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Social Exclusion, Occupational Stigma, and Constrained Agency among Harijan Sanitation Workers in Urban Bangladesh: An Ethnographically Informed Case Study of the Ganaktuli Sweeper Colony, Dhaka

Borun Chandra

barunchandro@gmail.com

Galgotias University

Anuradha Parasar

Galgotias University

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Abstract

Harijan sanitation workers keep Bangladesh's capital physically functional, yet the caste-inflected occupational stigma that surrounds their labour, together with gendered constraints on mobility and settlement-based exclusion, may narrow the extent to which paid work is translated into meaningful agency. This article develops an ethnographically informed, single-site case study of the Ganaktuli sweeper colony in Dhaka South City Corporation, complemented by purposive comparative observation in three other historic Harijan settlements (Gopibag, Nazirabazar, Wari). Thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews (16 men and 14 women), five focus group discussions, extended participant observation over eighteen months, and archival reconstruction of colonial municipal recruitment patterns form the empirical base. An integrative framework drawing on Ambedkar's analysis of caste labour, Sen's capability approach, Rowlands's typology of power, intersectional Dalit feminism, and Wacquant's concept of advanced marginality is used to interpret the material. The analysis suggests five interlocking patterns: (i) belonging without acceptance, in which lifelong residence in Dhaka coexists with daily caste marking; (ii) occupational inheritance and an “invisible ceiling” that confines women to hereditary cleaning work; (iii) bodily strain, workplace harassment and the fear of income loss; (iv) institutional distance from social-protection schemes formally available to them; and (v) a partial but real household agency, expressed most strongly in aspirations for daughters' education. Because the design is qualitative-dominant, cross-sectional and site-bounded, the findings are offered as analytic, not statistical, generalisations. The article contributes to the sociology of caste beyond India, to the literature on “dirty work,” and to debates on urban citizenship in South Asia by showing how caste, gender and space jointly produce constrained agency even under conditions of formal wage employment.

1. Introduction

Dhaka, one of the most densely populated capitals in the world, depends materially on a small, socially marginalised community for the cleaning of its streets, drains, markets, hospitals and public toilets. Members of this community are usually called Harijan in Bangladeshi public discourse—a term coined by M. K. Gandhi in the 1930s that today functions as a caste-marked descriptor for Hindu sanitation workers, most of whom are descendants of Dalit labourers recruited into colonial-era Bengal from what are now Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu (Chowdhury, 2009; Cawood et al., 2025). Although their labour is publicly visible, their caste-based exclusion is largely absent from official statistics, urban planning documents and the design of social-protection schemes (Ghoshal, 2020; WaterAid, 2021). This article asks how caste-linked occupational stigma, gendered norms of mobility, and settlement-based exclusion together shape the everyday agency of Harijan working women in Dhaka. “Agency” is used here in the sense developed by Kabeer (1999) and extended in the capability tradition (Sen, 1999): the ability to define one's goals and to act upon them, understood not as an individual attribute but as a socially produced capacity. The argument is that formal inclusion in wage labour does not, by itself, convert into agency when the surrounding social arrangements—caste, patriarchy and spatial segregation—continue to restrict the conversion of resources into achieved functionings. The manuscript is a substantially revised version of an earlier submission. In response to

the three reviewers of Discover Global Society, the design has been reoriented as a qualitative-dominant, single-site case study, centred on the Ganaktuli sweeper colony, with purposive comparative observation in three additional Harijan settlements. Statistical inference has been withdrawn; quantitative material appears only descriptively and only where a specific documentary or field source can be cited. Causal language has been replaced throughout with the vocabulary of patterns and associations, consistent with an ethnographic case-study design. The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 clarifies the historical and conceptual meaning of “Harijan” in the Bangladeshi context and situates the study within scholarship on caste in Bangladesh. Section 3 sets out the integrative theoretical framework. Section 4 introduces the Ganaktuli colony and the three comparison sites. Section 5 details the ethnographically informed methodology and evidence-provenance protocol. Section 6 presents five interpretive themes grounded in participant voices. Section 7 discusses the findings in dialogue with the wider literature. Section 8 identifies policy implications, limitations and directions for further research.

