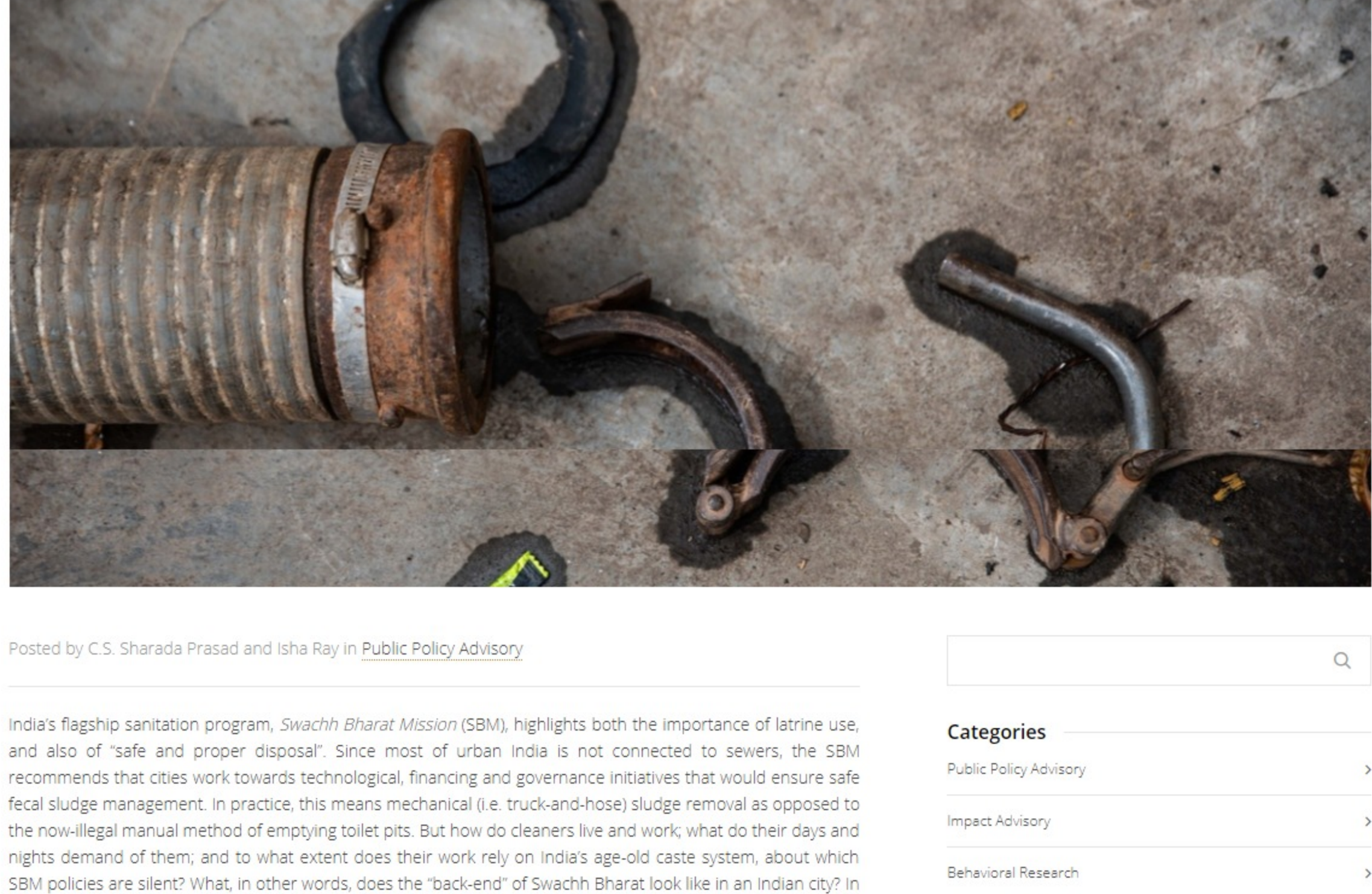
