

Liberating from shackles of discrimination

Ashif Shaikh

Jan Sahas Social Development Society

“No one actually likes doing this kind of work,” said Ashif Shaikh. ‘This kind of work’ that he referred to is manual scavenging, an inhuman practice he has been trying to abolish. “A Dalit in a village does not know Manu today. If I keep telling people that Manu is responsible for the atrocities committed on them in the name of caste, no one will listen to me, unless I tell them how to break free of the situation.” So he focussed on helping people break free of the shackles of caste-based discrimination. For more than 15 years, he has been liberating those involved in manual scavenging.

The role Ashif has played in the lives of thousands of Dalits and oppressed minority communities is manifested in the dignity with which the women of these communities lead their lives today. Spread across 55 districts of three states and reaching out to about one lakh people, Jan Sahas, founded by Ashif, is a well-known organisation working for Dalit rights. In a span of 16 years, nearly 20,000 women have been liberated from manual scavenging, more than 2,000 cases of atrocities on Dalits have been filed. No one could have imagined that a 20-year-old youth leading a movement could bring about a change in the way society and the government perceived the practice of manual scavenging.

Childhood

Ashif was born to Iqbal and Anisa Shaikh on 18 October in 1982. His ancestral home was in the Mukeri mohalla of Indore, a politically active neighbourhood. Many of his neighbours had affiliations to parties along the entire spectrum and some of them went on to become Member of Legislative Assembly and Member of Parliament (MLAs and MPs respectively).

Iqbal ran a tricycle business and was inclined to the then-burgeoning socialist movement under the umbrella of Janata Dal. He was actively involved in recruiting minorities as well as Dalits into the fold of the movement in their locality. His political work did not come for free. It took a heavy toll on his business and so in 1985 the family shifted to Dewas where Ashif’s maternal grandfather provided them with living space. Iqbal later shifted his business to Dewas and continued engaging in the movement. Ashif grew up listening to political discussions that were common at the family’s dinner table.

Prejudiced identity

Despite being Muslims, the Shaikh family had to bear with the notion of impurity, which the widely prevalent caste system propagates. Since childhood Ashif was taunted with comments such as, “Why do you come to mosques? You are not even true Muslims.” As a ten-year-old boy he could not differentiate between the other boys of his religion and himself, because of their caste, or more specifically because of their birth, which his religion so vehemently opposes. Eventually he stopped going to the madrasa for Islamic education, and to this day does not read or write the Arabic script.

He turned his attention to finding his own identity outside the purview of religion. “We had both Dalits and Brahmins as neighbours in Dewas. The Brahmin was relatively poorer than the Dalit. But I could clearly see that even though the Dalit had a better house, he did not enjoy the same status as the Brahmin, despite his wealth,” he recalled. And a Dalit Muslim was very different than the individual components of the term, a realisation that made him aware of the term discrimination.

Initiation into activism

Owing to his father’s network of socialist activists, Ashif started interacting with leaders of the Lohia tradition that rejected emulating western socialism. They believed that socialism was rooted in India’s social and cultural milieu. During one such interaction, he met Swami Agnivesh who was actively supporting the cause of abolishing bonded labour through his Bandhwa Mukti Morcha. Young Ashif was captivated by his fervour and vociferousness. He associated himself with the organisation and started working on child rights. Swami remained very distant, but the ideas of Kailash Satyarthi (who went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014), another of his disciples, were instrumental in developing Ashif’s own understanding of child education. Ashif realised the importance of liberating children out of the entire exploitative practice that caste and poverty brought about. He still remembers Satyarthi’s statement “*Bachpan Bachao Andolan - Kya, Kyun Aur Kaise?*” (Save the childhood movement – what, why and how?) that drove him into social action for the first time.

It was during this time that he first drew solidarity with the idea of organising students for specific objectives. Protests seemed a legitimate method of expressing discontentment at malpractices existent in the society. Ashif brought a group of volunteers under the banner of Shaikh Yuva Manch, a student body consisting of boys from the same community. Today he regards it as an immature attempt as it was narrow in approach to aim at a system as broad as caste.

At a very early age, he was also drawn to the ideas of Marxism by a Marxist ideologue in Dewas. For a year Ashif read and interacted with Upendra, who also happened to be a journalist. Upendra spoke of the role of student movement in propagating the class consciousness necessary for the struggle of the proletariat. But Ashif did not find the answers that he was looking for and soon he diverged from the ideology.

