



**IDC** School of Design  
अभिकल्प विद्यालय

# The Untold Story of Sanitation Workers

Under the guidance of prof. Sudesh Balan

DEP406 Design Project 2 by

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this written document represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas and words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the sources.

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## **Project approval**

The project titled “The Untold Story of Sanitation Workers” by Subhalakshmi Govindaraj of BDes 2016-20, is approved for partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of ‘Bachelor of Design’ at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay.

Guide:

Chairperson:

Internal Examiner:

External Examiner:

Date:

## **Acknowledgement**

This project would not have been possible without the constant inputs and support of many people.

I would like to thank Prof. Sudesh Balan for his constant support and expert guidance at every stage of the project. He helped me open my mind to various avenues possible and also prompted me to explore and think beyond which once I believed to be beyond my scope. His support in all forms is invaluable in this entire project. I thank Prof. Phani Tetali for his constant support and motivation. I also thank All the faculty from VC for guiding me throughout the course of this project.

I am also very thankful to R. Aswin Yogesh, G.S. Pradeep (IDC VC Alumni), Richa Agrawal, Pranjal Meena, Sowmya Ravichandran and Naveen Shaji for their extensive support, motivation and inputs which helped me see a better path.

Lastly, my parents and sister for constantly supporting me and encouraging me to always do better.

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## **Abstract**

Sanitation workers play an important role in society and yet, they are poorly paid and unrecognised. Waste is an unavoidable by-product of the increasing population in this world. While many countries have given importance to the lives of the people working in Sanitation departments, India is not considered to be one of them. Hence, this **project is my attempt at spreading awareness about the struggles of Sanitation workers.** Using Podcast as a medium of storytelling I aim to bring about a social change.

## Introduction

**Sanitation workers** provide an essential public service around the world. But did you know the hazardous conditions threaten the lives of sanitation workers in low or middle- income countries? In India, one sanitation worker dies every 5 days.<sup>1</sup> Without them, we would neither be able to live peacefully nor healthy. But, we barely even notice them. Are we not used to closing our mouth and nose when we cross a sewer? Then, how are we comfortable letting men work barefoot in there? Is that not turning a blind towards our fellow citizens? Globally, 673 million people openly defecate while a further 881 million have toilets that do not “hygienically separate human waste from contact with people.”<sup>2</sup> Known as “frogmen,” “sweepers,” or “scavengers,” sanitation workers provide an essential public service by emptying septic tanks, unblocking sewers, and cleaning toilets.

**Ragpickers** might not always enter the sewer and unclog drains, but they face a whole other range of issues. Be it picking up Human’s faeces or Dog’s, Orphaned Human Dead body or a cat’s, they are responsible for cleaning them up to provide a clean city for us. While they do that every day, they do not have an identity of their own. They are not being provided ID cards, nor do they have a contract signed to claim any benefits. They are being labelled as a **Dalit** sanitation worker or someone who cleans the toilet. These identities stay with them all through their lives. And this is why they cannot escape this life, once you get in, there’s no way anyone can get out. Being labelled for life also has many consequences apart from the eminent danger of death. Even if you do get out seeking another job to run their family, not many people are considerate enough to give jobs to people who once

cleaned our streets and common toilets in our cities. More than being labelled as Dalit workers, the worst comes when they are termed as untouchables who has been exposed to lots of chemicals, impurities and bacterias. They are still being treated as untouchables who are supposed to work under us. The waste pickers in Chennai mostly belong to communities like Narikurava from **Scheduled tribes** (constitutes 7.8 % of the Indian population), some from the **Scheduled Caste**.<sup>2</sup> They face **discrimination** in the form of not being allowed inside restaurants to dine in and sometimes serving tea and coffee in plastic cups instead of glass while everyone pays the same amount of money.

