Stories from the grassroots

Garima activists about their fight for freedom and dignity as Dalit women in Indian Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

This research is a result of a nine week field study during spring 2012, with the purpose of highlighting the stories of Dalit women in Madhya Pradesh, India. Together with a fellow student at Södertörn University, I investigated the Garima Campaign, an ActionAid project working with Dalit women forced to endure the illegal practice of manual scavenging, the manual removal of human excreta from dry toilets. This research was funded by a Minor Field Study scholarship provided by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

In this paper I investigate how these oppressed women may change their life situation and self-image through participation in a group of peers striving towards the same goal, asking the questions: how do they narrate their former life as manual scavengers, what is it that persuaded them to join the campaign, and what kind of attitudes did they encounter from other members of society? Following this, focus is on communication and how it can contribute to improving the life conditions of people of low social status. The theories used for this purpose are intersectionality and empowerment, as well as Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and symbolic violence. The data was drawn from interviews with female former manual scavengers, supported by observations of their life situation and on other background material.

The results of this study corroborate the findings of much of the previous work in this field, especially in relation to the treatment of manual scavengers by the rest of society. However, there seemed to have been three major arguments that finally convinced the women to quit working as manual scavengers. The first one related to their feeling of dignity. The second one dealt with them being aware of their human rights, which supports the argument that awareness may lead to change. The third argument was an important pathos argument, and consisted of the fact that their children were mistreated in school and that the women did not want their children to feel bad about their social situation. In the Garima campaign the women are allowed to do things taboo for Indian women, especially for Dalit ones, like disturbing the existing system and standing up for their rights by kicking up a fuss. The campaign opened up a new arena in which they did not only work to abolish manual scavenging practices, but also worked to attack the caste system on the grass-roots level. In informing others, convincing them to stop the practice, the self-confidence of the women was strengthened further, as individuals and as a group.

Key words: Garima campaign, manual scavenging, India, Dalit women, empowerment, Bourdieu, symbolic violence, human rights, grassroots level, rhetoric
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1. Introduction

Ever since ancient times, the Indian population was differentiated into different groups called castes. Of all the many castes in Indian society, the Dalits are the most vulnerable. Because the Dalits are born outside of the four major groups making up the caste system they have traditionally been considered unclean, and are therefore referred to as untouchables.

When India gained its independence in 1947, the new constitution banned caste-based discrimination; however, the gap between policy and actual practice is a large one, and Dalits are still not treated as equals, with illiteracy among them being high (Utrikesdepartementet 2007). For generations, manual scavenging has been one of the chores that Dalits have been forced to carry out for the benefit of the higher castes, consisting of manually emptying the dry latrines by using only very simple tools. Although these toilets have been illegal since 1993, there are still thousands of Dalits, mostly women, who have to endure performing this unworthy tradition.

The Garima campaign - with the Dalit organization Jan Sahas in the forefront - is working for the liberation of these women, and since the start in 2000, more than 10,000 women in the area of Madhya Pradesh have been liberated. Many of these women have testified that the Garima campaign was crucial for them stopping their participation in the practice (actionaid.se). By participating in the Garima Empowerment group, the women who stopped the practice are now themselves activists in the campaign. In this essay, focus is on their stories.

Unfortunately, there is nothing unique about the Indian situation which I investigate here. All over the world, many people - especially women - are facing social oppression which makes their life situation difficult, each day a struggle. However, the situation of the former manual scavengers in India is especially problematic since they are oppressed not only on the basis of their gender, but also because of their caste.
1.1 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to highlight the stories of the Dalit women who have stopped their work with manual scavenging and are now members of the Garima Empowerment group. My main focus is the thematical analysis of how these women narrate life before Garima, the decision to join the campaign, and, finally, to quit carrying out the illegal practice. I am interested in what the attitudes towards them from other members of society are like as well as what their current situation is and their thoughts about their future. In addition, I likewise want to investigate how their participation in the Garima Empowerment group has affected the self-confidence and self-perception of these women. I also hope to explain why they did not stop the practice themselves, before the campaign came to liberate them, through the use of my chosen set of theoretical frameworks.