Education as a tool towards liberation

Ashif had figured out that caste-based discrimination naturally led to exploitation. It became his priority to attack discrimination rather than concentrating on exploitation, which was for him only the surface of a problem deeply rooted in the nexus of caste and religion. With support from World Vision, an international organisation, he tried to bring all the student unions in Dewas under one umbrella, but could not succeed. Ashif was not convinced with the understanding of caste within the existing student bodies. So he decided to form his own student organisation that could include a much larger spectrum of people, to discuss, deliberate and work on the annihilation of caste-based exploitation.

He founded Sahasi Ekta Manch (SEM) in 1999 and held regular meetings in a small room in a school in Dewas. The group would gather early in the morning and discuss issues that they wanted to work on. The two-point agenda they fixed for themselves was to liberate children from labour and educate them, besides educating children from communities such as minorities, Dalits and Adivasis.

Ashif took varied efforts towards their goal. He started night schools for children in Anand Nagar and Gajragear slums in Dewas, with the support of Rotary Club. With the help of a fellowship grant he received for his works, he formed *bal panchayats* under the guidance of Kailash Satyarthi. The *bal panchayats* brought children from marginalised communities together to prevent them from becoming child labourers and to ensure them a formal education.

R N Syag, the founder of Eklavya was instrumental in forming Kabir Vichar Manch and Ambedkar Vichar Manch that attracted a large number of young Dalits. Ashif met Syag in one of the rallies of Swami Agnivesh and was drawn by his pragmatism. His own group had people who sang Kabir bhajans without realising the meaning of the songs. Ashif attended sessions on Kabir and found a plethora of interpretations of caste in Kabir's *dohas* or couplets. Eventually he incorporated Kabir's words of wisdom into several songs for their education programme.

However, being an informal group of students with no concrete agenda, the SEM had to be disbanded when the students moved in different directions.

The maiden protest

Fascinated with the idea of being a journalist, a profession which he saw as being a reflection of society, Ashif started distributing papers like *Dhal Talwar*. He sold his motorbike that his grandfather had gifted, to start a distribution agency of *The Observer*. However, he lacked clarity and direction. He had also enrolled for a degree in arts at the government college in Dewas. His idea was to pursue law after the undergraduate course. However, his plans changed due to an unfortunate incident.

In 1999, when two Dalit children and a bonded labourer died in a blast in a firecracker factory in Ujjain, Ashif along with a group of students and social workers went on a fact-finding mission. They found that a large number of children of Balai caste worked as bonded labourers in Ujjain's firecracker factories. The children were picked up from villages and made to work for long hours under inhuman and hazardous conditions.

The group decided to protest in the district collector's office. The victims' families and some lawyers joined the protests. The relentless protests attracted media attention and soon Ashif was giving interviews on the matter. Eventually National Child Labour Policy (NCLP) was invoked in the region.

Caste-based exploitation

Ashif realised the true potential of activism after their protests and the subsequent action by the government. He wrote a report on the entire event, elaborating the finer details, taking up the pen for a cause for the first time. Much to his dismay, the Bandhwa Mukti Morcha that he was working with then kept declining the role of caste in bonded labour works. He was not convinced by their perspective and decided to explore caste-based exploitation at the work place further.

Ashif received a fellowship from Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), under which he visited their centre in Mumbai, and started reading literature on caste. He came across *Lesser Humans*, a documentary on manual scavenging, directed by Stalin. K. The documentary was instrumental in developing his own understanding of the issue. Ashif and his friend Manish Kamble felt that the Gujarat-based human rights activist Martin Macwan would be the appropriate person to help them address the issue of manual scavenging. But due to the riots in Gujarat then, they could not contact Macwan.

Ashif still did not know the nature of discrimination in rural areas. With Syag's help, he designed a survey to understand the same. With a grant from National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), they conducted the survey in 18 villages of Dewas district. With each stint, he learnt many aspects of discrimination.

The young founder

At the age of 19, Ashif founded Jan Sahas as a society, to work in the domain of human rights. The Jan Sahas Social Development Society was registered in 2000. The name reflects the journey that the organisation has undertaken in the last 15 years. In addition to mobilising and organising women to leave the work that stood against human dignity, they follow a more concrete agenda of social development.

During this time, most of his associates were his school friends, friends of his mother and acquaintances. Through a friend, he met Krishna Pawar and requested her to get involved with their work. She agreed to and presently serves as a board member. Gradually he began forming a team, emerging as a team player.

