered it…. [Earlier] I used to get disgusted on seeing it, [but] since then I have become an expert at the same work.

As mentioned in the beginning, the non-Dalit participants mostly belonged to Vadari community from Andhra Pradesh that was traditionally doing the work of stone-crafting. These communities used to travel from place to place, selling stone craft. Their primary income used to come from selling grinding stones and pestle stones for home use. With modernization, people started using electronic mixers and blenders and stopped grinding manually. “Since the mixers came, we left that occupation…. Nobody is going to buy that now. How far will we go carrying it on our heads?” questioned a Vadari
participant. Another Vadari participant who claimed that he was good in stone-crafting shared, “I am not interested [in stone-crafting]. If I do some job, then only I will get some money. Now I have to think of my children.” A Vadari participant whose both sons were manual scavengers now shared,

we used to work with stones, make holes in the stone for grinding. I raised my kids doing that work somehow. It has been at least 25 years doing that… [But] nobody does it now. Everyone uses mixer now. Now our work has also stopped. Now nobody buys it.

A community of traditionally skilled workers became unemployed and unskilled with changing times. Many of them in Mumbai were now engaged in sanitation work.

The communities of sanitation workers in Mumbai were still geographically settled mostly according to their caste groups. A slum or semi-slum could have multiple caste or religious groups living in it, but they could still be distinguished as the people from the same caste groups were mostly living next to each other. It was very easy to identify and locate any particular caste or religious group in such neighborhoods. Often the neighborhoods were also named accordingly. This helped me with my sampling as well as described in the previous chapter. A participant described his neighborhood like this:

In our community, there are blocks. Starting from the station line, there are Muslim people. After that there is a Buddha colony (of Dalits who converted to Buddhism). After that there is a compound of Makada people (another Dalit caste). The one in which I live is of Makada people.

Despite this, the participants did not much experience the caste-based practices of untouchability and discrimination in their neighborhoods and among their coworkers and employers. However, they experienced being treated as untouchables by the residents of the areas they cleaned. “They react ugly,” a participant expressed in English. Even if a sanitation worker was not a Dalit, he was treated by public as an untouchable while doing sanitation work. The untouchability these workers experienced was because they were seen
doing sanitation work, traditionally considered a dirty work to be done only by some Dalit communities treated as untouchables.

Residents of the areas they cleaned sometimes told the participants to “move away” or “stay away” and let them pass first to avoid any physical contact with sanitation workers. Also, they often threw their trash at sanitation workers “from a distance” or asked sanitation workers to pick it up from their trash cans so that they could avoid touching trash cans or the workers. One participant narrated his experience:

> When we go to get the trash, they throw the box from a distance, and they would say, ‘no, stay away.’ And if a sanitation worker goes there to sweep, they tell him, ‘hey sweeper, you move aside now. First let this person go.’ This is how they talk. I tell them that ‘sir, we are poor people that is why you are talking like this to me. You are rich that is why we have to listen to you.’

The participants shared that when they worked in sewer waste, sometimes they didn’t even get drinking water when they asked the residents of that property for it. When they were offered water sometimes, it was in the mugs used for bathing. Often they didn’t get cold water even when requested. One participant described how he felt about it:

> They used to humiliate us so much. And after we have used it, they used to wash it with a soap. It used to trouble us so much. Now also it is the same but we have become used to it.

Another participant explained how they were served tea sometimes:

> Once the holder of a clay cup breaks, it should be discarded. What they do is that they keep it. They think that if one day the sweeper or the manual scavenger asks for tea, then we will offer it in this cup.

The participants also felt hurt when sometimes instead of their names they were called “trash-guy” or “broom-guy,” a commonly used term for sanitation workers in India. One participant told, “sometimes we meet people like that, who don’t have enough brains to speak properly. They straightaway call us broom-guy (*jhaduwala*).” Two participants
also admitted experiencing casteist insults by the residents at their work site. One participant shared, “the people who live in that society, they people used bad words for our community. They insulted our entire community.” A participant also talked of being mocked by his friends for his work. They would tease him, “you look so good and you wear such good clothes but you do the work of gutter. Why do you always keep sweeping such dirt with a trash can by your side?”

The participants also felt offended by the way people look at them when they cleaned sewer waste. They also found it humiliating when people covered their noses while passing by them. “They act as if we are very wretched people,” said one participant. Another participant complained that “they make faces as if they have never seen anything dirty.” One of the participants shared what would happen if he went to a restaurant after doing manual scavenging: “If we would go to a hotel to drink tea and they are sitting next to us they would say that we are stinking so much of the gutter. Only we know how it used to hurt our hearts.” Many participants said that they have become used to such public attitude towards them. A participant concluded, “there is no dignity in this work. There is no doubt about it.”

**Education of children.** Many of the participants were not educated at all or had low level of education. “I don’t even know how to count beyond 20,” admitted one participant. Despite this, most of the participants valued education and believed that their children needed to study well for their communities to get free from manual scavenging. One participant asserted,

If we can ignore how much money we are making, how we are making it, and just take out some of it and some of our time for the education of our children, then I have faith that our community and our scheduled castes will reach the skies one day.
The participants were determined to educate their children and ensure that their children
don’t have to do manual scavenging on growing up. “Today I am spending all I can for the
education of my son,” told a participant. They also believed that although more expensive,
English medium education would offer their children more opportunities and success in
future: “Now what happens is everyone wants English medium education, so nobody goes
to Marathi medium school. So that a child doesn’t face problem after 10th class.” Another
participant explained, “if our child goes to an English school, he learns to speak in English
in the next three to five years. Otherwise, here in the municipal corporation’s school, it will
take him 10 years to learn that much.” One participant shared,

my daughters go to an English medium school. I have also admitted them
to a tuition class. They go to the tuition class in the morning, to school in
the afternoon, and I let them watch television in the evening…. They should
study well. The younger daughter is weak. She doesn’t write well. I have
become so worried.

A participant asserted, “now I am going to let my children study till class 10, 12, 13. I will
let them study as much as they want to.”

However, not all the participants could afford such expensive education. The
participant who could not send any of her four children to school cried as she said, “when
we had our eldest daughter we had a lot of dreams… that we will do something for her, we
will save some money. Whatever we are facing, she should not face.” Those who could
send their children only to municipal corporation schools complained of poor quality of
education there. One participant described the situation:

There used to be a time when they used to teach in municipality schools.
Poor men used to enroll their children in the municipality schools mostly.
Today if you go to a municipality school which starts at 7 in the morning,
you will that till 10 am, the teachers would be sitting inside the office only,
chewing tobacco, etc. Even if they take a class, they hardly teach for half an
hour. How will the children of our community focus then? They don’t get
education, they get only fun and play time, later as they grow, they start feeling hungry to earn.

The participants also sounded somewhat unsuccessful in motivating their children to study well. One participant complained about his son: “He goes to school and roams around it carrying his school bag and comes back home at 12:30 pm and says that the school got over.” A few participants were frustrated about the situation and felt that their hopes were getting crushed. Complaining about his nephew not studying, one participant expressed his disappointment: “If they are like this then tomorrow if someone is offending us, we will stand mute.” Some participants shared that their children found the educated youth in the community being jobless very demotivating. When their children saw young educated people also doing sanitation work, they argued that there was no point in getting education. “Educated people are also doing this work,” they would point out to their parents and stop studying. A participant’s son, who was educated and doing sanitation work, questioned her, “what have I achieved?”

The participants also confirmed that even the educated youth from their communities had to do the work of sanitation because of joblessness. One participant claimed, “in our caste, even the one person who gets education out of a hundred, he is also unemployed.” Another participant shared, “undergraduates come to me in such a needy condition and they request me, ‘get me a job somewhere, get me a job somewhere’.” A participant reported that even the educated people from his community got sanitation-related manual jobs:

Now even if they have studied class 15, 16, or 17 (under-graduation and graduation), then also they don’t have any job. He did not get any job. He has done a B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) and is still doing this same work (of sanitation).
One participant shared, “my condition is that I am a graduate,” and he was still working in the drainage department of the BMC and was doing manual scavenging for living. Another participant told, “the workers who work with me have studied till class 12, 15, graduate, and even double graduate. They are doing this same work.” Sharing a similar story about his educated coworker, a participant questioned,

what did he achieve by studying? He didn’t get any job anywhere. He had to come at last to a garbage truck to work. I am an illiterate; I haven’t gone to school even for a day. There is no similarity between us. But now we are doing the same work.

Some participants thought that the environment of their neighborhood resulted in a bad impact on the children of their families. In one of the communities of manual scavengers that I visited, young boys were willingly dropping out of school and starting to work along with their parents as sanitation workers. A participant claimed that only those from their community had progressed who left that neighborhood. Another participant in another community explained that it was common there for the children to miss the school all the time. “Gambling and alcohol” were common in this neighborhood. Sometimes children from slum areas were also refused admissions in English medium schools: “These days they don’t take slum children in English medium school. Because those children are very spoiled. Their reputation is like that.”

Moving out of manual scavenging. Many participants shared that they had tried to move out of manual scavenging but did not succeed. One participant told, “I tried a lot. I still have it written where all I applied.” “There is no job anywhere without bribery. That is the thing,” he concluded. One more participant claimed, “the thing is that if you go to anyone for work, the first thing they want is bribe.” Another participant shared his unrealized dreams:
I have thought of driving a vehicle, of setting up a shop. But I need money to start it. I don’t have that much money to invest so where should I get it from? This (manual scavenging) is the only work I have to do.

Three of all the participants had recently stopped the work of manual scavenging. One participant got the role of a supervisor for Dattak Vasti work. He used to supervise his brothers and other coworkers as they did manual scavenging. The second one quit after he severely injured his foot while cleaning sewer waste. He went back to his family’s traditional work of stone crafting. “The only thing is that it is a lot of hard work,” he said. The third one left after the death of three of his coworkers (also his relatives) while cleaning a septic tank. He was now working as a construction laborer.

However, such changes could be temporary as some other participants shared how they had to come back to manual scavenging when they tried to quit because they could not find better work opportunities despite trying hard. One of them shared: “I am doing this work since 2008. Then I stopped it for a year in between. I thought I would think of something new and good. But when nothing worked out anywhere then I got into this [again].” Another participant shared, “I tried at a lot of places for work…. I gave up in the end and came here to work,” as a manual scavenger. A participant recollected,

I had left this line (profession) of gutter cleaning. Later I started selling brooms…. That business, while running good, suddenly all my brooms stopped selling. Then I left that broom business as well and I was roaming around idly inside this colony, looking for work. I came here and started working here.

In all such cases, it is noticed that those who wanted to move out of manual scavenging could always come back to the sanitation work and depend on it as a backup in between trying different jobs or trades. They were also familiar with the work and its requirements, as one participant asserted, “we know this work.” Another participant talked about his brother who also came back to manual scavenging from a brief non-sanitation job: “It
didn’t suit him. Because only this work suits us.” One more participant talked about his familiarity and comfort with sanitation work; “now if someone picks us from here and asks us to do an office work, we cannot do it,” he said.

Being from the communities of sanitation workers was helpful to the participants to an extent as many of them reported getting work through their personal contacts. “We get the job only through the people we know,” admitted one participant. One participant shared, “my brother used to do this work, so my sons also joined.” Many of the participants permanently employed at municipal corporations had also got jobs in place of their deceased parents. Many other participants got introduced to the work through their family members like in this case:

my school was from noon to 5 pm. So during the morning time… my grandmother was in the BMC at that time. So I used to go there to help her…. [Later] anytime if she is unwell and she stayed back, I used to go for work in her place.

Another group of participants migrated to Mumbai recently and started doing sanitation work by getting jobs through a relative. Other recent migrant participants also admitted that they knew people in Mumbai already who got them these jobs involving manual scavenging.

However, a few participants also found this to be the reason that kept them trapped in sanitation work. Being from the community of sanitation workers also meant that they did not have the needed knowledge or social contacts to enter other vocations. Also, they did not have enough education to have many work opportunities. As one participant explained, “if someone is not educated but since childhood he gets knowledge of some work then he can also progress to become a manager of that place.” Without such social capital, manual scavengers struggled to find better opportunities. They also lacked financial
capital to start their own ventures. A participant narrated a folklore about their caste having to do manual scavenging:

This is a story we have heard. Once big kings were sitting together. Among them, there was also our Valmiki, the one we believe is our God. Then people ate, enjoyed, and got up and left. Nobody cleaned the trash there. Then our God Valmiki grabbed the broom and cleaned it. What is bad in that? Then somebody gave him a blessing that you have done very good job, you will continue to do this since today. That is why the people of our caste also started doing this work.