Hopefully, my essay can highlight the injustice and caste-based discrimination which still persists in India today. The stories told by the women are very important for an understanding of how the grass-roots struggle against the caste system can be strengthened.

1.2 Research questions

- How do the Dalit women, as former manual scavengers, narrate their life stories and their transformation into activists in the Garima Empowerment group? What is that persuaded them to join the campaign, and what kind of attitudes did they encounter from other members of society?

- How did the participation in the Garima Empowerment group affect the self-image of the former manual scavengers?
2. The context of the study

In order to give a basis for understanding of the context in which the Dalit women live their lives, this chapter will present an overview of the gender situation in India as well as the age-old caste system, and in addition address the situation of the Dalits, providing a comprehensive background to the complex life situation of these women. Furthermore, the campaign that is studied in this essay, the Garima campaign and the Garima Empowerment group will be examined. A general presentation of the founders and organizers of the campaign, Jan Sahas and ActionAid, is also provided, as their involvement and knowledge was central to this study. In addition, the practice of manual scavenging is also dealt with under its own heading in order to provide a clearer understanding of the activity.

2.1 Gender in India

According to Trust Law\(^1\) (2009), India is one of the top five most dangerous countries for women to live in. In the investigation The World’s Five Most Dangerous Countries for Women the situation of women around the world is chartered through interviews with 213 gender experts asked to rank countries by overall perception of danger as well as risk. The risk factors used were those of threats to health, cultural and religious factors, sexual violence, non-sexual violence, lack of access to resources, and trafficking (Nelson 2011). According to this investigation, India is the fourth most dangerous country; when it comes to trafficking India scores as number one. It is estimated that more than two million women are working in the sex industry, with around 25 per cent of these being under 18 years of age. The problem is complicated further by not only the fact that many women are uneducated, poor and lack knowledge of their human rights, but also by corruption within the police force (Utrikesdepartementet 2007).

Violence against women is wide-spread, existing both inside and outside the home environment (Bambawale 1994, Utrikesdepartementet 2007). Male alcohol abuse is often a co-factor in domestic violence. Honour killings sometimes occur, mainly in the rural and northern parts of the country, and killings or violence are often associated with husbands and their families not being satisfied with the size of the dowry (Utrikesdepartementet 2007).

\(^1\) TrustLaw Woman is a website aimed at providing free legal advice for women’s groups around the world.
Women and men have formally equal constitutional rights. However, women and poor people encounter more difficulties in trying to bring their cases to court; this due to their weaker economic, political and social position in society (Utrikesdepartementet 2007). Only 10 per cent of ministerial positions and 11 per cent of seats in the parliament are occupied by women (UN Women in India 2012). Thus, even if discrimination of women is prohibited by law, women in India are still a very vulnerable group (Utrikesdepartementet 2007, Sekher and Hatti 2012).

The fact that women still are treated as inferior in India, a rapidly modernizing country, is discussed by Sekher and Hatti (2012), who highlight the necessity of understanding the connection between economic, social and cultural factors that underlie daughter discrimination (ibid). This problem is, according to Utrikesdepartementet, largely caused by to deep-rooted social and cultural traditions, wherein girls traditionally have been regarded as a burden for the family (2007). Therefore, girls have not had the same opportunities as boys have had when it comes to access to education, healthcare and other social services. One of the reasons for this are the demands for dowry that, despite having been outlawed, still exist in India. Yet another reason is that a daughter who gets married away then leaves her family to instead become a member of the family of her husband, this while a boy can stay and continue contributing to the support of the family even after his marriage (Utrikesdepartementet 2007). This is why, in many places in India, the birth of a girl is not as welcome as that of a boy (ibid, Sekher and Hatti 2012). A large number of girl foetuses are aborted based on the knowledge of their sex, and even murder of newly born baby girls may occur (Utrikesdepartementet 2007). According to the 2001 census the birth ratio was 933 girls to 1000 boys. In 2012, the number had dropped to 912. This disproportion leads to a skewed sex ratio among the population, which in turn leads to problems like trafficking, kidnapping of women, sexual harassment, and prostitution.