2. Historical and Conceptual Context: Who Are the Harijan of Bangladesh?

2.1 The term “Harijan” and its contested status

The word Harijan—literally “children of God”—was proposed by M. K. Gandhi in the 1930s as a reformist substitute for the pejorative labels then in use for so-called untouchable communities. From the 1970s onward the term has been rejected by many Dalit scholars and activists on the ground that it conceals the structural violence of caste behind a paternalist theology (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998). In India the self-designation Dalit, meaning “broken” or “ground down,” has therefore largely displaced Harijan in academic and activist usage.In Bangladesh the terminological landscape is different. Harijan remains the everyday descriptor used by community members themselves, by municipal employers, and in local Bengali-language media, especially with reference to Hindu sanitation workers, cleaners, drain workers and manual scavengers (Chowdhury, 2009; Cawood et al., 2025; Ghoshal, 2020). Dalit is used in advocacy and academic writing but has not fully replaced Harijan in everyday speech. Following the guidance of participants and the practice of Bangladeshi scholarship (Cawood et al., 2025; Jahan & Ehsan, 2022), this article uses “Harijan” as the primary term while remaining alert to its contested history. Where relevant, the analytical language of Dalit feminism is retained (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Arya, 2020). Within the Harijan population of Dhaka several sub-caste designations are recognised, most commonly Hela, Kanpuri, Telugu and Madrasi, reflecting the regional origins of the ancestral labour migration. These sub-caste boundaries continue to shape marriage, ritual and community-association membership, although they are increasingly softened among younger residents of Ganaktuli.

2.2 Colonial recruitment and the making of the sweeper colony

The origins of Dhaka's Harijan population lie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the colonial municipal administration of Dacca actively recruited Dalit sanitation labourers from Telugu-, Kanpuri- and Hela-speaking regions of the Indian subcontinent to perform manual scavenging and street cleaning (Chowdhury, 2009; Cawood et al., 2025). Under prevailing caste ideas of ritual pollution, dominant-caste and Muslim populations were unwilling to undertake such work; municipal authorities therefore imported caste-marked labour and housed it in segregated quarters adjacent to workplaces (hospitals, markets, cantonments) but socially insulated from the wider urban population. This colonial arrangement was not dismantled by the Partition of 1947 or by the emergence of independent Bangladesh in 1971. Successive municipal bodies—the Dacca Municipality, the Dhaka City Corporation, and today the divided Dhaka North and Dhaka South City Corporations—have continued to depend materially on the descendants of these workers, who remain the majority of the capital's formal cleaning workforce (Cawood et al., 2025; Dutta et al., 2022). Hereditary occupational entrapment, residential segregation in designated “sweeper colonies,” and the continuation of ritual untouchability—despite the community's Hindu faith and its embedding in a predominantly Muslim social order—persist into the present.

2.3 Caste in Bangladesh: an under-researched field

Caste in Bangladesh occupies a paradoxical position in South Asian scholarship. On the one hand, official state discourse tends to treat Bangladesh as a caste-neutral, majority-Muslim polity in which caste hierarchies are read as an Indian problem. On the other hand, a small but growing empirical literature documents the everyday persistence of descent-based discrimination against Hindu Dalits, particularly in urban sanitation work (Chowdhury, 2009; Ghoshal, 2020; Jahan & Ehsan, 2022; Dutta et al., 2022; Cawood et al., 2025; Zene, 2018). This article seeks to contribute to that literature by grounding the analysis in the specific spatial, political and religious configuration of Bangladesh rather than importing wholesale the analytic vocabulary developed in the Indian context.

3. Theoretical Framework: An Integrative Lens

The analysis draws on five interlocking bodies of theory: Ambedkar's critique of caste labour; Sen's capability approach as elaborated by Kabeer; Rowlands's typology of four dimensions of power; intersectional Dalit feminism; and Wacquant's concept of advanced marginality read alongside Lefebvre's and Soja's writings on spatial justice. Ambedkar (1936/2014) argued that the caste system does not merely stratify labour but stratifies labourers, tying persons to inherited occupations and to the moral valuations attached to them. Sanitation work, in this framing, is not simply low-paid but ontologically stigmatised: the more essential the service, the more invisible its servant. This paradox—indispensable labour, residual space, invisible worker—structures the account offered here. Sen's (1999) capability approach reframes development as the expansion of substantive freedoms rather than the mere accumulation of resources. Kabeer (1999) extended the framework to women's empowerment through the triad of resources, agency and achievements. Applied to the Ganaktuli case, this framework makes visible a distinctive feature of the participants' lives: the presence of formal resources (paid wage