Availing welfare. The participants reported challenges in dealing with banks. Those who were new migrants to the city complained that the banks were not offering them saving accounts without address proofs; “the bank people ask for proofs but we do not have a proof of this place,” complained a participant. They were refused by many banks the zero-balance bank accounts promised by the government to poor people for their financial inclusion. As these participants’ employers gave them salaries through checks, they did not have a way to cash them. Their employer had told them, “this time keep your bank accounts ready before I pay the salaries. Otherwise I won’t be able to.” Among the participants who had bank accounts, those working on contract said that they could not avail bank loans as it needed a proof of employment which they did not have. “Banks don’t give loan to us,” shared a participant. Another participant told me, “the biggest thing is that we don’t have a salary slip.” As mentioned before, these workers had to depend on expensive private loans when in need of money.

Some participants also complained that a lot of paperwork and running around was needed to prepare a caste certificate. Caste certificate is a document required to avail government welfare meant for some oppressed castes in India. The certificate serves as a proof that they come from oppressed castes and are eligible for the affirmative action and welfare meant for such caste communities. One participant told that despite migrating to
Mumbai decades ago, he was required to go to his far away native place to get a letter from the local authority stating that his family lived in that place before coming to Mumbai: “They say that first get all the papers and then talk.” He also feared that he would have to pay bribe to get that letter. Another participant complained that despite submitting all the needed documents, his friend was not provided a caste certificate:

They need a proof of past 50 years that you are living there. Or the generation before yours was living there. I have a friend. He is living here since more than 50 years…. We took all the documents there. Then also, ‘go to that officer, fill that form, bring this paper, bring that paper, get a certificate from the corporator, get a letter of introduction, get a letter from this officer, that officer, get this get that.’ Like this, we started carrying a file of 25-30 pages…. A lot of people like us run around there from morning till evening, whose work doesn’t get done. Out of 100, only 2-4 people get their work done in a day.

C. Subaltern Communication for Social Change

As seen in the last section, the participants expressed more concerns about their immediate day-to-day survival, earnings, and job security for themselves and their family members, as compared to broader issues of labor rights, human rights, and the practice of manual scavenging that concern the larger community of manual scavengers. Thereby, for the most part, the participants were trying hard to directly or indirectly communicate with their employers and get them to act on their demands. This section describes the experiences of the participants as they tried to communicate with their employers about their concerns. Further, it also explains the use of mediators that was observed in the subaltern communication of the participants.

Communicating with employers. Not all participants were comfortable approaching their employers. Many participants who were contractually employed feared that if they asked for something they would be told to quit the work: “If we say anything,
they will ask us to leave.” A participant feared that his employer would say, “we will hire someone else.” One more participant claimed, “if we say much, they remove us.” Their employers had already told them not to expect more than what they were getting, be it salary, protective equipment, or paid leaves. A participant remembered, “the chief had told us directly that whoever can work in 5,000 Rupees should do it, others can leave.” They had seen many of their coworkers get fired over petty issues, like this participant had: “How can we fight? They have given a suspense letter to one of my friends. He has been suspended for six months.” Another participant shared that he had seen “a lot of people” getting fired for questioning the employers. The contractual nature of their jobs added to the insecurity. A few participants found their employers to be too powerful to oppose, like in this case:

They people can give money and get anything done to you. Today this is also going on in the world. Like some rich person gives money and tells someone to kill someone. People kill like this. So we feel scared of that.

The employers were also often unavailable to sanitation workers. One participant working on contract at the BMC was frustrated as he could not reach higher officers despite trying a lot: “We are not able to reach the people we want to reach, people who can listen to us. Our voice doesn’t reach their ears.” Another contractual worker at the BMC reported that he was not even allowed to enter the BMC office as he was employed through a contractor. And his contractor also refused to hear him saying that “you are not my worker, you are BMC’s worker. Go and fight there…. We will change after six months.” A participant told he had no details regarding his employment “because those who take up the work on contract, they and BMC [have the details]… nobody else can say in between.”

Those participants who could communicate their concerns with their employers were also not much successful. False promises and procrastination were very commonly
used by the employers to dissipate workers’ demands for the time being. When two participants asked their contractor to give them the details of their pension fund, “he kept saying yes, I will do it. Not now then I will do it next month. If not next month, I will do it after 15 days…. He spent the entire six months like this” without giving them any detail. Regarding the details of his medical insurance, a participant complained,

we have shouted so much and become tired but we are not getting it. They say that it will come, fill the form. We have filled the form 50 times and submitted. Nothing happens. Nobody pays any heed. They think that we will come, shout, and then we will leave.

Another participant shared, “I said it many times that we need gumboots, gloves, we need masks. They say that the stock hasn’t come yet, it hasn’t come yet.” Some participants who were promised permanent job offers by the NMMC were still waiting after completing about 20 years of service on contract. One of them complained, “they just say that, yes, we will do it, we will see. It will happen in this standard meeting, in that standard meeting. That is all what is going on. And now it is about to be 20 years.” A participant concluded, “they never listen no matter how much we say it. They just keep saying yes we will do it, that’s it.”

Often their employers straightaway refused the workers’ requests. A participant complained that his “contractor doesn’t even show us his records” of the workers’ attendance. One participant was refused the money for his treatment for an injury that happened during work. “It is your fault. You should be careful while entering,” the contractor said to him. Some participants who worked at the BMC and the NMMC objected to the biometric attendance system that was introduced newly. They had not received appropriate instructions for the new system: “we don’t have any details of it, we don’t have the circular that what time we should swipe in and out, nothing like that.” Even a little bit
of delay in using the machine would result in a loss of income for the workers. Their officers refused to allow any flexibility to the workers even when they were facing huge salary cuts since the machines were installed. One participant shared, “the officer says that if you want to work, swipe it (the biometric system). If there is any loss, that is yours.” Another participant told, “many times we get into fights with contractors. Then we don't shake hands…. But they don't give up then we have to give up.”

The participants said that trying harder could result in disciplinary actions against them. As one participant put it, “they use their pen” to silence the workers. As mentioned before, a participant shared that his friend was suspended for questioning the BMC officials. One participant working permanently at the BMC expressed his helplessness: “If they tell us to get down inside [sewer waste] in emergency then we have to do it. Otherwise they will mark us absent.” This would result in a loss of their income and pension in future. Another participant said, “we cannot fight much. If the senior has said something, we have to do it. Otherwise he will say that I will report this against you.” One participant told that he could not refuse the BMC officials telling him to do manual scavenging because “they will say that you are complaining because you have to work. They will blame it on us.”

One participant compared the oppressive situation with manual scavenging: “If someone raises his voice, they dunk him in the gutter.”

Sometimes their employers also managed to manipulate or coerce the participants into not communicating their concerns. A participant employed at the BMC said that his officers “will not let us complain.” These workers were told not to allow anyone to click pictures of them working. Another participant revealed that whenever any inspection happened he was told to claim that he received more salary than what was actually paid by
his contractor: “When big officers come to ask how much we are earning they tell us not to say that we are getting 6,000. They say, tell them that we are getting 7-8,000.”

Some employers even used charitable activities to win over sanitation workers and make them feel grateful and obliged. One participant shared a story of his conflict with his employer when the participant refused to take his orders and work. The dissent of this participant was doused by the employer by handing him over some cash to “party”:

Since I fought with that officer, I would come, sit here, and not work. For a week he also didn’t say anything…. Then one day he said to me, hey brother, come here…. He gave me 500 Rupees and said that it has been a long time since I didn’t give you money for alcohol. Go, have a party in the evening. I thought that fine, let me take the 500.

A female participant who also did Dattak Vasti work was delighted that her contractor gave her a dress. “He gave it to nobody else but me,” she gloated. Another participant claimed, “this work is very good for the people like us” because his contractor gave some charity money to him and his coworkers in cases of emergency. To those who would be dissatisfied by their low salary, he would say, “there is nothing bigger than satisfaction…. [The contractor] is giving us all the facilities…. Don’t see what they are earning. Be satisfied in the money that you are getting.” This participant was also glad about getting used clothes and leftover food from the houses he collected trash from. “This is a very good work for poor people like us,” he kept saying.

Although the employers had created such oppressive and non-dialogic environment for the workers trying to communicate their dissent, it did not mean that this had completely silenced these workers. Many participants seemed aware and careful with their employers and strategic about communicating or taking actions for social change. “We have to be strategic about it,” explained a participant. One participant shared, “we remain silent, there is no option. We don’t fight, we stay silent. We understand things on our own and we
become quiet. We decide that we will see it [later].” They might have become silent for the time being that did not mean that they had given up. Another participant described,

I haven’t given up. We are quiet right now because if someone talks too much, the officers keep an eye on them. Tomorrow if they get any point against us, they will directly fire us from work or throw us into another ward.

Off the record, he told me that he was active in his union and was trying to do something about the situation. “Now because nobody is around we can tell you these things,” confided a participant. One participant hinted, “a lot of things are going on. Paper work is going on. Everything is going on.” The situations were unpredictable for sanitation workers but they were keeping a close watch on them: “Now let us see what happens next.” Another participant said regarding getting a permanent job at the BMC: “We will get to know once it is 2019. Even we cannot say anything till then.”

One group of participants who were permanently employed at the BMC had also tried a little non-cooperation movement at work to oppose the BMC policy of denying the PT case, that is a job to a family member after the death of this worker: “There is a fight going on between the laborers and the officers.” The BMC officers told these workers that since only machines will be used for cleaning drainage and the workers would not have to do manual scavenging anymore, they would not be eligible for the PT case. However, when it came to actual work, machines could not clean around the bends and the officers would ask these workers to enter manholes for cleaning. At this, these participants said, “we are also being stubborn that it is not our work, how can we do it?” However, these workers could not continue their non-cooperation much. When pressurized a lot by the officers, the workers had to give in and enter manholes, otherwise they could face serious disciplinary
actions against them. One of them explained, “we have to fear despite being permanent… we work out of fear.”

Some participants also resorted to hostility or aggressiveness in absence of better options to deal with the conflicts they had with their employers. Their reactions seemed like outbursts of repressed frustration and anger. There were some specific occasions when the participants found such reaction justified and did it. Some participants shared that they would do it if their employers insulted them, their families, or community in any way. A participant told that he hit his senior on the head with a glass bottle when the senior was abusing him using offensive language:

I cannot tolerate cursing, of mother and sister…. Because among we people, nobody uses the curses of mother and sister. And we don’t even take it from anyone. That is the reason. Mother, sister don’t interfere with anything. I am working at your place, my mother and sister are not working for you that I listen to you cursing my mother and sister. That is the thing.

Another participant went to police to file a case of caste-based atrocity against his employers when they used casteist abuses. Some other participants said that regardless of the consequences, sometimes when the employers behaved rudely, they also got rude to them and refused to take their orders. One participant quit his job because on being 15 minutes late from a manual scavenging work, his supervising officer locked the office while the participant’s clothes were inside it. On being questioned, “the officer asked him directly whether you want to work or not,” to which the participant replied, “I don’t want to do it.” Another participant who collected trash from door to door shared, “if some is rude then we say that you dump your trash yourself. We are not your servant.” The participants also shared their experiences of arguing with their employers when the promised salary was not paid. A participant, on facing a new tax deduction from his already low salary of 6,000 Rupees, told his contractor, “if you give the full salary then all right,
otherwise I am not coming to work since Monday. If you deduct from my salary, I don’t want your job.”

Only two participants in this study were active in their labor unions and were engaging in direct negotiations and interactions with their employers in an organized manner. One of them described how he went with his fellow union members to help an old female sanitation worker when she was getting fired from her job after about 18 years of service: “When we went to that society, she was hired back. Within 10 minutes only. And they also increased her salary.” “Our group has more than 100 members,” he shared. He was confident and hopeful of helping more sanitation workers in future:

Now this has become our mission, to help the poor, to stop the atrocities on sanitation workers. I mean what the government is not doing for the poor, not doing for the sanitation workers… even those who work under the BMC don’t get any facility from them. Even private societies don’t give the facilities they should give. For this, our team is ready to work always.