In the argument of Bambawale (1994) the importance of women's education is highlighted; education, here, is one way of overcoming the age-old traditions of norms and restrictions imposed on the women. Further, Bambawale argues that in the transition of India into modernity, most of the traditional family functions were transferred to outside of the home, and with this, there was a demarcation made between the educated, professional and skilled women on the one hand, and the unskilled on the other (ibid). Education would, however, improve the social, economic, health and political status of these unskilled women, thereby letting them play a role in the development (ibid. 20). Likewise, it is necessary to improve the women’s knowledge of the
legal system so that they gain awareness of their human rights, because even though a large proportion of the population is uneducated when it comes to the laws that protect them, it is especially women who lack this knowledge. This view is supported by Mattson (2012) and Khors Cambell (2003). This aspect will be addressed further under section Empowerment.

2.2 The caste system

The caste system consists of a fourfold division of different varnas (groups) which dates back to ancient times when Indian society was divided into different groups that were organized in a hierarchical fashion (Bai & Shaik 2011: 12). The people born outside of these four groups constituted a fifth category, the Dalits, also referred to as untouchables. This aspect will be addressed further under section The situation for the Dalits.

Historically, the caste system provided the basis for the social and economic framework of social life in India (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 343). The system constituted social groupings in society, because each varna had certain rights and duties, and correspondingly, certain occupations were reserved for some varnas, the positions being out of bounds for other varnas. The social ranking is determined by a purity/pollution scale, in which the Brahmins are located at the top of the scale and the untouchables, being impure, are relegated to the very bottom - while in the middle we find various groups with varying grades of purity/impurity (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 343). The top three varnas possessed social and economic rights that the shudras and the untouchables did not have.

Even though caste-based discrimination was forbidden in 1947, it still continues to influence social order in India. (Namala 2009, Bai and Shaik 2011). According to the UN, the system is maintained through the rigid enforcement of social ostracism (a system of social and economic penalties) in case of any deviations (Namala 2009).

The caste system is based on separation, division of labour, and hierarchy where civil, cultural, and economic rights for each caste are fixed. This means that assignment of basic rights among various castes is unequal and hierarchical, with those at the top enjoying the most rights coupled with the least duties and those at the bottom performing most duties coupled with no rights (UN 2009).
Sarika Sinha, an ActionAid activist, claims that the caste system has changed its character since its inception, arguing that even if the caste system started as integral to Hinduism, it is now much more an integral part of the Indian society.

People in India have tried to escape from the caste system by converting to other religions. However, when they do they still cannot escape from the caste system. So now we have Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims – that wasn’t the case before in India (Sarika Sinha, 2012).

![Pyramid of the caste system](Markville history n.d)

**Fig. 1: Pyramid of the caste system** (Markville history n.d)

### 2.3 The situation of the Dalits

Traditionally, the Dalits have been excluded from society, segregated both politically and socially. In their book *Berättelsen på min rygg* Hartmann and Thorat chronicle the abuses the Dalits have been facing and in many ways continue to face in the Indian society of today. Seen as unclean in a religious sense, they have also been forced to live in special hamlets located distant from the central parts of the villages. They are considered as born to serve others and to perform the lowest paid occupations. Disallowed to own properties of their own, they have become dependent on the higher castes. The authors claim that ritual impurity has gone hand in hand with a problematic economic situation (2006: 10).