employment, individual bank accounts, physical proximity to schools, hospitals and government offices) coexists with a systematic difficulty in converting these resources into achieved functionings such as safe mobility, occupational choice, protection from harassment, or reliable access to health care. Rowlands's (1997) fourfold typology of power—power within, power to, power with and power over—is used to disaggregate what the more diffuse term “empowerment” may otherwise conceal. In the accounts analysed below, self-worth (power within) is fragile; the space of individual decision (power to) is narrow, particularly in relation to occupational mobility; collective capacity (power with) is unevenly developed across the four sites; and the capacity to resist domination (power over) is minimal. Intersectional Dalit feminism (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Arya, 2020) supplies the interpretive grammar for the joint operation of caste, gender and class. Harijan working women do not encounter caste discrimination and gender discrimination as separable axes to be added; these operate as a single, mutually constitutive structure, expressed in harassment on public transport, refusal of shop credit, verbal abuse at the workplace, and the double burden of paid sanitation labour and unpaid domestic reproductive work. Finally, Wacquant's (2008) account of advanced marginality, read alongside Lefebvre's (1996) “right to the city” and Soja's (2010) spatial-justice framework, is used to interpret the persistence of the sweeper colony as a produced space. Ganaktuli, Gopibag, Nazirabazar and Wari are not accidental clusters of poverty; each is the sedimented outcome of specific colonial and post-colonial decisions about where the caste-marked cleaning workforce would be housed and to what forms of tenure it would be entitled.

4. Study Setting

The primary case study is the Ganaktuli sweeper colony in the Hazaribagh area of Dhaka South City Corporation. Ganaktuli is the oldest and largest Harijan settlement in Dhaka and functions as both a housing precinct for DSCC-registered cleaning staff and a wider community locus, home to the Sree Sree Ram Mandir, the Sree Sree Durga Mandir, and the Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha (founded in 1983), a long-standing community-welfare association. Field observation showed that the colony is entered through a single concrete gateway that functions simultaneously as an administrative threshold and a symbolic boundary. Inside the gate, a bazaar lined by tarpaulin-roofed tea stalls, fruit carts and informal eateries serves as the principal site of male sociality; women were observed transiting these stalls during shift changes but rarely lingering—a spatial pattern that confirms the persistent gendering of public space. Three housing typologies coexist within the colony: multi-storey reinforced-concrete blocks progressively built by DSCC for registered cleaning-staff families; an intermediate tier of semi-pucca brick-and-tin hybrids; and a lowest tier of fully informal corrugated-iron shanties erected against or between the pucca blocks by younger, unallotted families. Poor drainage and seasonal water-logging are pervasive; residents themselves described monsoon flooding as the single most distressing feature of everyday life, highlighting the striking paradox that the community responsible for cleaning the city lives with the city's most deficient sanitation infrastructure. Three additional Harijan settlements were included as purposive comparison sites in order to test whether patterns observed in Ganaktuli extend to differently configured settlements. Gopibag differs from Ganaktuli in having no fenced colony and no exclusive

block of Harijan residence; Harijan families live in semi-pucca houses interspersed with Bengali Muslim and non-Harijan Hindu households, yet caste boundaries persist at communal tube-wells and tea stalls, and housing tenure is markedly informal. Nazirabazar is the densest, oldest and most acoustically intense of the four sites; participants there reported the highest incidence of verbal harassment in commercial spaces and had no community-level institutional infrastructure analogous to Ganaktuli's Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha. Wari, blending into the Doiyaganj commercial market area, is characterised by dimly lit night-time alleys and the highest self-reported insecurity after dark. The article does not claim that these four settlements are representative of all Dalit or Harijan communities in Bangladesh. The comparison is analytical rather than statistical: it is used to identify continuities and variations across differently configured urban Harijan settlements, not to estimate population-level parameters.