However, other participants who reported being members of labor unions were not this active and were not in leading positions within their unions. For them, their unions acted more as mediators, run by people not from their communities. They had little say in the activities of their unions and depended on the union representatives to negotiate with their employers and to take actions on their concerns. Such use of mediators for communicating with employers is discussed next.

**Using mediators.** In absence of an effective way to communicate with their employers, sanitation workers often resorted to using mediators to reach out to their employers. Using mediators also gave workers some support and confidence, as a participant revealed that “when they don’t have anyone standing behind them, they feel scared” of asking employers for their rights. The sanitation workers employed at municipal corporations most commonly used labor unions as their mediators. Dattak Vasti workers
mostly did not have labor unions. A participant complained about a union leader neglecting Dattak Vasti workers: “He did not take any interest in Dattak Vasti workers. He did not help them progress. Dattak Vasti is such that they don’t even count it. Even the BMC people don’t care for them.” The participants doing Dattak Vasti work mostly talked about seeking the help of the corporator in their area. The workers employed at residential societies directly and not through contractors reported approaching some of the residents of these societies when they needed mediation.

There was hardly any interaction of the participants with rest of the society. Only a few participants mentioned rare occasions of journalists writing or shooting news stories on their conditions. Also, no contemporary political leader was mentioned to be interested in their cause and fighting for it. As per the participants, no non-profit organization was working actively for the manual scavengers in Mumbai. The disappointment from the civil society was obvious among the participants. One participant told me,

like what you are writing, many people have written it and gone. Many people have come here and gone. Nothing has happened in this community. Till date…. They only write and go…. Nobody ever calls us back…. Till date nobody has called us.

Another participant reported, “I have been interviewed three times but nothing has worked out till now.” One more participant complained:

It has been three years since we have given an interview to a non-profit organization…. We even enter gutter [for video shooting]. Some days ago we got to know that they will give some 40,000 Rupees each. Then nothing happened about that. Later they will give bigger amount like 15,00,000 Rupees, something like that. If you want to start a shop, you can do that. That is what they said but nothing has happened till now.8

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8The amounts mentioned here are those promised to manual scavengers by the government, according to The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.
Another participant questioned on being asked about non-profit organizations: “They don’t come in this area. They just ask what your problem is, what not. Tell me, you have recorded all of my conversation, will you take any official step after that?”

(i) Labor unions. Majority of the study participants were members of labor unions (see Figure 4). Mostly the workers employed at municipal corporations were union members. According to one participant, there were 56 labor unions in the BMC. A small number of the workers employed at residential apartment societies and for Dattak Vasti were also members of labor unions. Being part of a labor union made a lot of difference for the sanitation workers in Mumbai. Only labor unions had reached courts and were fighting legal cases against employers for fair wages for sanitation workers. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, those contractual workers who were not part of any union were neglected and paid almost half of what union members earned:

The contractors say that those who are in touch with the court, those who are union members, we will pay them 560 Rupees (per shift). Those who are not court laborers, we will give them a daily wage of 200 Rupees. They will get the same amount of work done. But they will cut down on the income.

Also, while contractual workers at the BMC were not even allowed inside BMC offices, they could at least put across their concerns through their union representatives, as this participant reported: “Union guys can fight for us. But we cannot go on our own and ask for things that we want.” Another participant told, “we cannot go directly to big people.” Union representatives were allowed to meet the BMC officials. A group of participants told their union representative to ask the municipal corporation to avail them medical treatment at nearby hospitals. Through their union representatives, the workers could put across their concerns and demands to their employers.
Labor unions of sanitation workers also sometimes organized protests for their demands. One participant reported that his union took out a protest every time a sanitation worker died on duty and demanded compensation for her/his family. He remembered three such protests at the head office of the BMC: “While he was cleaning near the divider, he met with an accident. His body was also taken there. Three bodies have been taken there until now.” One of these victims was a female worker. Because of the protest, “they have started a pension for her daughter.” Another participant reported being in a protest recently to oppose the biometric attendance system and the excessive salary cuts that workers had because of it. Because of the protest, the deducted amounts from salaries were refunded immediately to the workers. Many other participants also reported attending protests organized by their labor unions for various reasons. A group of other participants reported that they had participated in multiple protests in past two decades. Another participant claimed, “we have done so many protests!” Two participants also remembered taking out a protest to get permanent jobs for Dattak Vasti workers. As mentioned earlier, there were also a few ongoing court cases filed by labor unions of contractual workers for demanding their permanent jobs at the BMC. One participant asserted, “union people fight the case. They say these are our laborers.” Another participant reported that “a case is going on in the court” regarding their permanent jobs and pay scales. Also, different unions were fighting different court cases as this participant explained, “the case that they won is of a different union. We filed our case in 2014, seven years later.”
Some participants who worked at residential apartments reported that their unions helped them protect their jobs when their employers wanted to fire them. Their unions also helped them recover unpaid salaries, like in this case: “Union means if we are fired from a building work, then our union officer will come and talk to them. They ask them to increase the salary.” Another participant also reported, “the union people help us somewhat to get salaries.” One more participant was confident about his union: “they stand with us at all occasions.” A participant asserted:

We have our union. We have no problems. If we face any difficulty, even if a car hits us on the road and our leg breaks, then also we will get salary for treatment at home, be it five months or 10 months.

A group of participants explained, “if any problem comes up then unions can support [workers]. That is why some workers are in unions.”

However, a union would not always act on the concerns of its members. The participants reported having to urge their unions a lot before they would take any action. One participant described the situation: “We have to gather at least 10-12 men among us and then go [to the union]. Then only the union person listens to us. If one man would go and say, then even the union person will not listen.” A participant working on contract for the BMC shared, “in our place, they change the contract every six months. In that, they fire so many boys. After that if we go to the union, one month we will run around, then after that these people will act.” A participant frustrated about his union not taking any action regarding his problem said: “We told all this to the union people, we told them everything. They say that we will organize our protest this month, that month.” Another participant expressed his disappointment with unions: “we have become tired of saying it to the union now, we have become tired of saying it to everyone. Nothing is happening.” A participant said regarding the death of his friend and coworker last year while cleaning a manhole:
When he died, the union didn’t do anything, the officers also didn’t do anything, nobody did anything. The entire matter got buried then and there itself. He was a member of the union but the union did not take any interest.

One participant and his coworkers had to threaten to quit their union for it to take an action against the salary cuts they were experiencing: “if the workers wouldn’t get their payment soon, then many of them started thinking of leaving it… that we want to leave the union now…. Then they went there and fought for the salary.”

Also, the unions did not communicate with their members very well. One participant admitted not having much idea about the ongoing court case filed by their union against the BMC: “Only the union knows what happens there. We cannot know. Sometimes one guy comes here in a week or a month and tells us a few things. Otherwise, apart from that, nobody is there to look into our matter.” Another participant admitted to not knowing much about the people working in his union: “We have not even seen their faces till date and neither we know their names.” Another participant pointed out the top-down communication style of his union: “The union guy comes, he talks and then he leaves.”

One participant talked about the money he paid to his union for membership: “Whatever it is, be it 300 Rupees, 400 Rupees… we have to pay to the union compulsorily. That is how it is.” But on being asked what the union did with the money it collected from workers, he said, “that we don't know. That is up to the union people.” Another participant reported that unions also took from workers some money “as and when the bonus comes” because of their mediation. The labor unions of the participants seemed not to be transparent about their accounts with their members.

The participants also seemed somewhat disappointed from the poor performance of their unions. The protests organized by labor unions were often unfruitful. One participant described his experience of participating in the protests organized by his union:
We just sit outside the office and keep shouting there… like a beggar. Nobody listens to us. Even journalists don’t come to listen to us. [The BMC] people only say that we will get it. And afterwards we don’t get anything.

Another participant told that when he and his coworkers participated in a strike organized by their union, instead of getting their demands fulfilled they faced salary cuts for not coming to work for six days. A participant remembered about a protest long back, “we wrote our names and signed papers, everything went to a trash can. Nothing happened. We didn’t hear anything from them. Nothing. The contractor changed, we are here, he is somewhere there.” Another participant expressed his disappointment: “We took out a protest march… in 2003, in 2009, and now in 2016… then also nothing changed!” One participant sounded hopeless about the ongoing legal case as well that his union was fighting: “They are saying that they will win the case. But I don’t think so. Seven years have gone by and nothing happened.”

From the interviews, both sanitation workers as well as their unions appeared tired of fighting with the employers without getting results, as a participant claimed, “the union people have also become tired of shouting about these problems all the time but nobody listens.” “If we go to the union, then nobody even listens to them [anymore],” claimed another participant. One participant shared, “our union doesn’t do anything. Whatever is going on, we are sustaining in the name of our union. We will not gain anything from that. No benefit at all. Whatever salary increase happened, we are doing it ourselves.” Another participant claimed that their labor unions were deliberately attacked that undermined their effectiveness: “Now they have killed the union. Politicians have killed them…. Once they file a case against them in the court, the union dies.”
Some participants had no faith in their unions. “They are all thieves,” concluded one of them. He claimed of being cheated: “They say something else to us and take money under the table from the contractors…. They tell us that they have talked. But they keep us suppressed.” Another participant believed, “unions and non-profit organizations don’t function without corruption.” A participant shared, “earlier unions used to help a lot. Union people used to get a lot of respect. Now we tell the union people to sit aside.” A few participants also reported taking actions on their own, independent of their labor unions. In one exceptional case, the participant felt no need of a labor union: “we never feel the need that there should be a union. Because whenever we have a problem, when we directly talk to the NGO workers (the contractors), they say that okay, your work will be done.” A group of participants in one of the interviews also reported that involving union instead resulted in upsetting the BMC officials who threatened to take severe disciplinary actions. “That is why we don’t do it much,” explained one of them. In case of these workers, mediation instead worsened their relationship with their employers. Some participants who worked at residential apartments and in Dattak Vasti also reported that no labor union had approached them so far. On being asked about labor unions, one such participant questioned, “what do you mean by union?”

(ii) Corporators. Corporators, been elected by citizens, were seen as politically influential by sanitation workers. The political power and influence of a corporator was evident throughout the interviews for this study. One participant explained, “it is very important to have an attachment [with the corporator]…. The thing is that he is the corporator of this area, so we have a lot of respect for him.” Sanitation workers expressed their respect to the corporators by prioritizing the sanitation work he assigned to them and
finishing it at the earliest: “If he has reported any complaint and if we don’t have any other big pending complaint to look after, then we do his work first. We do it fast.” As some participants reported, these work assignments could also be outside the purview of their jobs. One participant claimed that the corporator in his area also asked him to join his political party under the pretext of protecting his interests.

When people faced sanitation problems and got no help from municipal corporations, they lodged their complaints with the area corporator. The corporator, as reported by the participants, remained in touch with all sorts of sanitation workers including those at municipal corporations through their supervisors. He would give direct instructions to them to act on the sanitation-related complaints he received. Corporators were also in touch with the contractors of Dattak Vasti and corporations. A participant claimed that the “police comes to know later. But the first information of the contracts that BMC awards goes to the Corporator…. Even those living in this colony don’t know that.”

A corporator would usually assure sanitation workers that s/he would take care of their concerns, and would ask the workers to report to her/him in case they were mistreated anywhere. Even the participants who worked at the BMC admitted that they sometimes complained to corporators when their senior officers did not act on their concerns. However, primarily Dattak Vasti workers depended on corporators for help when in dispute at their work sites. One participant employed for Dattak Vasti work believed that corporators were very helpful:

Since past 15-16 years whoever comes after getting elected helps we people a lot for this work. They keep calling us and asking if we have any problem…. They support us entirely. Whatever work we say. If we don’t have a trash cart, they will get it for us.
However, as mentioned earlier, a corporator did not seem to be officially responsible for sanitation workers. Regarding asking their area corporator to act on their concerns, two participants told me, “we cannot put across our demands.” Another participant shared that the corporator in his area did not help him when he requested:

Now it has been 12-13 years for me working here. I asked the corporator here that, boss, you make me work so much. I even clean streets for you. Please make me a permanent employee at the municipal corporation. I don’t even want the permanent job, just give me a job here at the municipal corporation. I am ready to do it…. [But] they hire the people from their village only. The people here are from the same village as the corporator. So he wants to stay in their good books. He wants their votes.