## TOP DEFINITION

### Sanitation worker

noun; Sanitation work includes emptying toilets, pits and septic tanks; entering manholes and sewers to fix or unblock them; transporting faecal waste; working in treatment plants; as well as cleaning public toilets or defecation around homes and businesses.<sup>3</sup>

## EXAMPLES OF ACCIDENTS INVOLVING SANITATION WORKERS

### Sanitation worker

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Two **sanitation workers** died and one was hospitalised after they inhaled toxic gases while cleaning a manhole in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam

From Mirror Now

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Particularly in India and Bangladesh, **sanitation worker** is seen as a job for members of the Dalit caste

From Devex

## Project Introduction

### Why podcast?

This project aimed at understanding the story behind the struggles and death of the sanitation workers. I intend to tell the ~~un~~ told story of the sanitation workers and how people generally turn a blind eye to them.

This is a sensitive topic, which might ask the hard questions about something called “you-know-what” or “That which should not be named” or simply how every single government still oppresses Dalits in almost every corner in the country by making them work in sewers under the control of municipal corporation. Sensitive topics can also be complex, and complex stories require a simple narration to convey the message. Podcasts are intimate, and a good oral narrative will tap into the emotions of the audience and

allow them to relate and empathize with the message much more than facts and figures alone. Humans have a tendency to be driven by their emotions. According to Jane Praeger, a strategic storytelling professor at Columbia University's Strategic Communications and Communications Practice program, “[We] like to believe we are logical, but in fact, we use data and facts to post-rationalize the decisions our emotions have already driven us to make.”<sup>4</sup> We are getting busier every passing day and we like to consume content all the time. The knowledge available from a podcast is vast. Historically, storytelling was always a way of passing on knowledge, some people still grow up listening to stories narrated by their elders. **By podcast, we have the opportunity to learn information on the go.**

## **Evolution from film to Podcast**

The project initially started with a film that tells the story that we all have heard through conventional media- The struggles of Sanitation workers. We hear lots of stories, read lots of news, but there is barely any action taken. Maybe that is because we do not know the depth of the issues. We know our fellow citizens face discrimination every day, but do we do something about it? The answer would probably be "No". Even if we do realise that we discriminate against daily, by shunning them into separate groups of 'untouchable' people, not many of us know the depth of each person's story. The final narrative aimed at tapping the emotional side of the viewer to provoke an action.

Keeping the feasibility of the project during the 2020 Global pandemic in mind, shooting necessary

videos and interviewing people personally was a challenge. This evolved into the found footage film idea. Found footage is a sub-genre that I found interesting while looking up options to execute this film. While many know found- footage films to be famous among the horror genre, it could also help a struggling film-maker who intends to finish a film during a lockdown of 2 months, given that there were no copyright issues. Executing the final narrative with existing videos and phone interviews seemed doable but it also posed a major challenge- copyright issues. With phone interviews and the final narrative in place, finding appropriate copyright-free videos was difficult. While I got permission for 1/4th of videos, getting in touch with 65 content creators was an issue.

Keeping the limitations in mind and the sensitivity of the topic, I aimed for the traditional audio storytelling method which now evolved to Podcasts with the help of modern technology. The film was majorly intended to be audio dependent. With the interviews and the ambience noise, it gives a rich narrative people could listen to.

## **Why documentary podcast?**

But what exactly is a documentary podcast? They tell true stories through a heavily produced / polished style consisting of music, many interviews and tight editing that feels like a documentary film.<sup>5</sup> This could also be referred to as the clichéd documentary with interviews, but it also has added audio elements, like news broadcasts and environmental sounds to enhance the experience.

This form of a documentary has given me the freedom to explore audio elements. The limitations of having to work with only sounds provide a path to use grabs of existing interviews, ambient sound, phone conversations, etc.

## **How did i do it?**

### **Data Collection**

Researching for this project required a lot of contacts and communication skills. The research included interviews with ragpickers from Chennai and Neyveli, sanitation inspector- Chennai Corporation, references from BBC Documentary podcasts, short films and news footages on sanitation worker's plight.

