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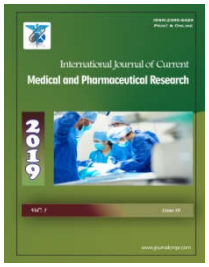

PRESENT PRACTICE OF WASHING BY DHOBI NEAR GANGA IN VARANASI

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ABSTRACT

Background- Dhobi's (washer man) traditional work gives them immunity for livelihood. But washing clothes also bear some health risks, particularly the skin problem. Traditional washing practice is also associated with pollution of water reservoirs specially river Ganga in case of Varanasi.
Methodology-The study was community based cross sectional study on men and women of dhobi (washer man) community present at the time of interview. Purposive sampling was used. Respondent were Dhobi (washer man) community of Ramnagar, a suburban area of Varanasi, India.
Result- 52% respondents encountered medical problem due to washing of clothes. 48% Dhobis had skin problem with chemical while washing clothes and knowledge of study subjects for pollution in river Ganga was 56%.
Conclusion- Problem of health risk may be minimized by shifting Dhobi from their traditional methods of washing and promoting use of washing machine, liquid detergent, dry clean and electric ironing. Micro-financing may help Dhobi in uplifting their standard of living.

INTRODUCTION

Dhobis are recognised by the constitution of India as the Scheduled Caste Community of India but in some part they are put under Other Backward Community (Prasad et al). In our country, their traditional occupation was washing clothes, i.e. laundry. The word dhobi is derived from the Hindi word dhona, which means to wash; Dhobi (English: "washer man"). Their ancestors took the occupation of washing clothes, evolving over time into a distinct caste bound by rules of endogamy. Most Dhobis follow the customs and traditions of the region they live. So for example those in North India speak Hindi, while those in Maharashtra speak Marathi (Bhanu BV et al, 2010). Dhobis in various regions are likely to be of many different ethnic origins. Highlighted caste surnames are Kannaujia, Rajak, Baitha, Safi (saphi). In Uttar Pradesh, the community is strictly endogamous, and practice clan exogamy. Their main clans, known as gotras, are the Ayodhyabas, Belwar, Mathur, Jaiswar, Jaiswal and Belwar (Hasan A et al). The Census of 2001 returned Dhobis representing six per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population (Biswas AK et al, 2013).

Traditionally, the community washed clothes for particular families, and received grain for services from them. But with the growth of the cash economy, most Dhobi are now paid money for their services. A significant number of Dhobis are cultivators, and this is particularly so in western Uttar Pradesh. They live in multi-caste villages, but occupy their own distinct quarters. Each of their settlements contains an informal caste council, known as a Biradari Panchayat. The Panchayat acts as instrument of social control, dealing with issues such as divorce and adultery. The 2011 Census of India for Uttar Pradesh showed the Dhobi population, which was classified as a Scheduled Caste, as 2,432,610 (Scheduled Caste Primary Census Abstract Data, 2011).

Even today largely these communities are engaged in their traditional works like washing and ironing cloths. Even if they migrate to any parts of India, their traditional work give them immunity for livelihood. But, washing clothes also bear some health risks, particularly the skin problem. The health risk depends on the way of washing i.e. use of body parts for washing directly, and this risk is also associated with the type of chemical used for washing. Pollution of rivers, esp. Ganga and other water reservoirs has added another important angle that needs to be explored; because water pollution affects the health status of washer men due to their direct involvement. Not only that common men also get affected in form of skin allergy, diarrhea, respiratory problem etc. Keeping these problems in mind, a study was planned with the following

Objectives

- To study the present socio-economic condition of DHOBI,
- To study the changes in washing practices of DHOBI and their perception regarding pollution of Ganga,

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- To explore the various factors related to washing practices that affect DHOBI's health.

METHODOLOGY

Type of Study- Community based cross sectional study.

Inclusion Criteria

- Men and women of washermen community present at the time of interview.
- Head of Family (HOF) and male were given preference over others.
- Resident of the study area.

Exclusion Criteria

- Washermen not doing the laundry work.
- Not present at the time of interview.

Study Setting- Urban community of Ramnagar, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

Study Area- Machharhatta ward of Ramnagar, Varanasi.

Period of Data Collection: 2 months (June-July, 2019).

