

The unseen living conditions of women sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, Odisha

Amita Bhakta, Prutha Shah, Ganesh Parida, Rashmita Patel, Meghna Malhotra, Manvita Baradi and Sarah Jewitt

Context

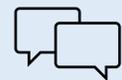
Women make up approximately 50% of the five million sanitation workers in India, who undertake degrading and dehumanising work everyday, often handling faecal waste directly without adequate protective gear and with little recognition, security, and support. Yet little has been recorded about their living conditions and access to adequate housing. This study in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack explored the housing and living conditions of women sanitation workers who were working as toilet and septic tank cleaners under the Government of Odisha's Garima Scheme, which has enumerated 9213 sanitation workers across the state as of July 2025.

Methodology

Research was conducted using participatory, qualitative methods with 10 toilet cleaners and 2 septic tank cleaners across Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, who were enrolled in the Government of Odisha's Garima Scheme, in February 2025.



PhotoVoice (Participatory photography) was used to visually capture what was liked and disliked about one toilet cleaner's living and housing conditions through photos.



Semi-structured interviews here held with 9 toilet cleaners and 2 septic tank cleaners to understand their housing experiences.



Figure 3: "I don't like that the road we use gets dirty, and pets and other animals poop there. We don't like walking on unclean roads or streets" (Photo © Banita Digal)



Figure 4: "I don't like seeing people get intoxicated from local liquor, as it makes us feel bad. The intoxicated individuals create an unhealthy environment, and when we try to stop them, they argue with us. Our children are negatively affected by witnessing such scenes" (Photo © Banita Digal)



Figure 1: A sanitation worker analysing her photos during a PhotoVoice session (Photo © Ganesh Parida)



Figure 2: Photos produced from PhotoVoice (Photos © Banita Digal)

Settlement environments

Sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack lived in challenging environments in slum settlements:



Roads and streets in the slums were often dirty due to animal waste, making them unpleasant to walk on (Figure 3)



Alcohol abuse was common in the settlements (Figure 4), leaving women sanitation workers fearful for their children's safety.



Access to drinking water supply and sanitation services was very limited in the slum settlements. Women sanitation workers and their families relied on shared community toilets, and some used water from tube wells for drinking, bathing, cooking, and washing. Some sanitation workers and their families had to resort to open defecation whilst waiting for household toilets to be constructed.

Housing tenure and conditions



Most of the women sanitation workers were renting their houses. Only one sanitation worker in the sample owned her own home, as it was self-built on government land.



Women sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack found it very challenging to pay their rent, which was often unaffordable on their low incomes.



The housing in which sanitation workers lived had asbestos roofs, posing risks to the health of women sanitation workers and their families.



In Cuttack, one toilet cleaner and her family had been allocated a single 15ft x 15ft room as 'housing' by the government, without any access to water and sanitation. This sanitation worker and her family used a community toilet that was shared by 30 households and could only collect water from a tube well twice a day, when it was available. One sanitation worker had to manage her menstrual hygiene in the nearby river after the water supply to the community toilet was cut off. A lack of solid waste facilities led her to dispose of her used sanitary pads in the river.



Women sanitation workers were denied financial assistance from the municipal corporation to build their own toilets at home under the Swachh Bharat Mission on the basis of their caste background.

Supporting sanitation workers' housing needs

This research has demonstrated how initiatives such as the Garima Scheme have been transformative for improving the work experiences of women sanitation workers, but that there is a need for other schemes to accompany this to improve their lives.

Parallel initiatives are needed to support sanitation workers and others living in slum and informal settlements to address the housing and socio-economic precarity they face.