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2 English title: *The story on my back*. (My translation)
This sentiment is confirmed in a UN report, which shows that while the Dalits constitute about 16.2 per cent of India’s population, almost 40.0 per cent of Dalits are living below the poverty line (BPL) (Namala 2009). The same report lists some of the discriminatory practices that the Dalits still are subjugated to, including:

- Denial and/or restrictions of access to public facilities like wells, schools, roads, post offices, and courts
- Denial and/or restrictions of access to temples or other places related to worship
- Exclusion from learning the Vedas and inability to become religious teachers or leaders
- Exclusion from honourable and profitable employment, relegated to menial employment
- Residential segregation requiring individuals to live outside the village
- Restrictions on life style that indicates luxury or comfort
- Denial of services provided by barber, washer-men, restaurants, shops, theatres etc.
- Compulsory requirements in the usage of different utensils
- Imperatives of deference in the forms of address, language, and sitting and standing in the presence of higher castes
- Restrictions in movement
- Liability to unremunerated labour for higher castes and obligatory performance of menial tasks

(Namala 2009)

The caste system also exists within the Dalit community – in effect, the Dalits have a hierarchy of their own, with their society being made up of 46 sub-castes, all of them responsible for performing separate tasks. It is not unusual for the Dalits of today having other occupations than those of their ancestors, but there are still Dalits performing traditionally discriminating practices. The focus of this essay is one those practices: the manual scavenging of human faeces.
2.4 Manual scavenging

Manual scavenging is the manual removal of human excreta from dry toilets - toilets without the modern flush system. The toilet has a container which has to be emptied daily with the aid of brooms, small tin plates and baskets (Garima Abhiyan and Jan Sahas n.d, Garima Abhiyan 2008). Some common health problems among manual scavengers are skin allergies, scalp allergies, tuberculosis, dizziness and unconsciousness.

The majority of the manual scavengers (95 - 98 per cent) are women, making women the largest group to suffer this practice (Garima Abhiyan 2008). As with most of the tasks of the Dalits, manual scavenging is a practice passed on from generation to generation. A daughter-in-law inherits the practice from her mother in law, who in turn inherited it from her mother-in-law. Manual scavenging is one of the occupations with the lowest social status in the caste-based hierarchy of the Dalit community, and in effect the people who perform the task are not only relegated to untouchability because of their caste, but also because of their occupation.

Over the years, criticism has been raised against the practice of manual scavenging, with the Garima campaign being the example investigated in this essay. Another prominent voice was that of Gandhi, who raised the issue more than 100 years ago at a Congress meeting in Bengal. Another prominent person fighting against manual scavenging is Dr. Ambedkar, still one of the front figures in the struggle for the rights of Dalits (Bai and Shaik 2011).
2.5 The Garima campaign

The Garima campaign is a campaign fighting to free all manual scavengers in India and to help them find alternative sources of income. It is led by the Dalit NGO, Jan Sahas, and supported by four other NGOs, ActionAid being one of them, and the campaign is mostly waged on a grass-roots level. Since the start in 2000, over 10,000 manual scavengers have been “liberated”, primarily in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Jan Sahas 2012, Garima Abhiyan 2008).

One of the main goals of the campaign is to encourage the women to motivate others (Bai and Shaik 2011). The women who have chosen to quit their work as manual scavengers are then involved in a part of the campaign called the Garima Empowerment group. In this group, the former manual scavengers themselves become the activists. They visit villages where the practice is still alive and talk to women, trying to convince them to stop taking part in the practice. When the women finally stop practicing manual scavenging, they organize rallies, basket-burnings, and other ceremonies in order to hold the rest of the society and the government accountable.

They [the government and the society] are made to understand the inhuman nature of the practice and the fact that its abolition can’t be opposed on any other tenable grounds and they have no right to exert pressure on those who resolve to discontinue the practice. (Jan Sahas and Garima Abhiyan. N.d.).

2.6 Jan Sahas and ActionAid

Jan Sahas is a Dalit organization committed to abolishing the caste system and ending all forms of discrimination based on caste, class and gender. Garima, “the dignity campaign”, is one of many projects that Jan Sahas uses to realize its mission (Jan Sahas 2012). Jan Sahas cooperates with four supporting organizations; ActionAid, the International Labour Organization (ILO), Christian Aid and the United Nations Slavery fund. Their work is based on a bottom-up approach to ending the age-old practice of manual scavenging.