The project started with a simple idea of me telling a story about the struggles of Sanitation workers. While I have personally noticed how they are not given any protective equipment like gloves or boots, or how they have to get inside a sewer lines and septic tanks after the residents file a complain to the Chennai corporation, I wanted to educate myself with more facts and stories. Many activists and speakers like Dr. Suraj Yengde, Devdutt Patnaik

talk about how Caste system and Varna systems have affected till this date, and I try to explore how manual scavenging is connected to our caste systems. Personally after the interviews and secondary research one main insight is that not all lower caste people are suffering these days, some have proved themselves by coming out of poverty and educating themselves. While not all lower caste people suffer from poverty and find themselves working as a sanitatin worker, the majority of sanitation workers belong to the lower caste community. While the Government passed a law which abolished Manual scavenging in 2013, we can still find news and stories of how people die while inhaling toxic gases inside septic tanks and man holes.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE PROHIBITION OF EMPLOYMENT AS MANUAL SCAVENGERS AND THEIR REHABILITATION ACT, 2013 <sup>7</sup>**

Provided that a water flush latrine in a railway passenger coach, when cleaned by an employee with the help of such devices and using such protective gear, as the Central Government may notify in this behalf, shall not be deemed to be an insanitary latrine.

(f) “local authority” means,—

(i) a Municipality or a Panchayat, as defined in clause (e) and clause (f) of article 243P of the Constitution, which is responsible for sanitation in its area of jurisdiction;

(ii) a Cantonment Board constituted under section 10 of the Cantonments Act, 2006 (41 of 2006); and

(iii) a railway authority;

(g) “manual scavenger” means a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the Central Government or a State Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed, and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be construed accordingly.

*Explanation.*—For the purpose of this clause,—

(a) “engaged or employed” means being engaged or employed on a regular or contract basis;

(b) a person engaged or employed to clean excreta with the help of such devices and using such protective gear, as the Central Government may notify in this behalf, shall not be deemed to be a ‘manual scavenger’;

## THE PROHIBITION OF EMPLOYMENT AS MANUAL SCAVENGERS AND THEIR REHABILITATION ACT, 2013 <sup>7</sup>

**13. Rehabilitation of persons identified as manual scavengers by a Municipality.**—(1) Any person included in the final list of manual scavengers published in pursuance of sub-section (6) of section 11 or added thereto in pursuance of sub-section (3) of section 12, shall be rehabilitated in the following manner, namely:—

(a) he shall be given, within one month,—

(i) a photo identity card, containing, *inter alia*, details of all members of his family dependent on him, and

(ii) such initial, one time, cash assistance, as may be prescribed;

(b) his children shall be entitled to scholarship as per the relevant scheme of the Central Government or the State Government or the local authorities, as the case may be;

(c) he shall be allotted a residential plot and financial assistance for house construction, or a ready-built house, with financial assistance, subject to eligibility and willingness of the manual scavenger, and the provisions of the relevant scheme of the Central Government or the State Government or the concerned local authority;

(d) he, or at least one adult member of his family, shall be given, subject to eligibility and willingness, training in a livelihood skill, and shall be paid a monthly stipend of not less than three thousand rupees, during the period of such training;

(e) he, or at least one adult member of his family, shall be given, subject to eligibility and willingness, subsidy and concessional loan for taking up an alternative occupation on a sustainable basis, in such manner as may be stipulated in the relevant scheme of the Central Government or the State Government or the concerned local authority;

(f) he shall be provided such other legal and programmatic assistance, as the Central Government or State Government may notify in this behalf.

(2) The District Magistrate of the district concerned shall be responsible for rehabilitation of each manual scavenger in accordance with the provisions of sub-section (1) and the State Government or the District Magistrate concerned may, in addition, assign responsibilities in his behalf to officers subordinate to the District Magistrate and to officers of the concerned Municipality.

## Insights

Ideally the waste received by the sanitation workers should be segregated between degradable, debris and plastic waste. But all they find are so many garbage bins overflowed with glass, medical waste by common people, dog faeces, and other harmful substances.

Though the government implies that manual scavenging is abolished under the act of Prohibition of employment as manual scavengers, they found a loophole, they are not called manual scavengers anymore but are called sanitation workers.

Subcastes like Thotti Paraiyar, Adi Andhra, Mathika, Maala, Mathari, Chakkiliyar, Adi dravidar, Kaatu Nayakar, Kuravar, Poyer, Pallar from Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes including the urban

poor population formed due to Capitalism are the people who are forced into this cruel injustice.