Also, some participants reported never being contacted by their area corporators.

Some participants also expressed a fear of being reported to the corporator by the residents of the area they cleaned. When sanitation workers would get into conflicts with some residents at their work sites, these residents could report the matter to the corporator, who would then question the sanitation workers. One participant who did Dattak Vasti work feared that he could not much question and get into conflicts with the residents of the area he cleaned: “If we say anything to these people, then the corporator threatens us.” Another participant who worked at residential apartments also confirmed this:

We cannot say much to the residents. If we get into an argument, what they do is they go to the corporator and they complain it to him. They say that this guy says wrong things to us, doesn’t work properly.

The participants also felt some pressure to act on their corporators’ orders. About being forced to do drainage work without safety equipment, one participant questioned, “what can we do if our officers and the corporator tell us to work on a complaint?”

(iii) Residents as mediators. The participant, who had lost three of his coworkers cleaning a septic tank, approached the neighbors of the owner of that septic tank when he refused to pay any compensation to the grieving families of the victims. The neighbors
talked to the property owner and tried to build some pressure so that he would pay some money for the survival of the families that lost their breadwinners:

We asked everyone in that society. We did not go to that house (the one where accident happened). We talked to the people living around it, I told them everything that happened. They asked us if we got any money. We told them that they have not given us a single rupee. These people spoke for us, they told those people to pay money, they cursed them and threatened to hit them. Like this they supported us. Their neighbors.

Despite this pressure, the property owner did not pay anything to the families of the victims.

Regardless, this approach was used by other participants as well who worked in residential societies and sometimes even by Dattak Vasti workers. Some participants who were employed through a contractor to clean a residential apartment shared that they sought the support of residents when their contractor tried to fire them. One of them shared, “some man who lives in the society, who is good… we do have to take some support. Then he says that don’t fire this guy, he is a good man. Then they hire us again.” Another participant employed in Dattak Vasti shared that the residents in the semi-slum where she worked liked her a lot and told her contractor not to fire her: “They say that if I am removed then they will not hire any other sanitation worker.”

**Outcomes of subaltern communication.** The participants had no dependable option when they wanted to take some action regarding their concerns. Sometimes even labor unions failed to bring change despite prolonged struggles including protests and court cases.

(i) **Individual interactions.** As mentioned earlier, most of the participants shared that individually interacting with the employers was not easy and often not even much fruitful. Even written complaints by some participants to the BMC did not make them take any action as in this case: “Three months ago I had given them some letters and all in my
ward. They didn’t do anything about that.” If the participants insisted their employers to act on their concerns, it could even result in the termination of their employment. As one participant pointed out, “the one who goes ahead to fight them gets beaten up.” Another participant commented, “if we complain then they silence us.” Even the permanently employed workers at the municipal corporations feared action against them: “Our record gets spoiled. They write it down in our file... that the employee is not good, his behavior is not proper.”

Mediation also did not always work out for the participants when they approached it individually. Like in the case of the participant seeking the mediation of neighboring house owners to demand a compensation for his dead coworkers, it failed to influence the targeted property owner to pay money to the victims’ families. In another case, the participants who sought the mediation of their union representatives to talk to some officers at the BMC reported getting individually questioned by these officers later on:

[Initially] they will say yes and later they will say, ‘hey, why do you get this person, that person? I will see you.’ We are called to the office and we get a ‘special treatment’ there, at the office. ‘Do you want to be a hero?’

In another case, when some contractual workers approached the BMC to report their contractor, the BMC officer called the contractor directly and told on these workers: “When we went to him, he directly called the contractor to tell him that your men have come here.”

As one participant reported, a police case against his employers did result in bringing out the needed change in them. When his employers at the housing society used casteist remarks for him, this participant filed a police complaint. As a result, all the members of this housing society came to the police station to ask for his forgiveness: “I got all the 19 members inside the police station. Then all of them also touched my feet at the police station…. Till date nobody said anything wrong.” Caste-based notions turned
out to be flimsy in the face of police and legal action. However, not many participants were aware of their rights and, as a result, were not at all considering the possibility of reporting their matters to the police. In addition, some participants doing the Dattak Vasti work were confident that a mediation of their Corporator could protect their interests if needed. However, they shared no such experience.

**(ii) Organized action.** The organized actions of sanitation workers were clearly more fruitful for them than individual negotiations. Many participants who were members of labor unions admitted that their union succeeded in resolving some of their issues and concerns. One participant was confident that his union would support him if he lost his job; “we will be saved,” he asserted. In another case, the participant and his coworkers were able to get refund of their salary cuts when they protested through their union against the BMC:

> For one hour [less logged into the biometric system due to misinformation], they deducted a total of 6,900 Rupees. Then we took out a protest to the office and then after four days we got the money in our accounts.

The participant who saved the job of an old female sanitation worker did it with the help of his union members: “The entire group goes together. The people in the building get scared when we go there.”

However, the municipal corporations in the city were also able to ignore labor unions of sanitation workers often. A mere discussion of union representatives with the BMC and the NMMC officers was not much fruitful as reported by the participants. Only huge protests and strikes were somewhat successful. Many times even the protests did not succeed in bringing the change intended. The protests in which the workers took the dead bodies of those who died on duty to their head office were not much fruitful. “Nothing has
been paid” to the families of the victims, reported a participant. Sometimes, the union representatives were also given false promises like those given to sanitation workers to subdue their organized action, as this participant shared:

[The union representative] goes inside, asks about it, and comes out and tells us that we will get the salary in 2 days, 4 days. And then we wait for 2 days, 4 days, and then holiday comes in between, and this comes, that comes, and it becomes 15 days.

In many cases, the protests were either ignored, or their demands were accepted only partially. In one case of protest mentioned by a participant, the protesting workers were instead fined for being absent from work and none of their demands were accepted: “That time we had remained absent for six days. When we came back to work, they deducted our salaries.”

The legal cases filed by the labor unions against the municipal corporations were taking decades to get resolved and the workers did not have much hope from them. Recently, the court decided in favor of a union in an old case against the BMC for appointing contractual workers permanently. While the court ordered the BMC to appoint about 2700 contractual employees on a permanent basis, as the case was in the court for a long time, most of those employees were not there to take these jobs anymore. One participant explained the scenario:

All those have died now. And those who are left, out of them half were found illegal. Some people’s names are not correct, the name is theirs but the picture is of someone else. So half of them got eliminated. Only some 800-900 of the total were found. Out of the 800-900 people, they have made only 200 people permanent. Other people have not received their letters yet.

**Subaltern communicative expressions.** Some forms of expressions were common among the study participants. They expressed pride for being self-dependent and a comfort in working with sewer waste that other people cringe at. But the participants also felt a
sense of helplessness and hopelessness about their situations and having to do manual scavenging for living. They also sometimes used aggression with their employers to settle conflicts that they otherwise could not. The participants even used avoidance sometimes to deal with unpleasant and unwanted situations.

(i) Pride. The participants sounded proud of the fact that they did a dangerous and filthy work to survive and provide for their families. One participant asserted: “We are doing this work also and the work is dirty also, but we keep our pride.” A participant said about his family, “at least they are getting money to eat their meal. If we will earn and bring it home, then only they will get it.” Another participant explained,

I should not borrow [money] from someone and take that money home. I should earn enough to feed my wife and myself. God has given me that much strength at least that when I return home, I should get some earned money back home.

A participant said, “we will do [any work] for our children till our limbs are working.” Another participant asserted, “the one who is concerned about his children will do anything it takes.” One participant claimed, “we can do anything for our stomach.” Another shared, “I have struggled a lot in my life and whatever I have achieved is by struggling hard.” The participants were proud of their self-dependence.

One participant asserted, “whatever work I got I did it. I never refused that I don’t want to do this work, that this is a dirty work or something like that. I never excused myself from any work.” Another claimed, “we never shied away from work.” A participant associated his ability to strive hard with his caste: “Valmiki people don’t stay hungry, regardless of what work they get, they do it.” One participant believed that his work was also a kind of social service: “We do take money, we don’t do it for free, but we also help the people in need.”
Some participants also sounded proud of their ability to work in sewer waste and mocked those who couldn’t stand it: “If men and women start passing by, they cover their noses with a napkin while crossing us.” One participant claimed that he could swim and play in sewage water like Indian people play with colored water to celebrate Holi. “The work that we did today, it was such that you cannot even see it,” many participants compared my discomfort with sewer waste with their ability to work in it. A participant questioned, “he took out dead mice. What is a big deal about it? We even take out dead bodies of people. So many women commit suicide and die in there.” Some participants even insisted that I see them cleaning gutters. One participant claimed, “our officers also tell us that we are well-known for our expertise in unclogging gutters…. Even the corporator here appreciates us.” He sat proudly on the cover of a manhole while I interviewed him.

*(ii) Aggression.* As mentioned earlier, the participants reported resorting to hostile and aggressive behavior sometimes when they did not have other means of expressing their dissent or resolving their conflicts with their employers. They did it regardless of the consequences they had to face later on. One participant asserted that he would quit work if treated rudely: “If someone talks to us rudely that do this, do that, pick this, throw it away, then let them keep their work with them, we will see how to manage things and what to do later on.” The participants would get more affected and emotionally hurt when they believed they were insulted because of their caste identity. They would also use aggression if needed to fight for the money they were promised for their work as this participant explained:

Some people think that these people (manual scavengers) are very dangerous, they do such dirty work. That they are violent. That these people
start fighting easily. It is not like that. But when the employer gets the work done and doesn’t pay money, people (manual scavengers) do it (fight).

One participant shared his experience of such fights:

Three-four times, I got into arguments for money with the society people. They promise that they would give a certain amount. And they used to not give the entire amount. So three-four times I got into fights there for the money.

(iii) Avoidance. In absence of better means to deal with unwanted situations or unhappy employers, some participants described how they avoided them. Some of the participants preferred hiding from some people the fact that they did manual scavenging. A few participants admitted that they had not told their children about their profession, like in this case: “My wife knows it. One of my coworkers told her. But I have not told my son what work I do.” One of them said, “there is no need to tell them anything. We need to work. They don’t know what work we do.” One participant was hiding the nature of his work from his neighbors; “there is no need for that (telling them). I just work with the BMC, that is all they know.” Another one was hiding it from the teachers at the school his children attended: “Nobody knows what work the father does… everyone thinks that I am a plumber.” On the other hand, some other participants admitted that they revealed their profession to others only because they were afraid of being seen doing sanitation work. “What if they ever see me working?” feared a participant.

Some participants also reported avoiding their employers when they didn’t want to refuse their orders directly. One participant shared that he would not answer his phone when his employer called for more work if he didn’t want to do it. A participant avoided taking up cleaning assignments at two particular houses that he found extremely dirty and disgusting. One more participant admitted that he avoided taking assignments that needed
entering deep sewer tanks. Another participant shared that once when his contractor got to know that he had complained about him, he avoided seeing the contractor for a while.

(iv) Helplessness. The participants expressed a lot of helplessness regarding their situations. “What can we do?” they kept asking me throughout the interviews. One participant explained, “these days a job is about saying ‘yes sir.’ Those who say ‘no sir’ get a slap on their face.” Another participant described the situation with this analogy:

Now this is a stone and my hand is stuck under it. I am suffering in pain and feeling angry as well, but I have to suppress my anger and take out my hand slowly. If I pull it suddenly in anger, then my hand will tear.

Quitting the work would render them jobless; “there is no other option,” pointed out one participant. “We have to do it because we are helpless. We have to fill our stomach,” shared one participant. Another participant shared,

I am lying in this gutter… it has all sorts of waste. I don’t know what all waste is inside a trash can. I have been doing this work. What can I do? If I get any work to sustain the household expenses, then it is this same drainage line work.

Also, their inability to raise their concerns made the participants feel mute and very helpless. One more participant expressed his inability to raise his voice: “the people at the top, they are big officers. We cannot say anything to them.” Another participant concluded, “we don’t have any rights. We cannot even raise our voices.” Surprised by my interest, a participant admitted, “we have got nobody like you to hear us and solve our problems.”

