



The Valmiki Community Of Mumbai: A Socio-Economic Analysis Of 'Educate-Agitate-Organize'

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Abstract

This research report provides a socio-economic analysis of the Valmiki community in Santacruz (East), Mumbai, a group historically marginalized and linked to sanitation work. Using Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's framework of 'Educate, Agitate, Organize', the paper examines the community's journey from historical degradation to modern-day resilience. The analysis reveals a significant gap in the 'Educate' pillar, with the community lagging behind other marginalized groups in educational attainment due to a vicious cycle of poverty, occupational stigma, and a lack of awareness regarding government schemes.

In contrast, the community has achieved remarkable success through 'Agitate' and 'Organize', as demonstrated by the Kachra Vahtuk Shramik Sangh (KVSS). The union's multi-decade legal battle ended in landmark (historical) court rulings. These decisions granted permanent employment and back wages to sanitation workers, highlighting that collective action (united effort) is the most effective tool for securing their rights. Despite these victories, the community faces persistent systemic barriers, including pervasive financial exploitation by moneylenders and institutional discrimination. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) addresses these issues by exploiting contractual labour to deny workers benefits and utilizes legal loopholes to bypass critical legislation, such as the Prohibition of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013.

The study concludes that while the community's resilience and organized efforts have led to tangible gains, their progress is incomplete and fragile. The report recommends a multi-pronged approach to address these systemic issues, including abolishing the contract system, strengthening legal protections, implementing targeted educational and financial literacy programs, and providing sustained support to grassroots organizations like the KVSS. These recommendations aim to facilitate a holistic and dignified transformation for the Valmiki community.

Keywords: Valmiki community, sanitation workers, Educate Agitate Organize, Mumbai, manual scavenging.

Introduction: Framing the Research Problem

The Valmiki community, a collective of historically marginalized castes often identified by the names Bhangi, Chuhra, and others, has been intrinsically linked to the stigmatized occupation of sanitation work for centuries. This research undertakes a detailed socio-economic analysis of this community, with a specific focus on the urban context of Santacruz (East), a locality within Mumbai's H-East ward. The central theoretical framework for this analysis is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's powerful call to action: 'Educate, Agitate, Organize'. This framework provides a critical lens to evaluate the community's journey from a "deprived society" to a state of reinvention and resilience. The adoption of the name "Valmiki" itself, derived from the revered sage who authored the Ramayana, represents a deliberate act of identity reclamation that began in the early 20th century, seeking to dissociate from a history of degradation and instead forge a new, dignified identity.

This research paper is structured to first provide a historical and demographic context, followed by a critical application of the Ambedkarite framework to real-world outcomes. The analysis will then detail the community's socio-economic conditions, present evidence of their agency and resilience, and conclude with the existing state policies and a set of comprehensive recommendations for holistic development.

Historical Trajectory and the Legacy of Occupational Stigma

The historical identity of the Valmiki community is inextricably tied to a long-standing system of occupational segregation. Known by various names such as Chuhra and Bhangi, these groups were historically relegated to the "polluting" work of sweeping and sanitation. This practice was further cemented during the British colonial era, which organized systems for sanitation and systematically employed these communities as manual scavengers. This institutionalization created a hereditary occupation, trapping generations in a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. A defining characteristic of the community's modern history is its high rate of migration from rural to urban areas. This demographic shift was largely driven by the availability of employment in the sanitation sector of municipalities and the Ministry of Railways, a trend that began during colonial times. This migration has led to a spatial concentration of Valmiki populations in cities. In Mumbai, this has manifested in segregated residential areas, such as the explicitly named "Valmiki Nagar,". While government policies sometimes provided housing in these "sweeper colonies" as a form of welfare, this practice has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing socio-spatial segregation, ghettoizing the community and perpetuating their isolation from the broader urban society.

The 'Educate-Agitate-Organize' Framework: A Critical Application

Dr. Ambedkar's seminal slogan, 'Educate, Agitate, Organize,' provides a tripartite strategy for the emancipation of oppressed communities. The Valmiki community's journey in Mumbai can be effectively understood by examining their engagement with each of these three pillars.

The Imperative of 'Educate' and Its Implementation Gaps

Ambedkar considered education to be the most potent tool for social change, a means to break the "shackles of caste-based oppression" and create a confident, self-reliant community. For marginalized groups, education is not merely a path to knowledge but a direct challenge to the social structures that preserve their low status. While this philosophy is well-understood, its practical realization for the Valmiki community faces immense hurdles.