Unavailability of toilets is one of the reason why people are forced into cleaning up human faeces which in turn leads to many health disorders. But building common toilets does not stop the problem. Swachh Bharath 2014 - 2019 has been an initiative which aims at eliminating open defecation and improve Solid Waste Management. While it has provided many good initiatives like building common toilets and private toilets in few homes in rural areas, it does not reduce the load for the Sanitation workers.<sup>8</sup> Common toilets have led to worse situations like cleaning up clogged toilets every single day as a routine which are filled with human faeces and vomits.

## Interviews

Interviews were one of the main sources for research. The method used was mostly telephonic interviews and a couple of one to one interviews. A total of 8 people were interviewed, which included 2 Sanitation inspectors and 3 sanitation workers from Chennai Corporation Zone 13, 2 one to one interview with permanent employees since 1999 from Neyveli Lignite Corporation and 1 sanitation worker ( mostly manual scavenger ) from Cuddalore Municipality. Some interview question and their answers;

### ***Do you have to clean human faeces on a daily basis?***

*"They just say it for namesake that you do not have to touch human faeces or clean it with bare hands, but*

*even if you are termed as ragpickers, you have to eventually clean it up because the garbage that is thrown out, pretty much contains a lot of human waste."*

*"There is no guarantee that you will not have to clean up human faeces, everyone has to eventually do it."*

*"Some areas are so poor that they don't have toilets in their houses. And the government does nothing about it. Swachh Bharat has been a mission to eradicate open defecation, but nothing has changed since then. All of them openly defaecate in the roads. Or they will do it in paper or a plastic cover and throw it on the road. Be it cleaning up excreta from a toilet or clean up sewer lines, there will be hazardous gases, and we all still suffer from it. "*

***How did you start doing this job?***

*"The other caste people would not be ready to do the same work, no matter how much money they are offered for it. They might even beg for money on the streets, but they will never do this. It has been branded as our responsibility by the society. It is very difficult for us to gain respect within the society too. Our poverty is being exploited for their comfort."*

***Are you not scared of contracting diseases?***

*"Sometimes, medical waste is thrown away directly after treatment without caring about hygiene and safety. We have to handle it all with our bare hands. They don't give us any protective equipments. They did once, but they took it away after they clicked pictures."*

***What are some difficulties you face on a daily basis?***

*"Whether its an animal which dies or a human who dies, we are the ones who are supposed to clean after and handle the corpses. Whatever dies in this area, we are the only people who are responsible."*

*"Once there was a dead pig and they asked me to clean it, I went there to clean it up, I assumed it had died only then, but it was so shocking to see that the pig was rotting with worms and insects feeding on its body. We weren't even given any protective equipment. We just used a paper to cover our hands, and picked up the rotting pig and cleared up the road. We can't just put them in the dustbin because they say it can be hazardous to people in and around the area, and I guess it is not hazardous to us! Even if we do question the authorities, they tell us that 'it is part of your job, we*

*can't hire other people to do this job separately, you came to this job knowing you would have to face this, so stop complaining."*

*"I still remember, there are so many instances where we have vomited on the spot after looking at dead animal corpses. We couldn't eat for one whole day. Even now, sometimes, whenever we look at human faeces or remember dead animals, we can't eat peacefully." there will be hazardous gases, and we all still suffer from it. "*

#### ***Have you ever heard of Manual scavenging?***

*"They ask us to enter the sewer canal, and we are scared to do that because there are snakes inside them. The supervisor tells us that we don't have any other option. And if still question it, they fire us from our jobs. Since*

*we are not permanent employees, it becomes easy for them to throw us out. Human cleaning another human's excreta only happens in India. It still happens in India, and you can see for yourself, just last week I entered into this drain and cleaned it with my bare hands while standing immersed up to my neck in the sludge. It stinks so badly that we can't eat properly for a couple of days. We have separate plates for ourselves and don't let our kids eat from them, because we don't want them to catch any diseases from us. In Covid times, you try to distance yourself from others to not contract diseases, that has been our lives overall. "*

*"We try to clean up the streets early in the morning, before anyone wakes up so that they don't have to deal with the smell or the sight of human faeces. We are the ones to clean up septic tanks and open sewer canals along the city roads. We have to clean it up with*