(v) Hopelessness. Very few participants sounded positive and hopeful of change. Most of them said, “now we have become used to it” about working in sewer waste and saw no point in trying to change their profession. A participant questioned on the basis of a protest he participated in a few years back, “Prime Minister himself had come. Everyone had come. Then also nothing happened. Then what is the use of doing anything here?”
Another participant shared, “I have just worked hard like a donkey… the future is not getting better, what to do? I have tried a lot, nothing happens.” One participant concluded, “this is our destiny. Only this work is there for us.” A participant claimed, “we will get old by the time it makes any difference.” “We have shattered from inside. We have stopped thinking,” told another participant. One participant declared, “I am here in this work for my lifetime. I will never be able to come out of it.” A participant confessed, “we have stopped thinking.” Another participant shared, “our people have given up. What can we do?” A few other participants also found it pointless to talk about their exploitative conditions. One of them asked, “If we cannot do anything about it, is there any point talking about it? Will me alone talking help it?”

(vi) Self-blame. Some participants believed that they had nobody else to blame for their conditions but themselves. While discussing the death cases of manual scavengers, many participants who themselves did not use any protection while doing manual scavenging argued that the deceased workers should have been more careful before entering sewer waste. One of them questioned, “why didn’t he think? He should see how deep it is. He should have been an expert.” Another said that “it depends on us.” One more participant claimed that it depends on the worker “whether he wants to work with all the safety or without it.” A participant believed about manual scavenging that “the workers should not do it. There is no use talking to [the property owners].” One young participant blamed his previous generation for his misfortune: “It is their fault. If he (his uncle) was educated, then today we would have been educated. If the parents are educated, then children become educated for sure. It is his fault.”

The next chapter is a discussion of these findings and their theoretical implications.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The study findings confirm that the manual scavengers of Mumbai experience subalternity of multiple kinds, both in their professional and personal spheres. While their challenges were primarily class-specific owing to their poor financial conditions, they also experienced caste-based challenges and discrimination at their work sites. Both their class and caste disadvantages impacted their overall education level and skillset, thereby, employment opportunities in the long run. Most of the manual scavengers in the city also suffered because of a denial of labor rights to them as they were employed through contracts and treated as informal workers. Their multiple subalternity also resulted in a marginalization of their voice and agency to challenge and change their conditions.

This study of manual scavengers of Mumbai also offered an opportunity to explore a subaltern community that did not much have many external change agents working with them. The only outsiders organizing manual scavengers at the time of this study were the representatives of their labor unions. Also, the study participants included a wide variety of manual scavengers that were living in different locations in Mumbai, had different caste and ethnicities, had different kinds of employment arrangements, salaries, work assignments, and participation in labor unions. This also helped to identify the dimensions on which their communication for social change (CSC) efforts and outcomes varied.

At the time of this field study, the sanitation workers employed in municipal corporations in Mumbai were mostly struggling with the implementation of biometric attendance system. This electronic system of attendance had made their job harder as there was a very small time window for them to mark their in and out time. They had to make
sure that they were present at the office during that time otherwise they would lose their salary for the day. Their frustration about not being able to get the biometric system removed so far may have affected their narratives in these interviews. Additionally, most of the interviews were conducted around my neighborhood in North Suburban Mumbai. This could also have affected the kind of responses and experiences that were more prominent in this study. From the eight different municipal corporations in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, only one municipal corporation, BMC, is majorly represented in this study data. The experiences, challenges, and subaltern struggles of manual scavengers working for other municipal corporations in the city could be very different. These municipal corporations are mostly in the peripheral areas of Mumbai where septic tanks and dry toilets could be present and traditional forms of manual scavenging could also be practiced, which was not the case in the main city region where this study was mostly conducted.

In the following sections of this chapter, I have discussed briefly the implications of the major study findings. The first section describes what the findings explain about subaltern CSC and some of its important aspects and dimensions. The second section summarizes what the findings suggest about the role that the caste and communities of manual scavengers played in their lives. The last section sums up the role of the government in the lives of manual scavengers. This section also includes some policy level implications from this study that the government can implement to improve the situation.

**On Subaltern Communication for Social Change**

The study findings confirm a presence of subaltern voice for social change despite an absence of dialogic or participatory conditions for communication for the manual
scavengers of Mumbai. Their subaltern voice was sometimes feeble, sometimes unheard, sometimes neglected, sometimes suppressed, and often ineffective, however, this should not be mistaken as an absence of the subaltern CSC. Subaltern voice and, thereby, subaltern communication for social change of manual scavengers did exist as predicted.

The findings also illustrate a very hostile environment for the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers, far away from dialogic and participatory practices. Thus, as argued in the earlier theoretical discussion, the dialogic-participatory CSC theoretical approach (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes, 1999) does not help explain the situations and CSC of manual scavengers of Mumbai. The study of subaltern CSC needs fresh theoretical perspectives.

As predicted earlier, the CSC of the subaltern communities of manual scavengers was targeted to the people outside of their community, mainly their oppressors, that is, their employers. Manual scavengers were mainly in conflict with their employers who were denying them of fair wages, benefits, and rights. The CSC efforts of manual scavengers were entirely focused on getting their employers to agree to these demands. It is mainly due to lack of fair wages, benefits, and due rights that manual scavenging communities were still struggling to meet their basic needs and ensure their safety, health, and education for their children. These personal day-to-day struggles of manual scavengers defined their CSC goals, and their audience that is not just external to their communities but is their main oppressor.

Conflicts with the oppressor. The primary reason for the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers to be non-dialogic was an unwillingness of their employers to engage in a conversation with them. This unwillingness seems to be less due to just a class or caste bias
among the employers and more due to a fundamental conflict of interest involved (Coser, 1956). Fulfilling the demands of manual scavengers meant a direct financial cost to the employers that they were trying to save by refusing to engage in a dialogue with their workers. The entire struggle of manual scavengers for social change was shaped by this conflict at its core (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959).

At the macro level, the conflict was due to a systemic oppression and exploitation of manual scavengers that was keeping them marginalized and dependent on manual scavenging. Thus, the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers is an attempt to counter not just any problem but the specific conditions that oppress or subalternize them. Subaltern CSC is, therefore, nothing short of an effort to overcome the hegemony of ruling groups in the long run (Green, 2002). The core conflict between the subaltern and the ruling groups and their means of oppression trigger and drive the subaltern CSC.

Not just a denial of dialogue, the manual scavengers also sometimes experienced negative reactions, that can also be called as “reactive repression,” from their employers to discourage their CSC efforts. Such reactive repression is in addition to the regular oppression that subaltern communities already experience regardless of their CSC efforts. The reactive repression is exerted only in response to social change efforts of the subaltern communities. Subaltern CSC, thus, may always be facing the possibility of a reactive repression from the ruling groups. Therefore, such reactive repression is an important dimension in the scenario under which subaltern CSC functions.

Subaltern means. The subaltern CSC of manual scavengers was also restricted in many ways because of their subaltern conditions. With a low level of education, many options such as approaching masses through print or online media or documenting the
injustice they were experiencing were not feasible for manual scavengers. Being from a lower class, they were also poor and had to work every day for survival (Dahrendorf, 1959). This also significantly limited the resources that manual scavengers could use for their CSC efforts. Not having enough information about their terms of employment or having access to their employers also restricted the CSC approaches of manual scavengers tremendously. As mentioned before, the CSC efforts of subaltern communities is also subalternized.

Manual scavengers were mostly untrained in dialogic and negotiation skills. Their efforts to communicate with their employers were thwarted repeatedly, using both regular and reactive means of repression. The subaltern CSC efforts of manual scavengers were, thus, constantly contained and thereby negatively affected by the agency of their oppressors. These experiences helped manual scavengers develop a strategy to withhold their CSC efforts when a situation would be high-risk. While communicating for social change, they constantly assessed the situation and stopped when the risks exceeded the expected rewards. Their subaltern CSC is, thus, characterized by a flexibility, or rather reflexivity, needed to quickly alter with an intensifying reactive repression from their oppressors. This reflexivity is an important characteristic of subaltern CSC as it always driven by a conflict between subaltern and ruling groups, as discussed earlier.

On rare occasions, some manual scavengers chose to forgo their reflexive CSC behavior and went ahead with their unmediated individual change efforts with a lot of confidence despite some high risks involved. In such cases, they also freely resorted to hostile and aggressive behavior to convey their messages to the employers. This suggests that when pushed hard, subaltern communities may even overcome their fears and get mentally prepared to face worst consequences. At such points, they look for final solution
to their problems and choose to prioritize change over their personal securities. However, such fearless and aggressive subaltern CSC approach was not much common among manual scavengers. The findings indicate some triggering events for such aggressive CSC behavior by manual scavengers (Kassing, 1997; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Manual scavengers got more aggressive when they experienced personal offenses, casteist or communal offenses, and threats of losing the promised monetary compensation. The triggering factors should vary for different subaltern communities that experience different forms of oppression and marginalization.

One of the major findings of this study is the use of mediation by subaltern communities for CSC efforts when denied dialogic opportunities. Mediation worked for manual scavengers more than direct individual efforts to communicate with their employers (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011). Voice being usually denied to them, manual scavengers channeled their voices through mediators such as labor unions, corporators, or the residents at the areas they cleaned. Mediation helped them shield themselves from a direct reactive repression from their employers that many manual scavengers feared.

However, mediation also lowered their control over the communication and its outcome. There was also a limit to the extent they could use mediation. Labor unions did not take up and fight for every problem that their member manual scavengers faced. Manual scavengers did not have much control over the decisions and activities of their unions. Also, the other mediators whom manual scavengers used such as corporators or residents of a locality were mediating more as a favor than an obligation to them. Instead, such favors obligated the workers to these mediators. And with these mediators as well,
Manual scavengers had very low control over the communication and its outcomes. Mediation, a commonly used strategy for conflict resolution, is thus a viable alternative route for subaltern CSC that involves low risk as well as low control (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

Manual scavengers were also not much familiar with the methods of independent collective action. No social change practitioners were working for their empowerment to counter their challenges better (Dreier, 1996; Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Most of them depended on labor unions for taking any sort of collective action for communicating with their employers. However, since labor unions were mostly run in a top-down manner by people whom manual scavengers did not know well and probably considered outsiders, labor unions played the role of external mediating organizations in this case. Manual scavengers in Mumbai depended on mediation by labor unions to a great extent. Independent of a mediation by their labor unions, manual scavengers struggled to raise their subaltern voice and make it heard. Organized mediations by labor unions did bring positive results for manual scavengers on multiple occasions and caused larger impact than their direct or mediated individual efforts. Also, unlike other mediators, labor unions offered them a mediator that was always present as well as responsible for raising their concerns. Labor unions were, therefore, somewhat trusted and preferred by many manual scavengers despite their many failures to get the desired change.

In some rare cases, manual scavengers became active in their labor unions and took lead in collective action for social change. In such cases, the labor unions stopped being mediators run by external agents and became direct platforms for the subaltern voice and collective agency of manual scavengers. Such active unionizing and unmediated collective
action enabled manual scavengers the means to directly negotiate with their employers in a manner that they were not confident otherwise. Such direct collective actions also brought them better outcomes. Thus, the effectiveness of subaltern CSC certainly improves with the level of unmediated organizing of subaltern communities. Also, mediated organizing can facilitate subaltern communities to learn and move towards unmediated organizing, and, thereby, more effectiveness of their social change efforts.

**Subaltern experiences of communicating for social change.** Manual scavengers often experienced disappointment even after trying hard to cause the change they needed. As a result, they mostly felt helpless and hopeless regarding their oppressive conditions, that is, a sense of alienation (Blauner, 1964). The pride that they had in their ability to do manual scavenging to provide for their families did not reflect much in their CSC efforts. They were clueless how they could hold their exploitative employers accountable and get their rights. Manual scavengers were lacking in hope and confidence to achieve the social change they wanted. This, in addition to their subaltern conditions, reflected on their CSC efforts and their outcomes as well. Most manual scavengers were continuing using old means such as unionizing and not actively trying new means to cause the needed change (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 2009; Offe, 1985). Their past experiences of failure to get the desired outcomes discouraged them from having much hope or confidence in what they were doing.