A study in Delhi and Mumbai revealed that Valmikis lag behind other Dalit communities in educational attainment and school enrollment. This observation is critical because it suggests that a community's struggle for education is not just a matter of will but is deeply intertwined with their socio-economic status and the stigma of their occupation. Parents, despite aspiring for a better future for their children, often

remain trapped in low-income sanitation work, creating a vicious cycle where a lack of resources and social support limits educational access. The lack of awareness about government schemes and the procedural complexities in accessing them further complicate the situation, preventing the community from leveraging what little support is available. This pervasive gap in the 'Educate' pillar is a primary constraint on the community's upward social mobility and is a key factor supporting the central hypothesis of this research paper.

The Success of 'Agitate' and 'Organize'

In contrast to the challenges in education, the community's engagement with the 'Agitate' and 'Organize' pillars has yielded significant and tangible successes. This is best exemplified by the sustained and strategic efforts of the Kachra Vahtuk Shramik Sangh (KVSS), a waste collectors' union in Mumbai. The union fought a multi-decade legal battle against the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), challenging the exploitative contract labour system. These workers, who had been performing essential sanitation services for years, were deliberately misclassified by the BMC as "volunteers" or "self-help group members" to deny them basic rights, salaries, and social security benefits.

Socio-Economic Conditions in Santacruz (E) and Mumbai

The socio-economic landscape of the Valmiki community in Mumbai is a complex mosaic of statistical realities, systemic challenges, and predatory practices.

Demographics and Educational Status

As per the 2011 Census, the Mumbai district has a total Scheduled Caste (SC) population of 2,19,934, which constitutes 7.1% of the district's total population. This population is concentrated in urban areas, a consequence of historical migration patterns. While the Mumbai district boasts a high overall literacy rate of 89.21%, and Maharashtra's stands at 82.34% , these aggregate statistics obscure the educational backwardness of the Valmiki community within this larger group. As mentioned, studies on similar communities in other urban centers like Delhi highlight that Valmikis fall behind other Dalit castes in educational indicators, a likely reality in Mumbai as well.

Table 1: Key Socio-Economic Indicators for Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra and Mumbai (2011 Census)

Category	Maharashtra	Mumbai District
Total Population	11.24 Crores	30.85 Lakhs
SC Population	11.81% (of total)	7.1% (of total)
Valmiki Population	2.17 lakhs	10 thousand (approx.)
Percentage	0.19%	0.0087%
Total Literacy Rate	82.34%	89.21%
Urban Literacy Rate	88.69%	89.21%

Source: Census 2011 of India

The provided data states that the Valmiki community constitutes 0.0087% of Mumbai's population. Of this group, 1,137 individuals are manual scavengers. (TOI: 2013)

Economic Conditions and the Vicious Cycle of Debt

Most sanitation workers, about **85%**, are not on government payrolls but are employed through contractors, daily wages, or NGOs. This contractualization is a deliberate tactic by the **BMC** to deny them formal salaries and social security benefits. As a result of low wages and a lack of benefits, these workers are constantly financially insecure and are often forced to take loans from local moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates of **5% to 30% per month**. The moneylenders frequently seize the workers' bank passbooks, taking their entire salary on payday to deduct their interest and principal before returning the small remaining amount. This creates a vicious cycle of debt that prevents the workers from gaining control over their finances, undermining any potential economic gains.

Resilience and Reinvention: Evidence of Community Agency

Beyond the struggles, there is clear evidence of the Valmiki community's resilience and capacity for reinvention, driven by both traditional and new forms of collective action.

The Triumphs of Organized Agitation

The KVSS's agitation was a direct response to this systemic injustice. The union's founder, Milind Ranade, filed a case in 1998, initiating a struggle that would last for 27 years and culminate in a landmark Supreme Court order. The court's ruling on March 3, 2025, mandated that 580 contract sanitation workers be granted permanent employee status with back wages dating back to October 13, 2006. This victory was a culmination of relentless morchas, dharnas, and legal pressure, and it followed similar successes for 1,250 workers in 2003 and 2,700 workers in 2017. These victories demonstrate that the community's most effective mechanism for securing their rights and improving their livelihoods has been collective, organized action. The KVSS's success story in Mumbai illustrates that for the most marginalized, "agitate" and "organize" are not abstract concepts but necessary, hard-won tools to compel a reluctant state to recognize its legal and moral obligations.

Table 2: Timeline of Major Legal and Policy Milestones for Mumbai's Sanitation Workers

Year	Event	Parties Involved	Outcome & Significance
1997	KVSS founder observes workers' plight, sparking the movement.	KVSS, BMC	Start of a 27-year struggle for dignity and rights.
1998	Case filed at the Industrial Tribunal.	KVSS, BMC	Formal legal challenge to the contract labour system begins.
2003	First major legal victory.	KVSS, BMC	Permanent jobs granted to 1,250 workers.
2017	Second major victory.	KVSS, BMC	Absorption of another 2,700 workers into permanent roles.
2025	Supreme Court delivers landmark ruling.	KVSS, BMC	580 workers granted permanent status and back wages, confirming a pattern of success through organized legal action.