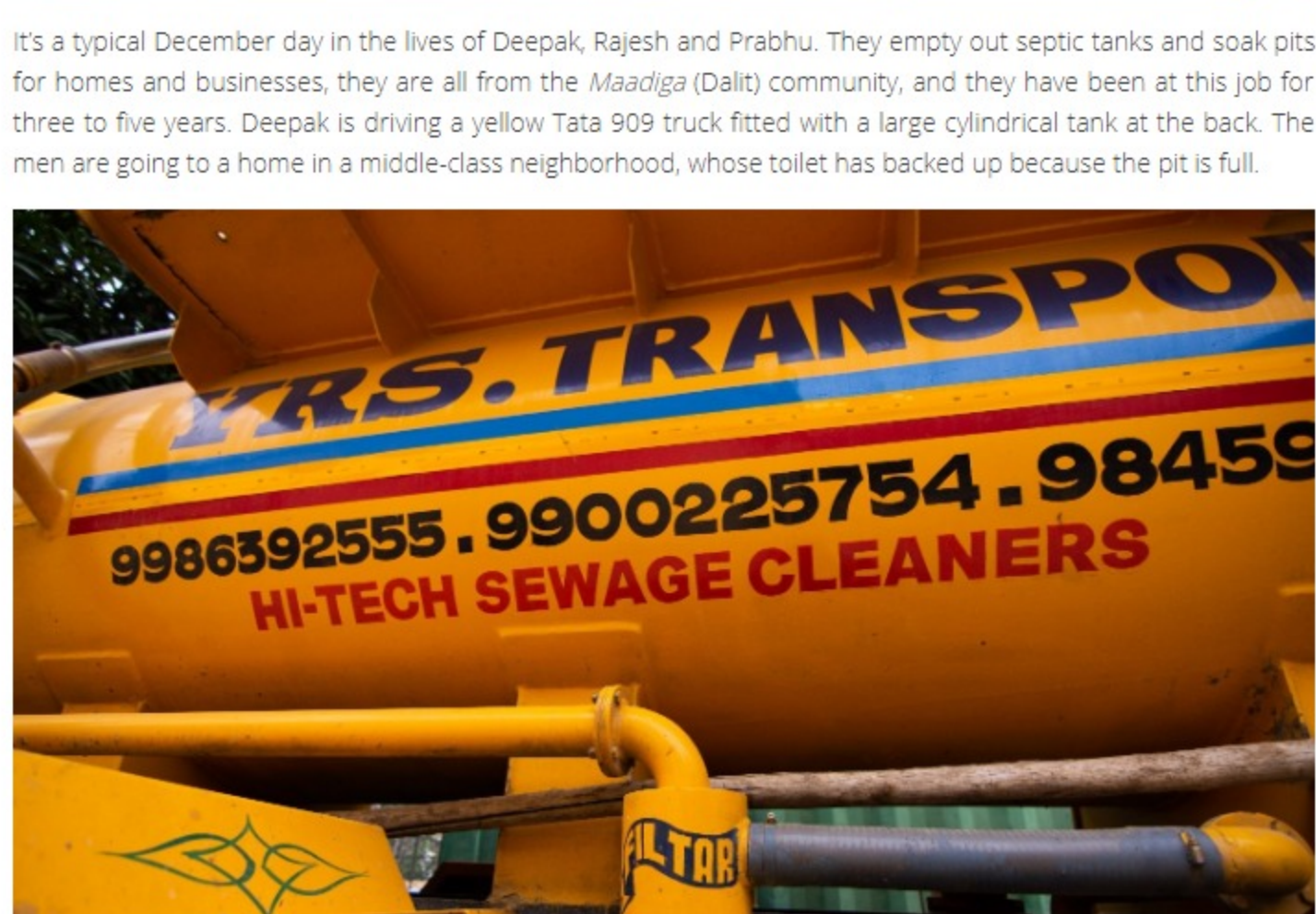