Manual scavengers also experienced a lack of meaningful support from public and the civil society in their struggles. It was a support they knew they needed and could benefit from. They valued whatever little external support they received, be it through labor unions, corporators, or the residents of the areas they cleaned.
The outcomes of subaltern communication for social change. The subaltern CSC did not always get manual scavengers the outcomes they wanted. Often, it only got them false hopes and promises from their employers. Rarely the subaltern CSC showed immediate results. The process of negotiating their demands with their employers was a long one for manual scavengers and needed persistence (Bowles & Flynn, 2010). This was also due to the frequent discontinuities in their subaltern CSC owing to reactive repression from their employers. Mediations also did not always work in favor of manual scavengers. Individual CSC efforts exposed manual scavengers to more risks and delivered less results. Organized CSC efforts involved comparatively lower risks and delivered results more often than individual efforts. Overall, the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers was a gamble for them as no method was entirely dependable and could always bring the desired outcome. Regardless of this uncertainty, manual scavengers kept trying different approaches known to them and kept raising their subaltern voices through various means as and when possible.

Differential subalternity. The subaltern CSC of collective efforts of manual scavengers generated better results than their individual efforts. In fact, being organized and taking collective actions was fruitful to manual scavengers otherwise as well (Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000). As mentioned in the findings, the participants who were members of labor unions were getting higher salaries for the same work than the participants who were non-members. However, being more organized did not completely eliminate the conditions of subalternity and exploitation for the unionized manual scavengers. They were still struggling for their rights and continuing their subaltern CSC efforts although with somewhat better effectiveness than unorganized manual scavengers. This difference in the experiences of manual scavengers based on their organizing is a marker of their differential
subalternity. Less organized manual scavengers were more vulnerable, exploited, and unheard than the more organized ones. Differential subalternity is important in context of subaltern CSC as it results in differential agency of subalterns to communicate for social change (Bandura, 1989). It underscores the importance of paying attention to the subjectivity of a change agent.

**Subaltern agency.** Subaltern groups have been regarded voiceless and agency-less for a long time (Spivak, 1988). However, recent scholars have questioned this assumption and argued that subalterns do not entirely lack voice and agency (Buras & Apple, 2006; Nilsen & Roy, 2015). Gramsci also suggested that subaltern groups do have the agency to challenge their oppression, represent themselves, organize themselves, and take action for a transformation of the society (Green, 2002). This study’s findings also confirm the agency of manual scavengers to voice their dissent and concerns and take possible actions to counter their oppression. However, the findings also illustrate how the subaltern agency is affected by a constant oppression and reactive repression from ruling groups that impact the effectiveness of subaltern agency. The study also confirms that the subaltern agency is not same across subaltern groups, and that different subaltern groups may have different level of agency to communicate and/or act for social change. Thus, regardless of challenges, failures, opposition, and denial of dialogue from ruling groups, subaltern voice and agency do exist to different degrees for different groups. A consideration of the subjectivity of a change agent, therefore, would help understand, plan, and predict the outcomes of social change endeavors better.
On the Communities into Manual Scavenging

The findings confirm that manual scavenging is still mostly done by Dalit communities in Mumbai. Manual scavenging jobs and stints were not usually available to the people outside of manual scavenging communities. It was mostly the people from manual scavenging communities who got such work opportunities through their personal networks. This trend kept manual scavenging mostly limited to some specific Dalit communities that have been engaged in the work since their former generations. This also suggests that the modern India failed to pull manual scavenging communities out of their enforced dehumanization that has continued for generations.

Role of a caste community. The caste community played an important role in exposing and introducing manual scavengers to this practice (Ambedkar, 1917/1979). Like in the traditional Hindu society, the profession of a caste community is carried forward by the future members of the same community. It is the role of a community to train all its children on their traditional profession. In the past, this was done proactively with an agenda to secure the caste skills and exclusivity. On some oppressed castes like that of manual scavengers, this practice was enforced using violent means. However, in the current scenario and for manual scavengers of Mumbai, it is neither a proactive choice nor a violently enforced tradition.

For the manual scavenging communities in Mumbai, their caste group’s support to facilitate an entry into manual scavenging was their last resort as other employment options were unavailable to them. Manual scavengers started the work of cleaning wet waste unwillingly and helplessly because of no other alternative to provide for their families. Their caste communities protected them in a hostile modern environment where they found
no place for themselves. In other words, manual scavengers found a backup in traditional caste practices when modernity rejected them.

This also suggests that low-skill and low-pay job sectors like sanitation have not been entirely modernized in the country and continue to function in traditional manners, benefiting from traditional structures (Ambedkar, 1917/1979) as well as delaying modernity to reach the subaltern communities they benefit from. The support of the caste communities that get manual scavengers jobs also ends up feeding into an exploitative employment system that benefits from the cheap labor brought in through these caste networks. As the findings explain, the employers prefer to keep the system from improving by denying manual scavengers their labor rights and employment documents which can avail them the same benefits that the workers of modernized and formalized sectors get.

**Caste consolidation.** During the study, I came across both Dalit and non-Dalit workers becoming first generation manual scavengers. When Dalit workers who were farmers or farming laborers in rural area migrated to a city like Mumbai, only the caste-specific job of manual scavenging was open to them instead of a range of opportunities that urban space promises. This job also came to them not through openly available opportunities in the market but through their caste communities’ networks. Their migration pulling them into a caste-specific job from which they were free so far indicates a pattern of caste consolidation.⁹ Instead of the caste structure getting eroded with time, it is consolidating as more people are coming under its ambit by joining their caste-based practice of manual scavenging.

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⁹Here, I refer to caste consolidation as a process of strengthening of the traditional function of a caste group. As per my knowledge, so far this term has not been used in this sense.
It is ironic to note that the manual scavenging communities that had moved to other professions in rural India have to move back to manual scavenging to survive in the urban India. A collapse of the rural Indian economy, particularly the agricultural sector, is a major reason for this shift. It has affected a large section of poor and landless farmers and farming laborers, forcing them to migrate to urban regions for livelihood (Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Lerche, 2011). Most of such landless farmers and laborers in rural India are from oppressed castes (Mohanty, 2005). In the process of migrating to urban areas, they have the support of only their caste communities. In case of manual scavenging communities, their community networks pull them into manual scavenging jobs in the urban regions which causes caste consolidation.

The fresh Dalit immigrants and migrants were mostly living on the outskirts of Mumbai and were employed in private contractual jobs at the new residential apartments coming up because of rapid development and expansion of the city. The development of modern India facilitates the caste consolidation of Dalit communities which further subalternizes them. Being immigrants also exposes them to a range of other challenges, such as not having enough documents to avail the welfare meant for them. Being unfamiliar with the urban environment also makes them more dependent on their caste communities. These disabilities further add to the likelihood of their caste consolidation.

**Caste convergence among oppressed castes.** The shift of many workers from the Vadari caste community in Mumbai to manual scavenging also speaks of a pattern. First, the Vadari community’s caste-based skill of stone-crafting is rendered obsolete in the modern India owing to its rapid development and fast-growing technology. However, this change doesn’t seem to be coupled with a parallel move of the community toward
education and other employable skills. Most of the Vadari community participants in this study were least educated among all. The entire community was, thus, left behind and unskilled as the country progressed. The parallel progress of the ruling communities as the Vadari community was left behind further worsened their marginalization.

Second, the Vadari community, being from a *Shudra* caste, was traditionally considered a little higher than Dalits on the Hindu caste system hierarchy. However, a shift of their entire community to manual scavenging speaks of the changing dynamics of the caste system in the contemporary India. While the Vadari participants in this study made it a point to distinguish themselves from Dalits, they were often treated as untouchables because of being manual scavengers. Such shift can be seen as a case of caste convergence, triggered or facilitated by the kind of development India is undergoing.

Last, this pattern of caste convergence does not indicate an end of the traditional hierarchy of caste. Vadari community, although regarded higher than Dalits in the caste hierarchy, are still from the lower end of the spectrum. The community is from the *Shudra* caste group that consists of all the toiling class communities. *Shudras* are also regarded as lowly like Dalits and are deprived of many rights like education and wealth. Like Dalits, some of the *Shudra* caste groups are also recognized by the Government of India as oppressed and marginalized and together addressed as “Other Backward Classes.” Therefore, caste convergence in case of manual scavenging can be said to be limited to only the lowered caste groups in the caste hierarchy (Hnatkovska & Lahiri, 2014).

With the increasing modernization, urbanization, and urban infrastructures in India, and with the receding agricultural sector and other traditional professions, more caste consolidation and caste convergence can be seen among the oppressed castes in the coming
times (Hnatkovska & Lahiri, 2014). As the findings suggest, an exit from manual scavenging is not easy and takes at least an entire generation’s sacrifice to educate and support the next generation despite extremely challenging conditions.

**Casteism in urban India.** The findings confirm that the caste-based practices of untouchability and discrimination were not uncommon even in a metropolitan city like Mumbai (Ambedkar, 1936; Deliége, 1999). The modernity of the city stands exposed when we consider how its manual scavengers are exploited and excluded by the society. It was mainly among the better-off residents of Mumbai that the study participants experienced casteist remarks and practices of untouchability. None of them experienced such casteism in their own communities or at their offices. However, while working among public, the participants were treated as untouchables regardless of their actual caste background only because of the nature of the work they were engaged in.

In an urban environment, the traditionally strict caste-based divisions that are still found in rural India cannot be much observed. One reason for this is that not everyone already knows everyone else and their caste backgrounds, which is feasible in rural areas due to small number of inhabitants. Another reason is that urban spaces include a diverse mix of immigrants from multiple other states of the country. The traditional marker of caste, the surname, is no more familiar to the people of different regions. It is, therefore, not always easy to tell someone’s caste in urban areas.

However, the inhabitants of urban spaces in India, many of them being immigrants from relatively rural places, still carry with them a memory of the caste system and its practices of purity and pollution, of untouchability, and the resulting social restrictions. They continue their caste-based practices and impose them using the caste-based markers
they can still identify (Subedi, 2013). Therefore, regardless of the actual caste of a manual scavenger, he gets treated as an untouchable because of his work that people still associate with a particular caste. This trend to blindly practice casteism indicates a resilience among urban India to continue practicing and protecting caste codes of conduct from eroding with the changing world. The modernization of the country has not enough modernized the mindset of its people.

**On the Role of the Government**

**Impact of the contract system.** The contract system enabled an unchecked abuse of both, the human rights as well as the labor rights of manual scavengers. Sanitation workers were made to clean sewer waste without any protection, which is punishable by law. However, none of the participants ever witnessed any contractor being punished for this violation. In addition to the adverse impact of manual scavenging to the workers’ health and safety, it is also dehumanizing to them. Despite decades of service with the same employers, the contractually employed manual scavengers were denied pension and insurance. Many of the workers did not get even a single paid leave from work and had to work seven days a week. Contractually employed manual scavengers did not have any means to report the malpractices of their contractors. They were rendered completely voiceless and helpless. The contract system without enough regulations and inspections in place was affecting the workers most adversely. Despite this, most the manual scavengers were contractually employed.

This is a failure of the municipal corporations, the main employers in case of manual scavengers in Mumbai, to ensure enough monitoring of their contractors and stop them from exploiting the hired workers. None of the participants reported municipal
corporations taking any interest in their complaints about the violations of their rights. Instead, some of them shared how they were stopped from even entering the offices of municipal corporations. The traditionally permanent jobs at municipal corporations were also getting outsourced now through contractors. Without ensuring the well-being of manual scavengers, the contractualization of the work was happening rampantly and irresponsibly. Those contractors who operated independent of municipal corporations or corporators, such as in case of residential apartments, could go completely unregulated and their malpractices unreported.

As the urbanization was advancing to the surrounding areas of the city, the requirement of manual scavengers was also increasing along with the infrastructure. This newly created demand for manual scavengers was met by the workers hired contractually. As the trend would continue, more and more manual scavengers would be employed contractually in future. The growing number of contractual jobs in manual scavenging should alarm the government to find a way to monitor the situation and stop the violations of the rights of contractual workers.