*alluminium plates or hands because they don't provide any equipment for that. "*

***Are you a permanent employee? How much do you get paid?***

*"We just have a daily wage of Rs 224. Would you be able manage with that meagre amount? Even if we have a salary of 6000 per month, we only receive 4500-5000. What can we do with that money?"*

*" We don't have any identity card or proper salary, but we would be exploited to do all the work. It has been 1.5 months since we received our salary. We feel as though they aren't ready to pay it from the way they respond to our queries."*

*"They are grabbing money from poor women who are*

*already suffering a lot. We have so many troubles like not having the money to pay house rent. They would not listen or understand about what we go through. I don't even have money to pay the hospital fees for my kid. "*

*"We ask them to calculate it properly and give it to us but they don't take it seriously. What do we eat otherwise? Do you want us to eat mud? We have been working for them for 6 years. Shouldn't we have a record of it? But they tear up and clear all records of us having worked there. If we question them, they say that it is a contract job, the contract is over and ask us to leave."*

## Design Process

Finalising on the narrative was comparatively easier than trying to juggle between audio and video.

I wanted to spread awareness by telling the story. And this vision became stronger and stronger after each interviews and it was to shed light on how discrimination still prevails in India even if the people from the upper-class bubble think otherwise. **This project is my attempt at spreading awareness about the struggles of Sanitation workers.**

After inetrviews and primary research, it was all about getting the facts right, putting the narration in place and trying to refer to experts and their views about the topic. This project idea evolved from a documentray film to a found footage film

and finally to a Documentary podcast.

This project is purely to spread awareness and just to share what I have learnt and hope people act on this

It initially started to be in the Tamil language. The video contained news clips, interview videos in Chennai, interview audios, interview questions, narration, etc in Tamil. In order to reach a much larger audience, adding subtitles in a video would be helpful, but when it comes to an audio podcast, the common language of English is being used.

Phone interviews, interviewer's questions, narration and other complimenting audios are either in English or is being translated from Tamil to English for a better reach.

## References

**Kakoos - a documentary film;**<sup>9</sup> A searing film on manual scavenging by documentary filmmaker Divya Bharathi which tells the untold story of manual scavengers. Shot in the 21st century, it tries to expose the injustice which is still prevailing in India. With a run-time of 1 hour 49 minutes, this movie was intended to challenge the caste system, the manual scavenger's everyday plight and the mysterious deaths of sanitation workers. This film tells you the absolute truth. From facts and statistics to stories across Tamil Nadu, you will find it all. It exposes caste trap and government in lieu of manual scavengers. It also deals with a lot of other issues. The right amount of story with the right amount of facts, this documentary was brilliance. The uncensored truth is exactly what everyone needs to see to understand the ugly truth.

Watching the film put me through an emotional roller coaster, in the beginning, watching toilets overflowing with faeces, humans collecting faeces with their bare hands, humans plunging their hands into drains and more, but as the film progresses, the disgust is no longer to do with what's being shown on screen.

The filmmaker does not hesitate to point a finger at various government organisations and Dalit organisations who take part in this injustice while they gain societal respect claiming they are changing the lives of the Dalits. The film follows various sanitation workers for nearly a year from February 2016 to January 2017 and the footage captured was for about 90 hours. The director did not just go around documenting what the workers

were doing, instead, she spoke to them, she went into 'their world', she got them comfortable and she then tells the uncensored story. Cleaning ~~faeces~~ and dangerous medical waste, removing maggot-ridden corpses with little to no sanitation gear are all part of the film. The elite class of the country still believe that the caste oppression has been abolished for years now since it is the 21st century, but this film is unflinching in its portrayal of how people enter this profession and are never given a chance to escape. This film has been my inspiration, and I hope to achieve a film like this that asks the right questions. It is purely for reference purpose.