Sampling techniques- In this paper Purposive Sampling was used. By using this sampling, first household was selected at random and then other households were selected continuously.

Data collection and Analysis- Data was collected by using interview schedule & observation method. Collected data was entered in MS excel and analyzed in SPSS.

RESULT

Table No. 1 Socio-demographic Information

Characteristics	Number (percentage %)
Age	
21-30	10(20)
31-40	14(28)
41-50	11(22)
51-60	09 (18)
More than 60	05 (10)
Sex	
Male	38(76)
Female	12(24)
Marital Status	
Married	43(86)
Unmarried	2(4)
Divorced	2(4)
Widow	3(6)
Widower	
Education Status	
Illiterate	17(34)
Primary	16(32)
Secondary	6(12)
High School and Above	11(22)
Type of Family	
Joint	29(58
Nuclear	21(42)
Monthly Income	
0-5000	6(12)
5000-10000	29(58)
10000-15000	5(10)
15000 and Above	10(20)

A Total of 50 respondents from Dhobi community were included in the study. In the study most common age group was 31-40 (28%). 76% respondents were male and 24% were female. In this study 86% dhobi were married. Percentage of illiterate respondents was 34%. Education of 22% respondents was high school above. In our study 58% family was joint family. 70% respondents' income was <10000 INR.

Table No 2 Washing Habit of Dhobi

Determinants	Number (percentage %)
Place of washing cloths	
Pond	22(44)
Ganga Site	20(40)
Dhobi Ghats	0(0)
Others	8(16)
Duration as washer man(Ancestral)	
10-20	13(26)
20-30	5(10)
30+	32(64)
Duration as washer man(Individual)	
0-10	2(4)
10-20	37(74)
20-30	11(22)
Contribution of other family member of washing clothes	
Yes	36(72)
No	12(24)
People lost interest in his Traditional work	
Yes	44(88)
No	6(12)

In our study 40% respondents used Ganga site of washing cloth and 64% respondents stated it to be their ancestral work and 74% respondents were involved in washing clothes since 10-20 years. Apart from the respondent, other family members also contributed in washing clothes in 72% of the cases. But gradually, Dhobi community is losing interest in their traditional work (88%).

Table No. 3 Information about River Pollution and Washing Method of Dhobi

Knowledge of pollution in Ganga river	No. (%)
Yes	28(56)
No	22(44)
Knowledge of pollution because of washing clothes near river site	
Yes	30(60)
No	20(40)
Working to minimize river pollution	
Yes	21(42)
No	29(58)
Method of washing	
Traditional	50(100)
Modern	0(0)
Chemicals used of washing cloths	
Only Soap	20(40)
Bleaching	4(8)
Multiple chemicals	26(52)
Effect of new technology on your work	
Yes	42(84)
No	1(2)
Partial	7(14)

56% dhobi had knowledge about pollution in Ganga river. 60% respondents agreed that there is pollution in Ganga because of washing clothes near river site. 42% respondents were working to minimize river pollution, but none of them were using the modern methods of washing. 40% dhobi used soap, while 8% used bleach for washing clothes.

Table 4 Relation of Health Problem with Work and River Pollution

Covariates		Health Problem		P value & Chi Square Value
		Yes	No	
People lost interest in his Traditional work	**Yes**	20(40)	24(48)	0.12(6.29)
	No	6(12)	0(0)	
Working to minimize river pollution	**Yes**	15(30)	6(12)	0.019(15.47)
	No	11(22)	18(36)	

Significantly higher number Dhobis (20 vs 6) lost interest in their traditional work due to health problem. Those who had health problem, more number of dhobi were working to minimize the river pollution as compared to disease free respondents (57.6% vs 25%).

Table No 5 Medical Problems Related to Washing

Medical problem encounter due to washing of clothes	No. (%)
Yes	26(52)
No	24(48)
Skin problem with chemical while using clothes	
Yes	24(48)
No	26(52)

52% dhobi faced medical problem due to washing clothes and 48% dhobi faced skin problem with chemical while using for washing of clothes.

Table No. 6 Income related to Washing of Clothes

Increase in cost of washing after prohibition of washing on bank of Ganges	No. (%)
Yes	12(24)
No	32(64)
Partial	6(12)
Family Income other than washing	
Yes	22(44)
No	28(56)

64% dhobi did not accept that there is increase in cost of washing after prohibition of washing on bank of Ganges while 56% dhobi did not have income other than washing.