When the Pits Fill Up: A Day in the Life of Sanitation Workers in Urban India



Posted by C.S. Sharada Prasad and Isha Ray in Public Policy Advisory

India's flagship sanitation program, Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), highlights both the importance of latrine use, and also of 'safe and proper disposal'. Since most of urban India is not connected to sewers, the SBM recommends that cities work towards technological, financing and governance initiatives that would ensure safe fecal sludge management. In practice, this means mechanical (i.e. truck-and-hose) sludge removal as opposed to the now-illegal manual method of emptying toilet pits. But how do cleaners live and work, what do their days and nights demand of them, and to what extent does their work rely on India's age-old caste system, about which SBM policies are silent? While, in other words, does the 'back-end' of Swachh Bharat look like an Indian city? In this photo-essay we trace the flow of waste from pit to dump in urban India, making visible the labor that produces the sanitary city.<sup>1</sup>



It's a typical December day in the lives of Deepak, Rajesh and Prabhu. They empty out septic tanks and soak pits for homes and businesses, they are all from the MaaDiga (Dalit) community, and they have been at this job for three to five years. Deepak is driving a yellow Tata 909 truck, fitted with a large cylindrical tank at the back. The men are going to a home in a middle-class neighborhood, whose toilet has backed up because the pit is full.



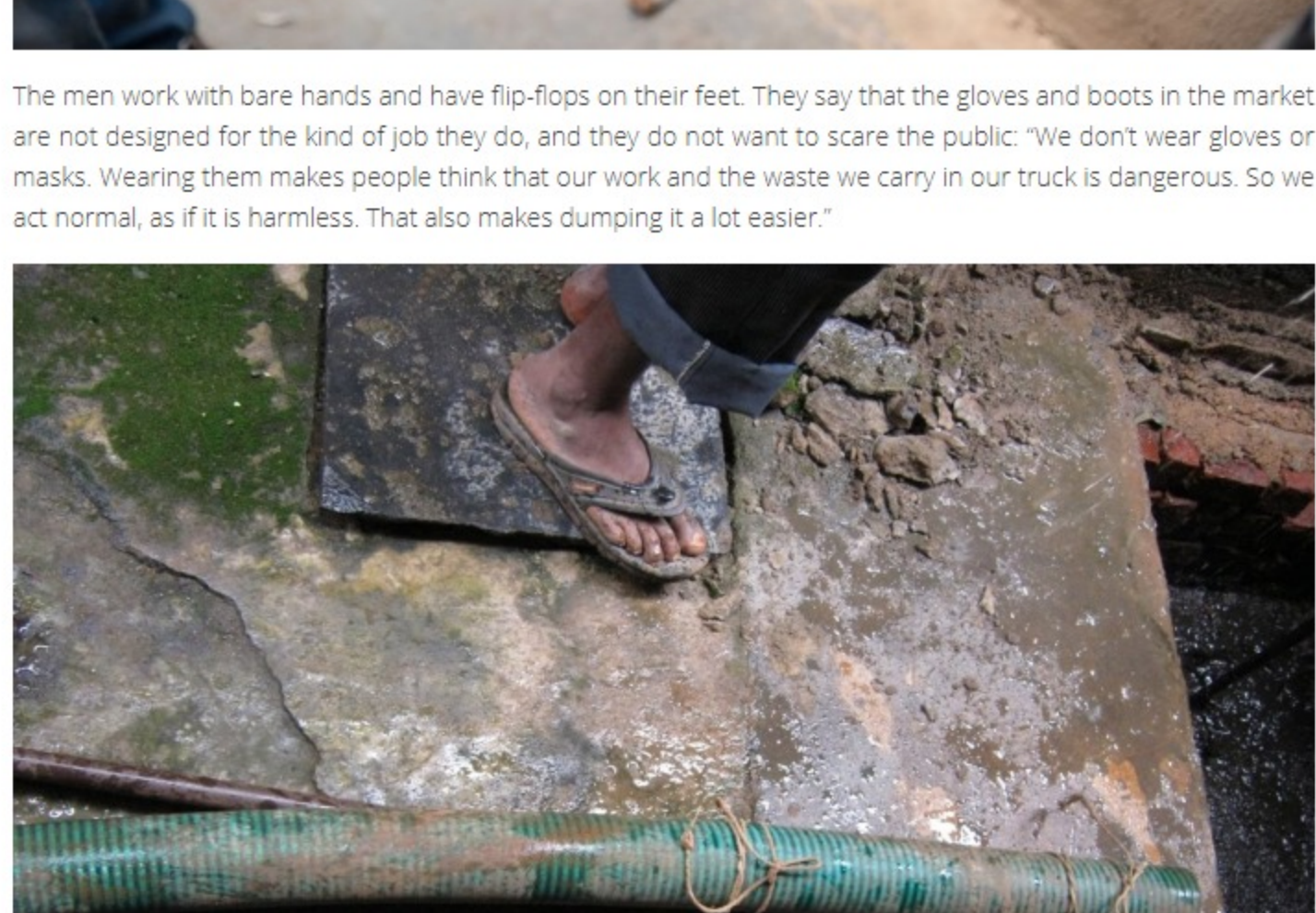
It's not hard for a homeowner to find an emptying service when he needs one. Truck owners paint the name and number of the service in large font and bright colors on the holding tanks and on city walls; the drivers carry business cards; they park at busy intersections where they can easily be seen while waiting for a service call. Flyers are distributed with the daily newspapers; the Yellow Pages carry advertisements.