Towards a life of dignity

Ashif stayed in villages for weeks, interacted with Dalit communities and documented all that he learnt and observed. By the end of the process he knew that untouchability was still in practice, though the way it was practised had changed due to a change in education and economic status of Dalits. Even among Dalits, untouchability was still in practice and caste-based occupations were still prevalent. He realised that he had to start his work with the Valmiki who were at the bottom of the pyramid.

From earlier interactions Ashif had learnt that roughly 90% of the manual scavenging work was being done by women. A baseline survey of all manual scavengers across religions was done in the previously identified villages. The debate then centred on the rehabilitation of the manual scavengers.

“If we had focussed at alternative livelihoods for these women, it would have been difficult to convince people that this was not just a matter of employment, but more importantly of dignity.” Therefore the campaign came to be known as Garima Abhiyan or dignity campaign.

In the village of Bhourasa, 20km from Dewas, Ashif and his group started off with 26 women, belonging to the Hela and Valmiki communities. Bakha from Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *The Untouchable* was young enough to question “Why are we always abused?” However the women that Ashif met had been conditioned into accepting the inhuman treatment meted out to them. As this too was a work under the jajmani system – the overbearing work connection between the landed upper caste people and the lower caste that worked for them – the women initially argued about the lack of alternate source of income. The constant discrimination at school, prevented the children of these communities from receiving higher education. Girls especially were seen as future *mehtarani*s or janitors and hence there did not seem any reason to educate them. Ashif started encouraging young girls to be the change makers within the families.

According to Ashif, though no one likes a manual scavenging job, slotting people into a specific role makes them too submissive to question the practice.

The reasons were the *jajmani* system of having to continue working as manual scavengers, and perceiving their work as a *jaagir*, an inheritance, with certain pride attached to it. Besides, women initiated their daughters-in-law into the work so as to reduce their own work burden. It took one-and-a-half years for Bhourasa to become totally free from the practice of manual scavenging. The hegemony of the caste-based oppression for more than 2,000 years was finally broken by a group of young, enthusiastic social workers. The baskets in which the women carried the excreta of upper caste Hindus were burnt in a public place, to convey a strong message.

Ashif knew that he had to eliminate the practice from the entire region, to have any considerable impact on the contradictory policies – one such policy was to end scholarship to manual scavengers if they quit work. He convinced the Bhourasa women to visit other villages and narrate their stories to the manual scavengers there. By the end of 2004, nearly 100 women had quit the practice.

Campaign rallies

The idea of going on *pada yatras* fascinated Ashif, after reading about former prime minister Charan Singh's campaign marches on foot. In 2013, his idea culminated in his own version of the *pada yatra* called *Maila Mukti Yatra*.

He then decided to conduct rallies, to eliminate the problem from each of the three districts that had been selected initially. The first *yatra* held in 2006 had 40 women covering 16 villages from Bhourasa to Nemawar village in Dewas district. This led to 60 families quitting manual scavenging work.

During the rally, several minor issues that the Dalits faced in their villages were also resolved. The panchayat officials in Bhourasa ironing out discriminatory practices at a community hand pump is a case in point. The movement gathered momentum and *Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan* was flagged off from Bhopal by Jairam Ramesh, the then Minister for Rural Development, to whom Ashif had presented data on dry toilets. The rally covered 17 states, and 10,000 manual scavengers quit their jobs. At the end of the rally, a people's parliament was organised where members from civil society organisations, think-tanks and manual scavengers gave inputs for abolishing the practice across the country.

The 1993 legislation – *Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act* – had put it as a problem of sanitation, and left it to the state governments to decide on corrective measures. The state governments did not take any steps. Ashif knew that he had to influence the policy makers, and therefore started highlighting the issue at

various national and international human rights platforms that had earlier disregarded caste as a form of slavery. Manual scavenging however, was unanimously considered as a form of slavery more than as employment or as improving sanitation.

Lending legal support

While interacting with Dalit communities, Ashif learnt about the atrocities being committed on them, especially on women, by upper caste people. Some panchayats denied Scheduled Caste (SC) families, entitlements due to them. Deogarh village in Madhya Pradesh ostracised families of manual scavengers liberated by Jan Sahas in 2006. Legal intervention seemed the best option to alleviate such problems. But Ashif had no legal expertise to help the women or to even guide them. His friend Anil Trivedi, a lawyer at the Bhopal High Court, encouraged him to bring such cases to light, so that they could seek justice.

By the end of 2007 Jan Sahas was hiring lawyers for consultation on cases, primarily of rape and other atrocities on Dalits. People who associated with Ashif during this period were mostly victims of atrocities and discrimination. Some of them went on to graduate in law after being associated with Jan Sahas. With Jan Sahas helping many victims, the idea of having a network of lawyers who were passionate about the cause came up. The idea culminated in founding the Lawyers Forum in 2012. Five years on, the forum is registered, has nearly 400 lawyers, and helps victims seek justice.