DISCUSSION

Services of Dhobi have been as central to Indian life as those of its farmers, politicians and Brahman priests. Irony is that, in India many people consider them untouchable outcastes who have been despised and shunned. Most of them followed their ancestral work, because this gave them the economic security. But, modernity is intruding on tradition, and for the first time, India's Dhobis see their livelihood, and their very existence, threatened. The villain creeping relentlessly into middle class homes is the automatic washing machine (Edward A. Gargan, 1993). Traditional way of washing by chemicals and detergents added another angle i.e. the medical problem, esp. skin diseases. Varanasi, the holy city for Hindus and the city in which the Ganges is worshipped, demanded shifting of Dhobi's traditional place of washing. These socio-environmental factors affected the Dhobi's socio-economic condition in modern days.

Our respondents were dhobi community of Machharhatta locality of Ramanagar, Varanasi. 70% respondents were from 21-50 years age group. Illiteracy among respondents was 34%, which is exactly the same illiteracy level among SC community of India (33.3%) and it is somewhat lower than the illiteracy level in UP (39.11%) (Scheduled Castes Population Census, 2011). Lower level of illiteracy as compared to the SC community in UP may be due the reason that Ramnagar is a suburban area of Varanasi and education facility may be more accessible as compared to rural area of UP.

Ganga Action Plan was launched on June, 1987 and a drive was started to minimize the pollution of Ganga (Ganga Action Plan, 1987). Realizing the religious and environmental importance of Ganga; Project "Namami Gange" was launched in June, 2014 (Namami Gange Programme, 2014). This led to prohibition on washing clothes on banks of Ganga. In effect, the practice of washing clothes on the bank of Ganga decreased to 40%. Although this figure is also not acceptable, but closeness to Ganga Ghat (~1 KM) and limited availability of alternative washing facility may be the reason of incomplete withdrawal of practice of washing clothes on Ganga ghat. There has been effort from government and non-government agencies to provide washing points to Dhobis in Varanasi as disclosed in personal discussion. Nadesar, Bhelupur, Konia, Ramnagar are some of the examples of washing points in Varanasi.

Mean duration of ancestral washing practice was 17.33 years in our study, which needs to be analyzed in relation with chemicals used for washing and their general health condition. Because these factors may be the reason for their disease. In 72% of cases other family members were also involved in the practice of washing clothes. Economic security provided by washing and ironing may be the main reason for this. In this study average monthly family income reported was 14,160 INR. Actual income may be higher than this, because it is the usual tendency in classical Indian society to underreport their family income.

One worrying finding is that 88% respondents are losing interest in their traditional work. Health problem is the significant reason behind this (p value = 0.012). In the same line, another significant relation is of health problem and river pollution. Significantly higher number of respondents (15 vs 6, p =0.019) were working to minimize the river pollution. All the Dhobis were using the traditional methods of washing. Problem of health risks may be minimized by shifting the Dhobis from their traditional methods of washing to modern methods of washing; like using washing machine, liquid detergent, dry cleaning and electrical ironing. Micro-financing may help Dhobis in uplifting their standard of living.

More than half of respondents (52%) complained of medical problem related to washing. Skin problem was the most common (48% of total) medical problem encountered. Cause of the skin problem may be the detergent and chemicals used for washing of clothes by hand. It has already been mentioned that all the respondents used the traditional way of washing. Medical problem can be minimized by shifting towards the new technology of washing and this is the need of the hour, also. Because 84% of dhobi's opined that their work has been affected by coming of new technology. Although, it is a good thing in terms of income that 44% families has alternative source of income.

In a nutshell, it may be said that washing clothes is the need of each and every individual. Keeping this fact in mind, this area has big potential for economic growth and can improve the quality of life of a substantial chunk of people of our society. Micro financing has the pivotal role in changing the life of traditional Dhobis. Certainly, there is medical problem, esp. skin problem, which is affecting the life of Dhobis. But this problem may be minimized by using modern technology of washing as well as shifting the washing place to planned dhobi ghat. This will minimize the pollution of Ganga, also. Need not to be mentioned that place of Ganga is more than a river in our society.

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