When the truck reaches the home, Rajesh and Prabhu jump out and try to locate the pit; it is covered by a concrete slab and is under a foot of soil. They find the slab and try to open to insert the hose. The other end of the hose is attached to a vacuum pump. On Prabhu's signal Deepak starts the truck engine, which gets the pump started. In a few minutes, the pit is empty. Prabhu and Rajesh work quickly to coil the hose back on the hook attached to the tank.



The crucial part of this business is dumping the sludge, and it isn't easy to find discreet dumping spots. Deepak says that Prabhu is an expert at finding suitable spots, but Prabhu modestly demurs. He just gets lucky, he says. Open and dry spots in the periphery of the city are always good, he explains, the soil dries fast and doesn't hold the smell for long.



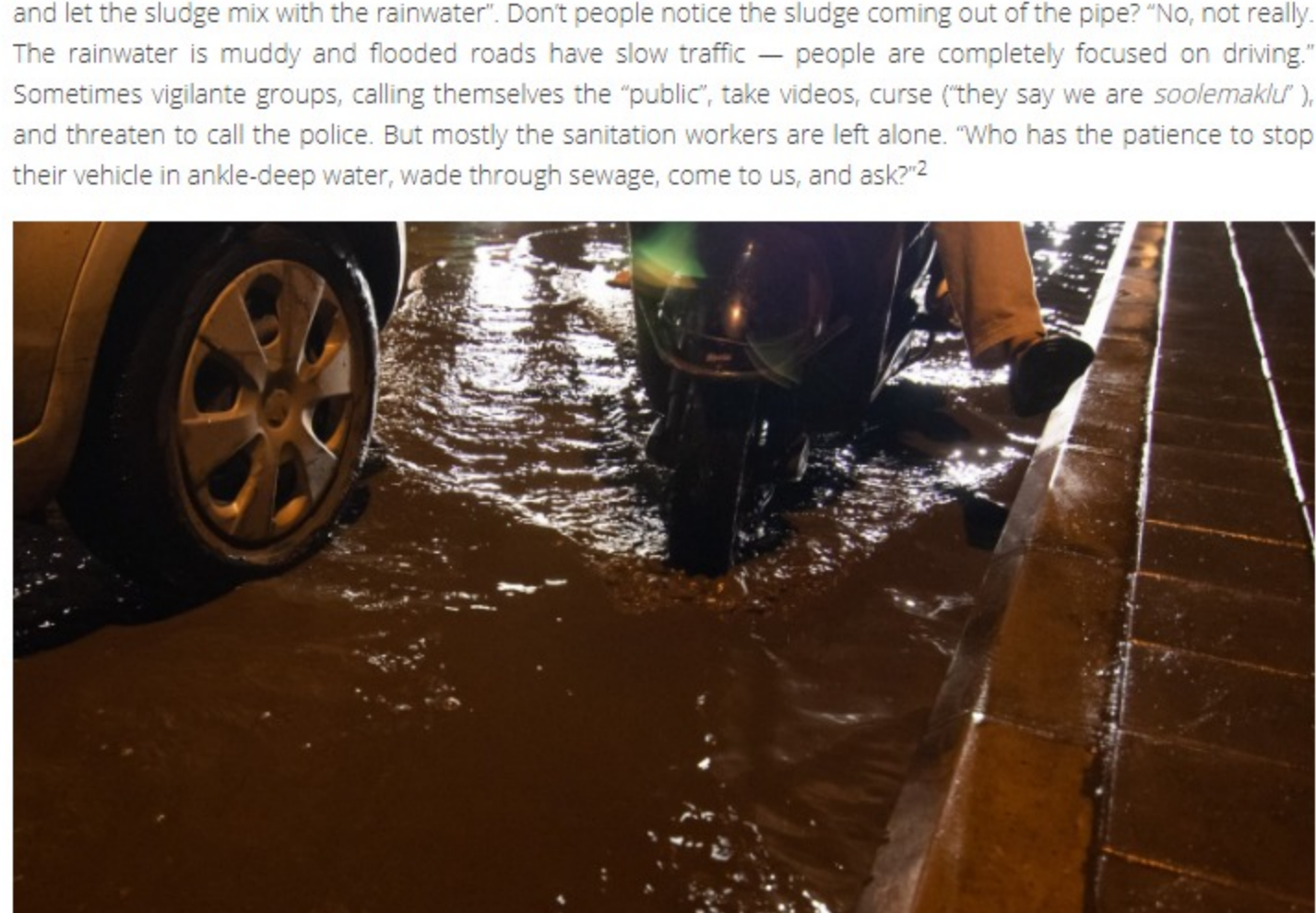
The large storm water drains that carry water out of the city – kaji kullu – already carry sewage, and the main sewer lines can also be accessed from side alleys where they can easily be seen while waiting for a service call. Open and dry spots in the periphery of the city are always good, he explains, the soil dries fast and doesn't hold the smell for long.