Source: The Times of India, Kachra Vahtuk Shramik Sangh reports

A Critique of Development Policies: Gaps and Systemic Failures

Despite policies designed for their upliftment, the Valmiki community in Mumbai faces systemic failures and paradoxical policies. The "Warsa Hakka" policy, which provides employment to the children of sanitation workers, inadvertently perpetuates the cycle of caste-based occupations. Furthermore, the BMC exploits legal loopholes by misclassifying manual scavengers as "seasonal sanitation workers" to avoid accountability under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Implementation failures also plague welfare schemes like the National Action for Mechanised

Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), which is ineffective in Maharashtra due to poor execution, lack of proper training, and the inability of local bodies to operate modern equipment.

Table 3: Analysis of Government Welfare Schemes and Their Implementation Status in Maharashtra

Scheme Name	Stated Objective	Documented Challenges in Implementation
NAMASTE	To mechanize sanitation work and eliminate hazardous cleaning.	Lack of enforcement; workers still clean manually without safety gear; inadequate training and technical capacity in local bodies.
KVDGSSY	To improve the financial condition of landless SC/Nav-Buddhists.	Lack of awareness and complex offline application process; potential for disbursement failures.
Prohibition of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013	To eliminate manual scavenging and provide rehabilitation.	BMC uses legal loopholes to misclassify workers; lack of accountability for non-compliance with safety protocols.

Source: *The News Dirt, Laws and Policy Review, MyScheme.gov.in*

This critical assessment of policy implementation provides a strong basis for the hypothesis. While the state has created a legislative framework for change, its practical failures, institutional apathy, and deliberate circumvention of laws fundamentally impede the Valmiki community's progress.

Conclusion: A Synthesis of Resurgence and Persistent Challenges

The Valmiki community in Santacruz (East), Mumbai, has achieved significant gains in labour rights and formal employment through successful agitation and organization, particularly via the **Kachra Vahtuk Shramik Sangh**. However, their struggle for complete freedom is hampered by persistent systemic barriers. These include **poor educational outcomes**, pervasive **financial exploitation** that negates economic gains, and **institutional discrimination** perpetuated by the state through policies like "Warsa Hakka" and the deliberate misclassification of labour. The community's progress, while remarkable, remains **incomplete and fragile**, as their upward mobility is systematically blocked by a combination of historical stigma, economic vulnerability, and institutional apathy.

Recommendations for Holistic Development

Based on the analysis, a multi-pronged approach is necessary to address the root causes of the Valmiki community's continued marginalization.

Policy and Legal Reforms

- **Abolish the Contract System:** The state must end the practice of outsourcing sanitation work to private contractors. Direct employment by the BMC and other municipal corporations should be mandated, ensuring all workers receive formal salaries, social security, and health benefits.
- **Strengthen Legal Protections:** The definition of 'manual scavenging' in the Prohibition of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013, should be expanded to explicitly include work in stormwater drains and other similar hazardous tasks, thereby closing a critical legal loophole used to deny workers their rights.
- **Ensure Accountability:** Enforce stricter penalties for government agencies and contractors who violate safety protocols or fail to provide a safe working environment, holding them directly accountable for worker deaths and injuries.

Educational Empowerment and Skill Development

- **Targeted Educational Support:** The state, in partnership with NGOs and community organizations, should establish dedicated educational centres within Valmiki colonies. These centres should offer free tuition, digital literacy, and vocational training in non-sanitation related skills.
- **Multilingual Awareness Campaigns:** Launch targeted, multilingual campaigns to raise awareness within the community about their rights, scholarship opportunities, and welfare schemes. This should be done in local languages and dialects to ensure maximum reach and understanding.

Financial Inclusion

- **Financial Literacy Programs:** Develop and implement financial literacy programs specifically tailored for sanitation workers, focusing on the dangers of predatory moneylenders and the benefits of formal banking, savings, and investment.
- **Specialized Microfinance and Loans:** The state should partner with formal banking institutions to offer specialized, low-interest microfinance and home loans, providing a safe and accessible alternative to informal lenders. The government should also actively investigate and prosecute instances of financial exploitation by moneylenders, with dedicated legal aid for victims.

Empowering Community-Led Solutions

- **Support Grassroots Organizations:** Government and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives should provide direct, sustained funding to successful grassroots organizations like the Kachra Vahtuk Shramik Sangh and community centres like the Bandra East Community Centre. These organizations have demonstrated an effective, community-centric model for change that fills the gaps left by the state.
- **Invest in Social Enterprises:** Provide seed funding and support for social enterprises like Chamar Studio that offer innovative, dignified, and sustainable economic alternatives, thereby empowering the community from within and accelerating the process of identity-reclamation.

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