Creating livelihood opportunities

The local administration did not hand over grazing lands allotted by the state government to SC families. From his interaction Ashif knew that lack of an asset base was the primary reason for subordination of Dalits. So he is working towards getting the lands handed over to the families so that their social and financial status would improve.

In 2013, after completing the yatra, Ashif felt that he had to address other issues in the fight against caste-based exploitation. "If you are repeating the same stories all your life, you have either refused to understand the problems or you have failed to solve them," he said.

The women who quit manual scavenging, sought a livelihood. After working considerably on the issue, Ashif decided to launch a campaign for providing skill-based training to the women.

He conducted a consultation in Delhi in September 2013, wherein all stakeholders including representatives from NHRC, and State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM) participated. He decided to address the livelihood problem by generating business opportunities for Dalits. He organised another consultation with business houses such as USHA, and H&M, besides

the SC/ST Finance Corporation. By 2015, Ashif felt that his role in creating the organisation was complete. He conducted a meeting of all the partners, where the strategy for future was to be decided. Eventually, he received answers that varied from increasing the portfolio of work to bringing in more people to effectively handle the projects. An immediate outcome of the meet was the decision to initiate a rehabilitation scheme in Dewas.

Jan Sahas created a sewing programme called Garima Silai Kendra, where all the erstwhile manual scavengers spent a great deal of time learning the art of stitching. Though the women found it difficult initially, with the encouragement of the field staff, they mastered the art. The products are being marketed at exhibitions in Indore, besides being supplied to a regular buyer.

Ashif then brought ITC into Dewas, for setting up an incense stick making unit. This however, did not take off. Other entrepreneurial activities, in addition to education programmes under Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives (APPI) have also been implemented in the last three years.

While exploring the local market spaces for opportunities, Ashif discovered that even if manual scavengers were to set up shops, their products would be considered inferior. So he has decided to approach multinationals and well-known brands to help establish a production base within the community and the necessary market links for the same.

On the personal front

In 2006, Ashif's mother passed away, leaving an indelible impact on his perspectives. He realised that not all problems could be solved in one's lifetime, but one could create a conducive ecosystem. While his mother's death was a blow to him, it was harder for his three younger brothers Adil, Imran and Irfan who were still in school. He supported them in all their endeavours, besides their education. Though he encouraged them to participate in the rallies, they were not aware of his work, since Ashif never discussed it at home. Two of his younger brothers are chartered accountants and one has completed a management degree.

The same year he married Tazub. Though Tazub helped him in Jan Sahas initially, they mutually decided otherwise and she has been working as a manager in Innovation Public School, supported by Jan Sahas. They have two children. Although Ashif is away on work most of the time, his family understands his commitment to his work and does not make any demands on him.

Way forward

According to Ashif, a network of volunteers rather than Jan Sahas, can bring about a change in the society. "A group of women who had faced sexual and other atrocities could act as a strong body and bring the accused to trial, so that their very presence acts as a deterrent for others even to attempt it," he elaborated. "Such network of volunteers within each theme only can bring about a change in the society, not merely the existence of Jan Sahas."

Through a decade-long endeavour, he has been able to bring together a pool of committed social workers who are now ready to be changemakers. Kranti, Sajjan and others, who had themselves once faced atrocities in their childhood and who have been working with Ashif for over a decade now are in a position to handle entire projects on their own.

Ashif delegates work based on thematic programmes. He started engaging with various firms for bringing in business opportunities for manual scavengers whom they had liberated. He connects the women directly to donors so that they can manage their own businesses. By the end of 2015, he was clear that his role in Jan Sahas would be that of an honorary secretary. After he became an Ashoka Fellow in April 2016, he stopped drawing salary from Jan Sahas, and today visits the office for a just a week in a month. Under the fellowship, he plans to come up with a chain of community-based organisations to help the affected liberate themselves from oppression without any external help.

About Ashif Shaikh

- Beginning his work among manual scavengers, Ashif now works for the rights of discriminated people in 15 districts spread across Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh
- His Garima Abhiyan or Campaign for Dignity has freed more than 20,000 women from manual scavenging
- Creates livelihood opportunities for the women liberated from caste-based exploitation
- Extends legal support to those facing discrimination, through a network of lawyers
- The rallies that Jan Sahas organises help create awareness about exploitation, and help resolve many discriminatory practices

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