Rainy days are the best but rainy drains are even better. "We find a road that is flooded," says Deepak. "We park the truck, attach a short pipe to the drain valve and lower it just enough to submerge it, then we open the valve and let the sludge mix with the rainwater." Don't people notice the sludge coming out of the pipe? "No, not really. The rainwater is muddy and flooded roads have slow traffic — people are completely focused on driving." Sometimes vigilante groups, calling themselves the "public" take videos, curse ("they say we are pollutionist"), and threaten to call the police. But mostly the sanitation workers are left alone. "Who has the patience to stop their vehicle in ankle-deep water, wade through sewage, come to us, and ask?"



This morning it's not raining and the truck stops right in front of an open drain outside the city proper. Rajesh and Prabhu connect the PVC pipe to the draining end of the tank and open the valve. In eight minutes, gravity empties the tank.



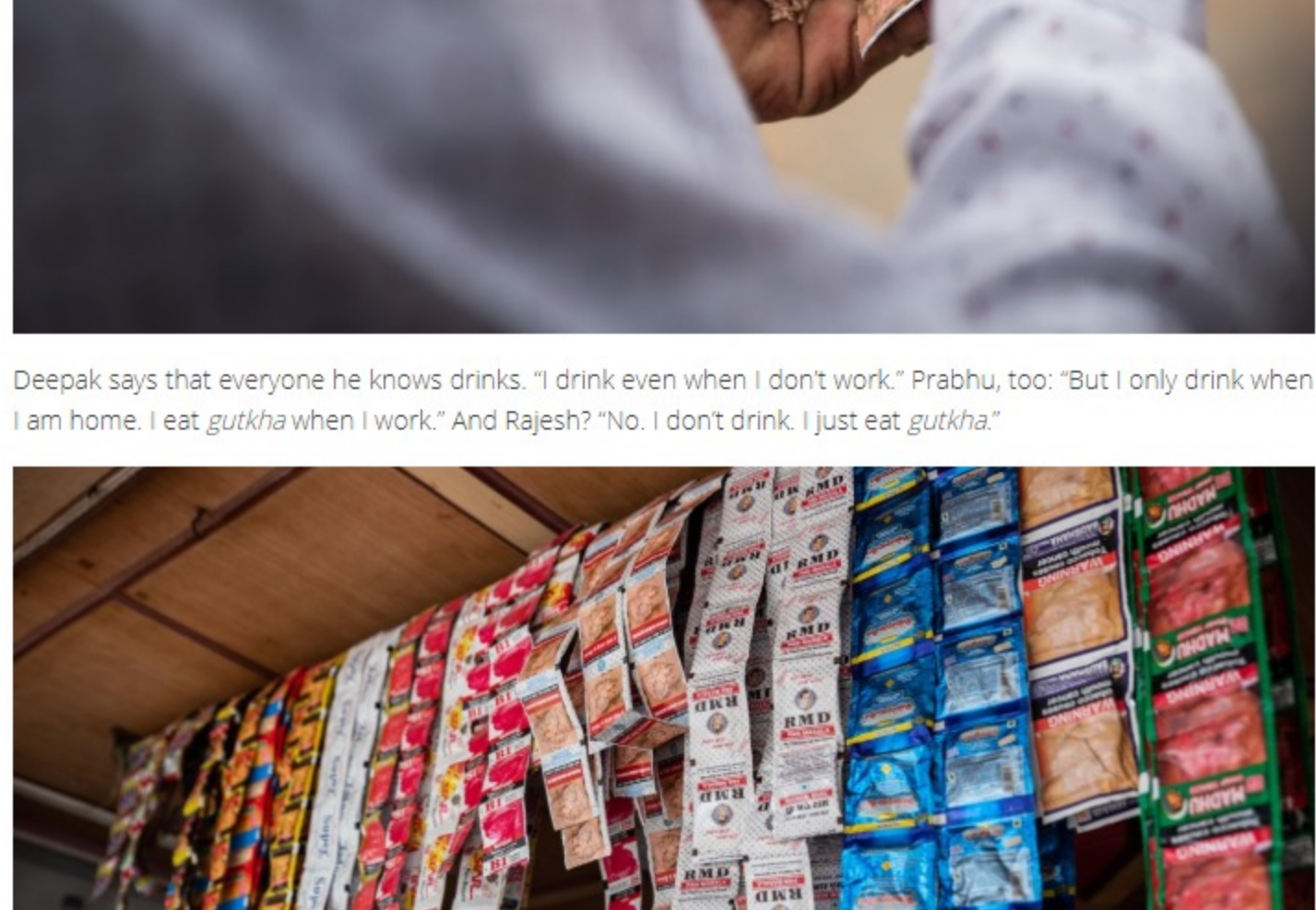
The next stop is the septic tank of one of India's best known companies. That tank is large – 8 to 10 trips would be needed to empty it, if a man isn't careful he could fall into the pool of sludge and die. Cleaners do, every year. Rajesh connects the end of the pipe to the pump. Prabhu ties a five-foot long iron bar to the end of the pipe and submerges it into the sludge. The bar acts as a mixer. Deepak starts up the pump and the truck tank fills up in about 12 minutes. Then the men are out on the road with the first load of sludge. No one has washed his hands.