5. Methods

5.1 Design

The study is best described as an ethnographically informed, qualitative-dominant single-site case study, complemented by purposive comparative observation in three additional Harijan settlements. The phrase “ethnographically informed” is used advisedly: while the fieldwork extended over eighteen months (November 2023–May 2025) and included sustained participant observation, the design does not meet the conventional bar for a full ethnographic monograph and is therefore not described as one. Three distinct classes of evidence are used, following the transparency protocol proposed in response to reviewer comments: First, observed qualitative material, consisting of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews (16 men and 14 women, aged 22–67), five focus group discussions (approximately 8–12 participants each), and extended field notes gathered during participant observation of daily life in Ganaktuli and shorter periods in Gopibag, Nazirabazar and Wari. This body of material carries the interpretive weight of the article. Second, historical and secondary material, comprising Bangladeshi and regional scholarship, municipal records where accessible, and grey literature published by non-governmental organisations working on sanitation and minority rights (WaterAid, 2021; Ghoshal, 2020; Cawood et al., 2025). This material is used to reconstruct the historical trajectory of the Harijan community in Dhaka and to situate the site-level findings. Third, exploratory illustrative material generated during the doctoral project through a simulated 400-household demographic profile. In the present article this material is neither used as evidence of statistical association nor reproduced as if it were an empirical survey. It is mentioned only where the earlier version of the manuscript relied on it, in order to make explicit the correction that has been made.

5.2 Sampling

Sampling was purposive and interpretive rather than probabilistic. Entry into Ganaktuli was negotiated through the Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha, whose office bearers acted as gatekeepers and introduced the first author to prospective participants across the three housing tiers. Purposive criteria included: self-identification as Harijan; current or recent engagement in sanitation-related work (either formally through

DSCC or informally as private cleaners in hospitals, markets and households); and, for the female sub-sample, willingness to speak on topics of workplace harassment, mobility and intra-household decision-making. Snowball recruitment was then used within each of the four settlements with attention to sub-caste diversity (Hela, Kanpuri, Telugu, Madrasi), housing tier and age. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached in the female sub-sample, consistent with guidance for qualitative interview studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

5.3 Data collection

Interviews were conducted in Bangla by the first author, who is conversant in the Bangla–Hindi–Bhojpuri code-switching common in Ganaktuli. A semi-structured guide organised around six domains (occupational trajectory; workplace conditions and harassment; caste and everyday interaction; access to state schemes; intra-household decision making; aspirations for children) was used flexibly. With participant consent, detailed handwritten and typed notes were taken; audio recording was not used because a number of early participants expressed anxiety about the political sensitivity of caste-based testimony in the current climate. This design choice, and its epistemological implications, is reflected in the limitations section. Focus group discussions were held separately for women and men in each of the four settlements. Participant observation included attendance at community meetings of the Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha, festivals at the Sree Sree Durga Mandir, shift changes at the Ganaktuli gate, and informal visits to household kitchens and courtyards.

5.4 Analysis

Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Initial coding was manual and inductive; a second cycle of coding grouped inductive codes into higher-order themes, and a third cycle read these themes against the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3. Coding was undertaken by the first author, with regular discussion of emergent themes with the second author to strengthen interpretive rigor. Where a claim is made in Section 6 it is anchored either in a direct participant quotation or in a field-note observation with a date and site.

The Social Exclusion Index used in earlier iterations of the doctoral project was retained here only as an analytical lens, not as a statistical instrument. Five conceptual dimensions—residential, occupational, institutional, interpersonal and psychosocial exclusion—were used to organise the coding tree; no numerical index score is reported.

5.5 Researcher positionality and participant safeguards

Community-level consent was sought separately from the Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha of Ganaktuli. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms; identifying details have been altered or omitted where necessary. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred locations (homes, shrines, tea stalls or community halls) and could be paused or terminated at any point. The first author is a Bangladeshi researcher who is not himself a member of the Harijan community. This position both facilitated access to municipal officials and NGO gatekeepers and imposed a duty of reflexive attention to the risk of

extractive research on a structurally marginalised community. The extended fieldwork period, the involvement of the Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha, and the decision to return preliminary findings to the community in a plain-language Bangla brief before submission were intended as partial mitigations.

6. Findings: Five Interpretive Themes

The findings are presented as five interpretive themes. Each theme is grounded in participant voices and, where relevant, in field-note observations. Quotations have been translated by the first author from Bangla; pseudonyms and site identifiers are used. Because the design is interpretive, no attempt is made to attach numerical frequencies to the themes.

6.1 Belonging without acceptance

A first, consistent pattern in the material is what may be called belonging without acceptance: lifelong residence in Dhaka, and often over three generations, coexists with everyday caste marking that signals non-belonging. A middle-aged cleaner at a private hospital, a long-term Ganaktuli resident, put it in these terms:

We were born here, grew up here, and Dhaka is our home. But when people see us, they think we are different and lower. When they know that we are Harijan, they view our work, our words, and everything about us differently.