**Living India; A Dalit's tale A BBC Documentary Podcast;**<sup>10</sup> This podcast confronts the issues faced by average citizens in Bihar. Journalist Rupa Jha travels to her

own state of Bihar and tells us stories of 4 local residents who come from lower caste community who also suffers from poverty. She narrates their story which in her opinion, sheds light on why India is still considered backwards. She starts off each segment by introducing the interviewees and what their struggles are. Which is then followed by the recorded interview audio. While it does not have much ambient noise, it has appropriate segues using their podcast music. This podcast has a seamless flow to it. The interview audio originally Hindi, is then faded out to a dubbed voice which also carries the same tone of struggle and despair as the original one. The journalist instead of the famous interview-style podcast, has opted for the narrative-style podcast where she gives the listeners context in between each interviewee's stories.

## **What did I make?**

### **Podcast Structure**

Defining the podcast goal was the first step to structuring it. The goal has always been to spread awareness about the struggles faced by sanitation workers and the development of goal included the medium I wanted to use to spread awareness. Every podcast needs a proper structure to follow to provide a flow so that the listeners do not get confused. This project also required a similar structure.

The basic documentary podcast structure used is;

**Podcast Intro with segues using music** - Narrator's introduction followed by the introduction of the issue which is then followed by introducing the interviewees.

**Details about the topic** - It talks about why this is an important issue that needs attention followed by backing it up with facts and leads with how I am going to address the issue (by narrating the stories of ragpickers and being a mediator to ask the necessary questions)

**Interviews** - Who is the interviewee and what do they wish to tell others? Planning the podcast interview is always helps in keeping the flow. Having a questionnaire ready and how to transition from one topic to another made it easy during the phone interviews which was the final method to record interviews. Even with a set of questionnaire, improvising with the guests seemed to add a natural flow to tell the story.

**Summary or Conclusion** - Listeners most likely remember the beginning and the end of the podcast than what's in-between, this is a phenomenon known as the Serial-Position effect.<sup>12</sup> Hence, summarizing the topic motivates the listeners to take action.

**Podcast outro** - Advising as to how they can do something about the issue. Explaining how the message will bring about a change.

The podcast length is roughly about 10-15 minutes which includes **The Setup, The Delivery and The Application**.

**The Setup** of the Podcast includes the Introduction to the issue, to build interest, why they should listen,

what they should be expecting and what is the problem that needs action to be taken. This consists of the first 2-3 minutes of the Podcast.

**The Delivery**, also known as the main content is to educate and inspire the audience with facts and stories. It explores the struggles of the sanitation workers, their day to day lives and what they expect to live a peaceful life. This segment covers 6 - 9 minutes of the podcast. It also ends with special segments like different people's opinions and from where they can find more relevant content just to keep the audience hooked. (Suggesting documentary movies, podcasts and interviews by Dr.Suraj Yengde)

**The Application** includes concluding the topic with

important insights by giving a summary advising the listeners on how they can make a change. It covers the last 2 - 3 minutes of the Podcast.

**Mixing** is the process of editing and arranging audio clips in a way that sounds seamless and natural to a listener. Planning the mixing ahead was one of the major responsibilities. Planning the mixing and fixing the final narrative goes hand and in hand by which we can maintain the flow of the podcast and we deliver the message across. Since I did not have access to taking recording interviews outdoors in their work habitat because of the pandemic, it was important to me that I include necessary ambient noises from their workplace, for eg. traffic noises, sweeping the road noises, vehicle horns, men chatting in the background, etc, which helps the

audience empathise with the sanitation worker's lives. Since the audio is being translated to English using dubbing voices, adding necessary ambient noise aims to maintain the originality.

#### **Audio credits -**

##### **Percussion beat -**

<https://www.adamvitovsky.com/heavy-impact>

##### **Dubbing Voice -**

Mr. M Govindaraj

Mrs. Shanmuga Sundari

Ms. Padmapriya

## **Conclusion**

The struggles of Sanitation workers is one such issue we do not know much about and it is about time we bring awareness to these hidden stories.

The aim of this podcast is to spread awareness about the struggles of sanitation workers and how society and socio economic standards have pushed them to always take up sanitation jobs. We usually tend to feel sad after reading about a sanitation worker's death, but by bringing their story and the depth of their struggles to the listener's ears, I hope to inspire empathy and social change in our modern world. Modern technologies and social networks gives us the platform to share our thoughts and raise our voice and with this project I begin my journey of being the voice of helpless people.

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