Once the third load has been dumped into an open drain, Deepak takes a swig of whiskey, Rajesh and Prabhu share a packet of gutkha.<sup>2</sup>



Deepak says that everyone he knows drinks. "I drink even when I don't work." Prabhu, too. "But I only drink when I am home. I eat gutkha when I work." And Rajesh? "No, I don't drink. I just eat gutkha."<sup>3</sup>



The men are almost done with emptying the fourth load of sludge when a police jeep passes and stops. Deepak gets out and walks towards the jeep. In a couple of minutes Deepak is back. "The police want their share," he sounds matter-of-fact. "We pay them the 'mamool' when they see us or when we go home past the police station."<sup>4</sup>



Urgent calls are answered during the day, pretty much all day; the cleaners start, but certain pre-arranged cleanings are done during the night. Elite hotels, especially, want the septic tanks cleaned at night; they do not want their guests to see or smell the operations. Tonight the men have been called in by a "large, posh" hotel. "People pay Rs. 10,000 (\$135 USD) per day to stay in the hotel, and their shit smells just like everybody else's," says Prabhu. He thinks it will be almost 5am before the men can go home.

Suctioning fecal waste via a hose and pump is progress over manual scavenging in which feces are cleaned using hand-held tools and carried away in a cart. It's risky work that they also know that the job of working with sludge is still left to a sub-section of Dalits. It's risky work, they are disgusted by the waste they handle, they need alcohol and opioids to numb the senses. There is no protection, there are no benefits. But they agreed, there is a small measure of job security. "The job security we have is our caste. Other castes will not do this work."<sup>5</sup>



1. This photo-essay is not a product of one specific day in one specific city but is a composite illustration of the several days and evenings that Sharada Prasad spent with truck operators in Bangalore, Dhanwad and Guntur. A detailed recouping of their work can be found in [Economic Subalternities in Rural India: Re-thinking](#) (2015).  
 2. Gutkha is a mix of areca nuts, seeds, herbs and tobacco. It produces a "buzz" when chewed.  
 3. Suleemakali in Kannada, "sons of ullores".  
 4. Mamool in Kannada, "the usual".

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About C.S. Sharada Prasad and Isha Ray

ATHENA INFONOMICS  
 This is a guest blog entry for Athena. C.S. Sharada Prasad, the photographer, is a PhD student at the Energy & Resources Group, University of California, Berkeley. Isha Ray is an Associate Professor at the Energy & Resources Group and Co-Director of the Berkeley Water Center.

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