Complicity of the system. The complicity of the municipal corporations, the PWD, and even the corporators is hard to ignore. Some of the participants reported being stationed at the government offices. It is unlikely that the government officials were unaware of the unsafe working conditions of these workers and the violations of their rights. Similarly, Dattak Vasti workers reported that their corporators were in regular touch with them. Despite this, there was no mention of any action from any corporator to safeguard Dattak Vasti workers from the banned practice of manual scavenging. The participants also shared how their attempts to report the malpractices of their contractors were foiled by the
municipal corporations by turning them down every time they tried. These findings clearly suggest a complicity of these government organizations and representatives in continuing the exploitation of manual scavengers.

Instead of protecting the rights of contractual workers, the municipal corporations and the PWD ignored the gross violations of their rights and refused to take any responsibility of the situation. Even the maintenance of sewer lines was given on contract by the BMC to contractors without checking if the bidding organization had trained and well-equipped workers to enter sewer lines. Contractors ended up using untrained and unequipped manual scavengers for sewer cleaning to save cost (Dahrendorf, 1959). This unlawful practice has claimed many lives. Despite this, the municipal corporations kept contractualizing the work, probably to avoid the cost of providing proper safety equipment to manual scavengers.

The case of Dattak Vasti work is particularly worth serious investigation. It is the duty of municipal corporations to develop all the areas in a city and provide sanitation services in those areas. However, the BMC was clearly avoiding its responsibility by entirely detaching itself from the Dattak Vasti work and employees. As a result, the workers of Dattak Vasti were the most exploited, neglected, unheard, and unorganized among all sorts of sanitation workers. As the government avoids its responsibilities, the workers were left to survive on the charity of the residents of a slum or semi-slum area, who themselves are usually poor. The role of corporators in the entire process is also unclear and lacking accountability (FPJ Web Desk, 2018; TNN, 2017). By offering small charities to Dattak Vasti workers and assuring them help if needed, corporators played a key role in mitigating their dissenting voice and actions. Despite the promises to protect
Dattak Vasti workers, corporators did not implement the laws and policies about manual scavenging in Dattak Vasti work.

None of the participants employed through contracts found the six-months contract system convenient or helpful. If anything, the system was a huge inconvenience to the workers who had to live in constant job insecurity. A new contractor might not hire the workers employed by the previous contractor. In addition, workers could also be fired from their jobs even before the completion of the six-months employment term. Also, because of a short contract duration, contractors often managed to get away without paying the workers their due money or information. The workers found it hard to negotiate with employers that were constantly changing. The entire system most likely benefited only the municipal corporations to avoid the labor cost on one of their core activities, and the contractors to make money off the situation. The workers who were contractually employed did not have much to benefit from the arrangement.

**Implications for policy for manual scavengers.** The current policies to prohibit manual scavenging have failed the workers tremendously (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Mander, 2014). The study shows a complex arrangement that also involves private organizations and individuals in the employment of manual scavengers. In such a challenging scenario, the role of the government is very critical and needs to be quite proactive for a complete abolition of manual scavenging and compliance to safety standards for cleaning sewer waste. Far behind this objective, the government has failed to stop even its own organizations and employees from making sanitation workers do manual scavenging without safety equipment. The findings of this study speak volumes about a
lack of enough interest of the government in implementing the 2013 Act that prohibits manual scavenging (Mander, 2014).

The process for labor inspection needs tremendous improvement so as to effectively check the violations of the 2013 Act prohibiting manual scavenging and ensure the safety of workers. The current inspection process is an utter failure and has no system in place to make the workers learn about their rights, safety protocols, and to report violations. Currently manual scavengers use a range of undependable safety protocols that have failed them from time to time. The government needs to clearly set scientific safety protocols for use by all sorts of sanitation workers dealing with wet waste (see U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1999). Also, the labor inspection process should extend to include all sorts of sanitation jobs that involve manual scavenging. As the findings suggest, currently no inspection process is there to regulate manual scavengers employed contractually by non-governmental entities like housing societies.

The government needs to take serious steps towards checking and reversing the trend of contractualization in those functions of municipal corporations that are of core and regular nature such as drainage maintenance. The sanitation workers doing the same job over a long period of time also deserve job security and the associated benefits like insurance, pension, and paid leaves. A denial of these benefits to such workers should be seen as a gross violation of their labor rights. The findings also point out procrastination as a technique used by municipal corporations to keep workers from their rights. The government should also deal with this malpractice seriously and ensure timely action on the decisions regarding the rights of workers.
The current scenario is such that all sorts of contractually employed sanitation workers need to find additional work opportunities after completing an 8-hour a day shift in order to make enough money for their families’ sustenance. Their primary job does not pay them enough for a decent survival in a city like Mumbai. The government needs to correct its policies accordingly to make sure that one full-time job should be enough to meet the living expenses of these workers and their dependents. The minimum pay for all sorts of sanitation workers should be fixed with proper consideration of the living expenses in Mumbai (Freeman, 1996; Morris, Donkin, Wonderling, Wilkinson, & Dowler, 2000). Also, the minimum pay for differently employed sanitation workers who do the same work should be same to avoid disparities. The labor inspection of sanitation workers should also monitor that they are at least paid the revised minimum pay scale set for them.

There is also an absence of a comprehensive policy to ensure healthcare for all kinds of sanitation workers as they experience a range of health hazards (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, 2013; Tiwari, 2008). Policymakers should acknowledge the contractual and informal nature of employment of a large ratio of sanitation workers. It is such sanitation workers who are contractually or informally employed that are most prone to do manual scavenging without protection and facing health hazards due to it. Considering the hazardous nature of sanitation work, a free and comprehensive healthcare should be availed to all sanitation workers regardless of the arrangements of their employment.

A lot of manual scavengers are unable to avail the benefits of the welfare program meant for them. Although the government has declared many provisions and facilities for manual scavengers in the 2013 Act and in its policies, none of them have reached the workers at the grassroots as this study also indicates. A major reason for this gap is that the
burden of proving employment in manual scavenging lies with manual scavengers. However, as the findings of this study point out, manual scavengers have very little success when it comes to getting information or employment-related documents from their employers. Instead of leaving the burden of proof on manual scavengers to establish that they are engaged in manual scavenging, the government can establish fact finding teams that identify the workers engaged in manual scavenging and provide them the needed documents, information, and assistance to avail the welfare meant for them.

The affirmative action policies need reforms to ensure higher education to manual scavenging communities so as to enable them to quit manual scavenging (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). As this study finds, a mere high-school level education, that about half of the participants had, has not offered them better employment skills and opportunities. Also, almost all of them dropped out of the education system after high-school and hardly anyone could pursue higher studies. Therefore, a comprehensive policy to eradicate the caste-based practice of manual scavenging needs to particularly focus on preparing the children of manual scavenging communities for a smooth transition and entry into higher education after graduating from high school (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

**Implications for communication policy.** There was a lack of transparency in the functioning of the municipal corporations and the contractors involved (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). The contractual workers did not know a lot about the terms and conditions of their employment. They did not even have a proof of their work appointment, their attendance records, records of their pension funds, medical insurance, or even copies of their contract agreements. Dattak Vasti workers sounded most unaware about the details of their employment and employers. The situation speaks of a gross denial of the workers’
right to information about their own employment. It also adds to the confusion, frustration, helplessness, and vulnerability of the workers, leaving them ill-equipped to avail the benefits meant for them or challenge it when their rights get violated.

The municipal corporations can fix a lot of these problems by putting in place a standardized information system for sanitation workers that provides them all the information regarding their employment and benefits (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). The workers should also be provided key documents regarding their employment such as identity card and a copy of their employment terms and conditions. The system needs to be designed considering the fact that sanitation workers are not much educated and may not have access to the Internet and smartphones. The information should be available to the workers in a language of their choice. Also, the system should be available to contractual workers as well in addition to permanently employed workers.

In addition to these basic details, sanitation workers should also regularly get labor inspection reports concerning their work (Fine & Gordon, 2010). Currently, no participant reported any awareness about these reports. The reports are not even available on the websites of labor inspection department of the state government. This creates a lack of transparency and room for malpractices and corruption in the process of labor inspection. In addition to the access, workers should also be able to report to the labor inspection department the malpractices that have not been documented in their reports. This will be instrumental in ensuring that manual scavengers have a way to raise their voice when their rights get violated and hold the employers accountable. The system may also help prevent fatal accidents from happening during unsafe manual scavenging. Without workers having
a say in the process, labor inspection does not remain much instrumental in checking violations of their rights, as this study also finds.

In addition, there is also a dire need of a feedback and complaint system at municipal corporations for sanitation workers to report their complaints confidentiality and get appropriate and timely actions taken on the complaints. As main employers, municipal corporations are obligated to act on the complaints of their permanent as well as contractual employees. The workers should also be able to report the malpractices of their supervisors, contractors, corporators, and even the officers at municipal corporations, without having to face disciplinary actions from their employers. Also, labor unions cannot be assumed to be an alternative to a safe complaint and feedback system (Blancero & Dyer, 1996; McCabe & Lewin, 1992). Workers who are not members of labor unions should also be able to raise their concerns and demands with their employers.

The government can reduce the hazardous impact on the safety and health of manual scavengers tremendously by publicizing the associated dangers and standardized safety protocols while dealing with wet waste. This information should reach not just the workers employed by municipal corporations but also the workers employed privately and contractually outside the purview of the government. Considering the large number of deaths of manual scavengers happening lately, a nationwide campaign to raise public awareness against manual scavenging appears to be the necessity (Nair, 2018).

This chapter has summarized some of the key theoretical as well as practical implications of the study findings. The next chapter includes a concluding note on this study, a discussion of its limitations, and some recommendations for future research on the topic of subaltern CSC.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation study was triggered by a realization of limitations of the current theoretical framework of Communication for Social change (CSC) to explain the efforts of disadvantaged people at grassroots of autonomously raising their voices regarding their concerns. The study explored the possibility of an alternative theoretical perspective to analyze that CSC which originates from the disadvantaged people at grassroots. For the same, I used Gramsci’s theory of subalternity to understand the conditions of oppression and powerlessness as well as the agency of such people to cause social change (Green, 2002). The perspective also helped conceptualize the CSC efforts of such subaltern communities as “subaltern CSC” and explore it. This study was, thus, focused on exploring subaltern CSC as a theoretical concept that can explain the scenarios left underexplored by the current theoretical framework of CSC.

For this purpose, I studied the challenges of the manual scavengers in Mumbai. Manual scavenging communities, engaged in cleaning human waste, are regarded as a subaltern community because of their tremendous marginalization and voicelessness in the current India. The oppression of manual scavengers in South Asia is coming from centuries of forced labor, dehumanization, and social exclusion imposed by the caste system in Hinduism (Ambedkar, 1936; Mani, 2005). As this study also suggests, their oppression and exploitation have continued till date in India although the means have changed with time. An understanding of the subaltern CSC of manual scavengers also needed an understanding of their subaltern conditions and the challenges that concern them. This study was an
attempt to explore the conditions as well as the challenges of the manual scavengers of Mumbai, in addition to their subaltern CSC against them.

This study introduced subaltern CSC as a potential theoretical concept to explain the communication efforts of subaltern communities like the manual scavengers of Mumbai. The study also confirmed that subaltern CSC cannot be explored fully using the theoretical approaches that are popularly used in the CSC discourse as of now. There are some very fundamental differences in the subaltern CSC and the planned CSC approaches popular so far (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Although some participatory CSC efforts may manage to have high level of participation of people, they remain externally initiated, most likely by social change academics or practitioners. On the other hand, subaltern CSC is essentially about those communication efforts by subaltern communities that are initiated by themselves, regardless of external support. This difference leads to another difference – the externally-initiated planned CSC programs seek to primarily address and communicate with subaltern communities while subaltern CSC is primarily an attempt to communicate with ruling or elite groups. Also, therefore, while the most participatory planned CSC approaches can claim to be two-way communication efforts, subaltern CSC remains a bottom-up effort of communication and does not always become a two-way channel of communication (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes, 1999). Using these fundamental differences, this study clearly establishes subaltern CSC as people-initiated, bottom-up, autonomous efforts of subaltern communities, and distinguishes it from externally-initiated, one-way or two-way planned CSC efforts.