A private cleaner in Gopibag described a familiar phenomenology of revealed identity:

At first they call me sister. Later, when they come to know that I am Harijan, their manner changes, they stop talking freely, and they do not want to sit or eat with me. It is as if we are only cleaners to them.

A participant from Wari extended the point to the labour market:

When we go for an interview for a better job, they ask about our background. Once they hear that we are from that colony, they say, ‘Oh, you people do this kind of work.’ At that point, all doors for progress close.

These accounts illustrate a common ethnographic finding in the literature on “dirty work” (Hughes, 1958; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999): stigma is not attached to a task but to a person, and follows the person into interactions unrelated to the task itself. In the Harijan case this logic is not merely occupational but explicitly caste-inflected, reproducing what Ambedkar (1936/2014) identified as the structural peculiarity of caste labour.

6.2 Occupational inheritance and the “invisible ceiling”

A second, closely related pattern is occupational inheritance. Participants across the four sites described entry into sanitation work not as a choice from a range of options but as a scripted trajectory beginning in adolescence, brokered through family networks and municipal patronage. Even where formal educational qualifications had been acquired, movement into non-cleaning occupations was

described as obstructed by an “invisible ceiling” of caste identification. A participant from Wari described the closure at the point of interview:

When we go for an interview for a better job... at that point, all doors for progress close.

The invisibility of this ceiling is precisely what makes it durable. The formal architecture of employment law in Bangladesh contains no explicit caste bar, and the language of municipal recruitment is meritocratic. Yet participants uniformly reported that once the combination of surname, colony of residence and physical labour was recognised, the interview trajectory closed. In Sen's (1999) vocabulary, the formal resource (a labour market) exists but the conversion factor (caste recognition) blocks its translation into an achieved functioning (occupational mobility).

6.3 Bodily strain, workplace harassment and fear of income loss

A third theme concerns the embodied costs of sanitation work and the fear of income loss that suppresses complaint. A woman in her late thirties, who had worked for more than ten years in a Nazirabazar private hospital, described the shift pattern in these terms:

I work eight to nine hours a day. If there is a night shift, it becomes even longer. The pay is not much, but I cannot leave the job because my family depends on my income.

A Ganaktuli participant linked the bodily cost of the work to the structural absence of paid leave:

Most of the time I have back pain, chest burning and coughing. Going to the doctor costs money, and if I take leave, my daily wage is cut. So most of the time I try to manage with medicine at home.

Verbal harassment, particularly on public transport and in commercial spaces, was reported by participants across the four sites; a Nazirabazar participant described the everyday choreography of the morning commute:

As soon as I get on the bus, it starts: comments, laughter and unwanted touching. If I say anything, they say, ‘You are a girl from that colony; why are you so concerned?’

An elderly woman from Nazirabazar described a public humiliation at a familiar shop that captured the compound of caste and gender in the commercial street:

I buy food every month from the same shop. One day I was short of money and asked the shopkeeper to write it down so I could pay the next month. In front of everyone, he said, ‘Why should I give credit to people like you? Sweepers are asking for credit!’

These accounts illustrate an intersectional logic in which caste identification and gendered vulnerability compound one another. What is notable in the material is not any single incident but the sedimented expectation of such incidents, and the corresponding self-management of speech, dress and route that

participants described. The fear of income loss, combined with the absence of formalised grievance channels, made the option of complaint effectively unavailable.

6.4 Institutional distance and programme design

A fourth theme is institutional distance: the perception, among participants, that formally available state and NGO programmes were practically inaccessible. A Gopibag participant described a familiar gap between broadcast promise and local delivery:

I have heard many times that the government has special benefits and quotas for us. But where are they and how do we get them? No one tells us. We see these things on television, but they do not reach our colony.

A woman in her early forties from Wari illustrated the way in which the temporal structure of programme delivery may itself function as a barrier:

If I attend the [sewing] training, I will lose my job. I have children and in-laws at home. The NGO staff said I could come later and something else would be arranged, but how long can I wait?

These accounts illustrate what Ferguson (1994) called the “anti-politics” of development programming: schemes formally targeted at marginalised communities may be designed in ways that presume temporal, spatial and interactional resources that the intended beneficiaries do not possess. In the Harijan case, the combination of long shifts, gendered domestic responsibilities, spatial confinement and low institutional literacy operated to convert formally universal entitlements into practically unreachable ones.

6.5 Partial household agency and intergenerational aspiration

The final theme complicates any reading of Harijan working women as passive. Participants consistently reported a partial but real expansion of intra-household agency associated with paid work and, in particular, with individual bank accounts. A Wari participant described the shift concretely:

Earlier, all the money went to my husband. Now I also have my own account. Some household expenses pass through my hands, such as children's school fees, food and small purchases. This makes me feel that I also matter.

The most consistent site of expressed aspiration was the education of daughters. Participants across the four settlements described a sustained, sometimes conflictual commitment to keeping daughters in school as a route out of hereditary sanitation work. A Ganaktuli participant recounted an exchange with her husband over school fees:

One day the school called and said that my younger daughter was doing well, but the fees would increase in the higher class. My husband said, ‘Then let her stop.’ I replied, ‘No, I will work more overtime,

but I will educate her.’ That was the first time I spoke like that in the family.

Yet the same domain also revealed the fragility of such agency. A Gopibag participant described the volatility of the aspiration when income falters:

I try to keep my daughter in school and not let her drop out. But when there is no money, after some time we have to consider withdrawing her. Then my husband asks why I want to take her so far when our condition is like this.

In Rowlands's (1997) typology, what these voices describe is the emergence of a modest “power to”—the capacity to act upon a defined goal—without a corresponding expansion of “power with” (collective capacity) or “power over” (capacity to resist domination). The result is an agency that is real but bounded: expressed within the household and within the intergenerational time-horizon of daughters' schooling, and comparatively muted in the workplace, the street and the office of the ward councillor.

7. Discussion

Read together, the five themes suggest that the everyday lives of Harijan working women in Ganaktuli, and in the three comparison sites, are organised by a persistent separation between formal inclusion and substantive agency. Wage employment, individual bank accounts, and physical proximity to schools, hospitals and municipal offices—conventionally read as resources for empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Cornwall, 2016)—coexist with a systematic difficulty in converting these resources into achieved functionings. The gap between resource and functioning is not attributable to any single mechanism. It is produced by the joint operation of caste-linked occupational stigma, gendered norms of mobility and public speech, and the spatial segregation of the sweeper colony. Three analytical points may be drawn from this reading. First, the Ganaktuli material offers an empirical case for treating caste, gender and space as mutually constitutive rather than additive axes of exclusion. The refusal of shop credit is not a caste incident to which gender is added; it is a caste-and-gender-and-street event, irreducible to any single dimension. This aligns with the analytic programme of intersectional Dalit feminism (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Arya, 2020) and cautions against policy designs that treat caste, gender and urban poverty as separately targetable variables. Second, the four-site comparison suggests that the specific configuration of the settlement matters. Ganaktuli's institutional infrastructure—its temples, its shrine, and above all its long-established Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha—provides a modest but real platform for collective claim-making that Nazirabazar, Gopibag and Wari lack. A Nazirabazar participant contrasted her situation with Ganaktuli in exactly these terms during a focus group discussion:

In Ganaktuli the Sangha is allowed to sit with the Councillor. Here whose will go for me? I go alone, and alone they send me back.

This variation matters for the theoretical framing: what Rowlands (1997) called “power with” is not a personal attribute of the women concerned but a property of the settlements they inhabit. Empowerment policy that ignores the institutional density of the neighbourhood is likely to misread individual reticence

as a lack of “power within.” Third, the material provides a modest contribution to the growing literature on caste in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2009; Ghoshal, 2020; Jahan & Ehsan, 2022; Dutta et al., 2022; Cawood et al., 2025). It supports the argument developed by Cawood and colleagues (2025) that caste in Bangladesh is not a residual Indian import but a specifically Bangladeshi social formation shaped by colonial recruitment, post-1971 municipal continuity, and the everyday co-existence of a Muslim majority order with an internal Hindu caste hierarchy. It also supports Ghoshal's (2020) reading of the sweeper colony as an active site of political marginalisation and not simply as a residential outcome. The material also invites two more cautious observations. Interviews with participants during and immediately after the COVID-19 period recorded a striking moment in which the essential character of sanitation labour was, however briefly, publicly recognised. A Wari participant recalled:

When everyone was worried about safety [during COVID-19], they [some doctors and nurses] told us, ‘If you stay, we will be safe.’ That day I felt that I was not just a sweeper; I was an important person.

Such moments were exceptional and short-lived, and their post-hoc recall may itself be structured by the desire for recognition rather than by any durable change. Nonetheless, they suggest that the conditions under which the invisibility of essential labour is publicly suspended deserve their own investigation.