This primary study done with the manual scavengers in Mumbai has helped identify and explain some of the important aspects of subaltern CSC. Although, in the long run,
subaltern CSC is aimed at challenging the oppression of subaltern groups by ruling groups and achieve a complete transformation of society, primarily subaltern CSC is driven by the short-term goals about the day-to-day challenges that concern subaltern groups. Such short-term goals, one at a time, move subaltern communities and their efforts towards a complete liberation from their oppression in the long run. Conflict being at the core of the relation between subaltern and ruling groups, an understanding of such conflict in each case of studying a subaltern community will help understand the overall direction of subaltern CSC efforts (Coser, 1956; Green, 2002; Noble, 2000). In addition, an understanding of subaltern CSC also needs an awareness about the limitations of a subaltern community. Limitations such as lack of resources, access, and education of a subaltern community also affect and limit its subaltern CSC.

Through this study, subaltern CSC comes out as a mix of multiple strategic approaches that are used as per the situational capabilities of subaltern communities to deal with oppressive ruling groups. The manual scavengers in Mumbai used a mix of individual and collective approaches to directly and indirectly communicate with their employers. Among the many approaches used by them, the subaltern CSC approach that stood out the most in this study is mediation. The use of mediators, for communicating with the employers who could otherwise not be reached, was a common strategy among manual scavengers in Mumbai. Other subaltern communities may not use mediators or may use them differently. However, this study findings suggest that mediation, that is a commonly used strategy for conflict resolution, remains an important approach for subaltern communities whose struggles are mostly defined by their conflict with oppressive ruling communities.
The flexibility of subaltern communities of using various CSC approaches to achieve social change comes from their focus on the desired outcome. For manual scavengers, the choice of an approach was based on its ability to get the desired outcomes under the circumstances. Manual scavengers did not care about who led the change and how it was brought about. They also did not care much about the level of their participation in the process. Subaltern CSC is characterized by such flexibility to use different approaches according to the situation, and a tendency to be outcome-driven. In addition, the approaches and effectiveness of subaltern CSC differed with the differential subalternity of communicators. The subjectivity, or rather the subalternity, of the change agent played a critical role in the CSC outcome for manual scavengers.

As discussed in the previous chapter, subaltern CSC also always has a scope of experiencing a reactive repression from ruling groups. The extent of reactive repression may differ from case to case and it might be completely absence sometimes. However, reactive repression from ruling groups, as explained in the previous chapter, is a critical concept that all studies of subaltern CSC theory and practice should consider (Moore, 1998). The reactive repression from ruling groups also makes subaltern CSC to be reflexive in order to alter with the intensifying repression and protect subaltern communities. Such strategic reflexivity also appears to be an important characteristic of subaltern CSC that always operates under conditions that are oppressive to different extents (Bourdieu, 2004; Luhmann, 1990; Sundbo & Fuglsang, 2006). The study also helps understand aggressive subaltern CSC that is used in exceptional cases when some triggering events happen. Different subaltern communities may have different triggering factors for aggressive subaltern CSC and may use the aggression to different extents.
In summary, this study helps identify some basic aspects of subaltern CSC that future studies on the topic can build on. However, the findings of this study are still not adequate to theorize and generalize subaltern CSC. The process of theory building for subaltern CSC will need more such studies as well as comparative studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Additionally, subaltern CSC can also be explored using different theoretical perspectives such as cultural theory and compared with the subaltern perspective. As an exploratory study, this dissertation has helped initiate a theoretical discourse on subaltern CSC that was missing from the CSC discourse so far.

Limitations

At the conceptual level, a theoretical understanding of subaltern CSC in this study is limited because only one subaltern group was explored in this dissertation, that of the manual scavengers in Mumbai. In absence of any comparative study, it is difficult to comment how some of the aspects of subaltern CSC may differ with the different subaltern communities. Also, this study may have missed some critical aspects of subaltern CSC that were irrelevant in the case of manual scavengers of Mumbai but might be more relevant in context of other subaltern communities. In the future, as more subaltern communities are explored for a study of their CSC, this limitation can be overcome and some theories can develop out of it. In addition, as mentioned earlier, an exploration of subaltern CSC may also gain from using different theoretical approaches than subaltern theory and comparing them with the subaltern theoretical approach.

This study is also limited in its scope because of the limitations of its research methodology. The methodology used a narrative inquiry and primarily depended on the narratives of manual scavengers for an analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study has
the same limitations that any narrative inquiry may have. The study findings are based on the narratives of the participating manual scavengers in Mumbai. It is likely that the findings may have some factual errors as the narratives of manual scavengers may not be entirely accurate. This is also likely because, as the participants shared, they often did not know much about their employers and the conditions of their employment because of a lack of information available to them. Their low level of education also limited their understanding of their terms of employment.

The participants were also approached only once for interviewing. I was a complete stranger to many of the participants. This also added to the limitations of this study as some participants did not trust me much and might not have shared some of their feelings and experiences. This limitation could be overcome by spending more time in relationship and rapport building with the participants before conducting the interviews (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). Also, sometimes one interview did not feel enough and I felt like going back to the study participants to ask more questions. The responses of the study participants may have been more elaborate if I had used these approaches.

The study findings could have been more illuminating and informative if the narrative inquiry could be supported by an observational study as well (Angrosino, 2007). I particularly felt the need to attend the meetings of manual scavengers with their labor unions and observe how these meetings were conducted. This, however, can be an another study in itself that examines the functioning and the role of labor unions of manual scavengers in their struggle against their employers.

I also felt that not knowing beforehand the different forms of manual scavenging and the kinds of employment of manual scavengers limited my understanding of the subject
initially. It took me a while and a few interviews to get some idea of what was going on. For example, there was no information about Dattak Vasti in any of the literature I reviewed and it took me a while to understand what it was about. The participants also found it tough to explain it to someone who had no idea about it. The study also made me realize that the grassroots situation of manual scavengers and the academic understanding of them differ a lot. In this dissertation, I have made a small attempt to document their grassroots situation that I found for the benefit of future researchers of the subject.

**Implications for Future Research**

*Future research on subaltern communication for social change.* First, as mentioned before, the future research on the topic of subaltern CSC should also look into the other theoretical approaches such as cultural theory and compare it with this study (Thompson, 2018). Other approaches may help identify some of the aspects of subaltern CSC that this study missed because of the theoretical limitations of subaltern perspective.

Second, subaltern CSC can be applied and tested as a theoretical concept to a range of subaltern groups, differing in their kind of experienced oppressions, intersectionality, geographical locations, and the level of organizing. For example, the subaltern groups that do not seem organized and vocal at all such as homeless people and the subaltern groups that seem extremely organized and leading a social movement such as the LGBTQIA community, both can be examined and their subaltern CSC compared.

Last, the critical factors that this study identified such as the use of mediation, the reactive repression from the ruling groups, the strategic reflexivity of subaltern CSC, and aggressive subaltern CSC can also be further explored. Mediation seems to be a technique that many subaltern communities may use owing to their voicelessness. There may also be
some communities for which mediation might be the primary means of subaltern CSC. Also, aggressive subaltern CSC may become a more important factor for some subaltern communities that use more violence and aggression for challenging their oppression. As this study found, triggering factors may help explain the use of aggressive subaltern CSC better.

**Future research on manual scavengers.** The forms of manual scavenging are many when it comes to urban India. The researchers of this topic need to meticulously study and document the various forms of manual scavenging practiced in urban and metropolitan regions of the country by various organizations including municipal corporations. The topic also needs a detailed investigation of the means by which manual scavenging practices are kept out of the visibility of those responsible to stop it. The role of the contract system is very crucial in keeping the practice hidden and away from the clean image of the government organizations. The fact that neither contractors and nor municipal corporations take the responsibility of sewer deaths or are booked for violation of law also calls for a further investigation to uncover the loopholes in the laws applicable. The narratives and voices of manual scavengers also need more documentation and attention of academics.
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Appendix A

Interview Guidelines

1. Please tell me something about yourself.
   Probe: Where is your native place? Tell me about your family.

2. How did you get into this work of cleaning wet waste?
   Probe: [If mentions caste/religion as a reason for doing manual scavenging] How does your caste/religion affect your employment opportunities?

3. Please describe in detail the sanitation work you do and the procedure you follow.
   Probe: Who do you work for? What do you do about your and other workers’ health and safety?

4. What do you feel about the work you do?
   Probe: How do others (your family, neighbors, relatives, society) feel about it?

5. What improvements you want to see in your work conditions? Have you tried doing anything about it? Why or why not? Describe your experiences.

6. What are the things and who are the people that you think support you in your struggle? How?

7. What are the things or who are the people that stop/oppose you from improving your conditions? How?

8. While struggling to improve your conditions, whom do you have to communicate with? How do you do that? Describe your experiences.
## Appendix B
### Demographic Information of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview number</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Manual scavenging job type</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Migration</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manual scavenger - 1</td>
<td>West Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Residential apartments</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Haryana</td>
<td>Class 10</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manual scavengers – 6; Other community members – 5</td>
<td>North Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Residential apartments – 4; Dattak Vasti – 2</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Haryana</td>
<td>Class 6 – 1; Unknown – 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Manual scavenger – 1</td>
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<td>Jhadu Khata at BMC on contract, random contractual manual scavenging</td>
<td>Non-Dalit (Bangle seller)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>Class 8</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Manual scavengers – 2</td>
<td>Vasai Virar</td>
<td>Residential apartments – 2</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki) – 2</td>
<td>First generation migration to Mumbai from Haryana</td>
<td>None – 1; Class 10 - 1</td>
<td>6,000 each</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Manual scavengers – 3</td>
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<td>Drainage department at BMC, permanent – all</td>
<td>Dalit (Buddhist) – 1; Non-Dalit (Tandel) – 1; Non-Dalit (unknown) – 1</td>
<td>Native of Maharashtra – all</td>
<td>Unknown - all</td>
<td>20,000 above each</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(For only those participants who were “manual scavengers”; do not include “other community members”)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manual scavenger – 1</th>
<th>North Central Mumbai</th>
<th>Random contractual manual scavenging</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Native of Maharashtra</th>
<th>Class 12</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
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<td>Random contractual manual scavenging</td>
<td>Dalit (Paraiyar)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>Class 8</td>
<td>6,000 to 9,000</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Manual scavengers – 6; Other community members – 3</td>
<td>North Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Residential apartments – all</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki)</td>
<td>First generation migration to Mumbai from Haryana – all</td>
<td>None – all</td>
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<td>Native of Maharashtra – 1; Unknown - 1</td>
<td>None – 1; Bachelor degree - 1</td>
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<td>Dalit (Unknown)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Manual scavenger – 1</td>
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<td>Drainage department at BMC, permanent</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Native of Maharashtra</td>
<td>Class 4</td>
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<td>West Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Drainage department at PWD on contract</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki) – 1; Dalit (Harijan) – 1; Non-Dalit (Vadari) - 1</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai - all From Haryana – 1; From Andhra Pradesh – 1; From Gujarat – 1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sl. No</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Department/Activity</td>
<td>Caste/Religion</td>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Educational Qualification</td>
<td>Salary</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Manual scavengers – 2</td>
<td>North Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Jhadu Khata at BMC on contract, random contractual manual scavenging – both</td>
<td>Non-Dalit (Vadari) – 1; Non-Dalit (Unknown) - 1</td>
<td>Native of Maharashtra – 1; Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh – 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Manual scavenger – 1; Other community members – 2</td>
<td>North Suburban Mumbai</td>
<td>Dattak Vasti</td>
<td>Non-Dalit (Vadari)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh</td>
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<td>6,000</td>
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<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh</td>
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<td>12,000</td>
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<td>Unknown - all</td>
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<td>Class 10 – 2; Unknown - 3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Residential apartments</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Rajasthan</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Manual scavenger – 1</td>
<td>Thane</td>
<td>Residential apartments</td>
<td>Dalit (Valmiki)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Haryana</td>
<td>Class 7</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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<td>Dalit (Unknown)</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Karnataka</td>
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<td>Dattak Vasti - both</td>
<td>Non-Dalit (Vadari) - both</td>
<td>Former generation migrated to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh – both</td>
<td>None - both</td>
<td>6,000 each</td>
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</tbody>
</table>