8. Policy and Practice Implications

Any policy inference from a qualitative case study must be offered with appropriate caution. The following implications are put forward as analytic prompts rather than as generalised recommendations. The first implication concerns the design of state schemes formally available to minority and low-income women in Bangladesh. If, as the participants' accounts suggest, the barrier to uptake is often temporal (training schedules that conflict with shift work), spatial (delivery points that presume mobility beyond the colony) or informational (opaque eligibility rules), then scheme redesign may produce more traction than the addition of further schemes. Co-delivery through community associations such as Ganaktuli's Samaj Kalyan Juba Sangha is one concrete route. The second implication concerns the working conditions of sanitation labour itself. The absence of paid sick and pregnancy leave, the precarity of contractor-mediated wage payment, and the absence of grievance mechanisms are all documented in existing Bangladeshi and regional scholarship (WaterAid, 2021; Cawood et al., 2025) and are corroborated by the accounts analysed here. Formal recognition of sanitation work as a specified occupational category with attendant labour protections would address a durable material grievance. The third implication concerns spatial policy. The persistence of the sweeper colony as a produced space of caste-marked labour is a matter of urban planning as much as of labour or social policy. Tenure security, drainage and housing upgrading in Ganaktuli, and the recognition of the informal Harijan clusters of Gopibag and Nazirabazar as legitimate residential neighbourhoods, would materially alter the conditions under which empowerment strategies operate.

9. Strengths and Limitations

The article's strengths are that it grounds a widely discussed but under-researched community in extended, community-negotiated fieldwork; that it foregrounds participant voices; that it locates the analysis explicitly within the Bangladeshi rather than the Indian caste context; and that it maintains a transparent evidence-provenance protocol distinguishing observed qualitative material, historical and secondary material, and (declined) exploratory simulated material. Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the design is a single-site case study with three purposive comparison sites; it does not, and cannot, support statistical generalisation to all Dalit or Harijan communities in Bangladesh. The empirical claims are advanced as analytic generalisations in Yin's (2018) sense. Second, the decision not to audio-record interviews, taken to protect participants during a politically sensitive period, limits the possibility of independent transcript verification and may have attenuated the recording of exact wording; the extensive use of typed contemporaneous notes and the return of preliminary findings to the community are partial mitigations. Third, the study is cross-sectional and cannot address change over time; a longitudinal extension is planned. Fourth, although the first author is a Bangladeshi researcher with sustained field presence, he is not a member of the Harijan community, and the analysis is inevitably shaped by that position.

10. Conclusion

This article has offered an ethnographically informed, qualitative-dominant case study of the Ganaktuli sweeper colony in Dhaka, with purposive comparative observation in three additional Harijan settlements. Its argument is that formal inclusion in wage labour, even when combined with individual bank accounts and physical proximity to state institutions, does not automatically convert into agency for Harijan working women. The conversion is obstructed by an interlocking structure of caste-linked occupational stigma, gendered norms of mobility and public speech, and the spatial segregation of the sweeper colony. Within this structure a bounded but real agency emerges, expressed most consistently in aspirations for the education of daughters and in the modest re-organisation of intra-household finance around individual bank accounts. The article contributes to the sociology of caste beyond India, to the literature on “dirty work” and occupational stigma, and to debates on urban citizenship in South Asia by insisting that caste, gender and space be read as a single social formation. It reads the Harijan colony not as a residual space of poverty but as an actively produced space of caste-marked labour whose persistence into the twenty-first century is a question for policy as well as for scholarship. Recognising the labour that keeps the city functioning, and extending to the workers who perform it the substantive freedoms formally guaranteed to them, is neither a narrowly technical nor a narrowly humanitarian question. It is a test of what urban citizenship in Bangladesh is, at this moment, prepared to mean.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest / Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Consent to participate

/ Consent for publication: All participants consented to the use of their anonymised words for scholarly publication. No identifying photograph or personal identifier is reproduced.

Author Contribution

Author contributions: BC designed the study, conducted the fieldwork, analysed the data, and drafted the manuscript. AP supervised the doctoral project, contributed to the theoretical framing, and critically revised the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version.

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written informed consent only if you genuinely have signed/documented consent records. Aise doctor researcher start my research from 2020 to till now. that's why I covered research activities during the mentioned time period

Data availability:

De-identified interview transcripts, field-note excerpts, and the coding tree that support the findings are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to community-consent restrictions.

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