ActionAid is religiously and politically independent, cooperating with over 2,000 other organizations around the world, as well as working with local organizations to help improve the lives of the poor. The organization has over 35 years of experience in fighting poverty and
believe that poverty is an injustice and in working with the poor in order to strengthen self-initiatives for escaping poverty. ActionAid focuses on the situations of women and girls, because it is the most effective way to reduce poverty in an area (Actionaid.se).

3. Theoretical framework

The theories used in this study were chosen in order to make the data collected during the investigation accessible and easy to analyse. Some of the theories assume a more prominent role in the analysis, while others have been chosen in order to explain certain phenomena more in detail. Intersectionality is used to examine social power structures and how these structures make up an integral part of individual selves and everyday life. The women interviewed are the most marginalized group of their patriarchal and feudal society, which makes their situation interesting to examine from an intersectional perspective. The concept of empowerment helps us to understand how the Garima Empowerment group and the manual scavengers’ newly found knowledge of their rights can affect their self-images. Here, theories central theories to my thesis become the doxology of Mats Rosengren as well as Bourdieu’s theories of conceptual fields, habitus and symbolic violence.

3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality can be defined as a theory that analyses how social and cultural categories – such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class – intertwine. Intersectional analysis is important for that which is created in the points of intersection between different types of social stratification (Lykke 2003, Knudsen 2012). In other words;

Intersectionality is a possibility to transcend an additive understanding of multiple identities and axes of power asymmetry. The main point of the term is to investigate how the different power axes interact, thus how they through a complex and dynamic interaction reciprocally construct each other. (Lykke 2003: 6. My translation)

Connected to the concept of intersectionality is the question of power, inspired by Michel Foucault (Knudsen 2012). The maintenance of power structures is something that we all take part in through unconscious actions in our daily life. However, it is important to realize that these
intentions or desires are not always a necessary condition for racism or sexism et cetera (Mattson 2010: 11).

In the research of Molloy we find an example of how power structures make up our everyday life (Mattson 2010). Her research is based on the personal experience of her role as a teacher. After having been alerted to the fact that she treated her pupils differently according to whether they were girls or boys, she began to structure the time allotted for talking in class so that both sexes received equal opportunities to speak. The boys soon experienced this as an injustice; they felt that the girls had too much opportunity to speak. The girls wanted for Molloy to revert to her old way of teaching as well, since they had not felt that they had gotten too few questions earlier. Molloy’s example show that it is difficult to break ingrained and obvious patterns – we often adapt to them rather than challenge them; we explain them away and conceal them. When trying to change these patterns, we strongly identify ourselves with both subordinate and dominant groups in different ways. This allows us to go on maintaining them, seeing them as something given and obvious (Mattson 2010: 32).

### 3.2 Empowerment

The term *empowerment* has been in use since the 1960’s, and even though recent years have seen an increasing amount of literature published on the subject, there is still is no international consensus among researchers about what the exact definition should be. The term encompasses an individual’s sense of self-worth, freedom of choice, influence - both in and outside of the home environment – over personal life matters, and access to channels for influencing the trajectory of social change (Calman 1989, Strandberg 2002, Carlberg 2005, Nationalencyklopedin 2012).

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is considered to be the founder of empowerment (Carlberg 2005). However, he never used the term, but his theory of how the liberation of man can be achieved through the acquirement of practical and theoretical knowledge is, according to Carlberg, very similar to what we today would call an empowerment perspective (ibid). Freire argued that the liberation of people must be the work of the oppressed themselves (ibid). Thus, from an empowerment perspective, liberation is an individual physical and mental process, by necessity an autonomously generated process (Razavi & Miller 1995, Kumar & Paul 2002, Carlberg 2005).
In the transition from oppressed to empowered, communication - and thus rhetoric - becomes very important. According to Storm Villadsen, rhetoric functions as a kind of “social glue”, therefore being much more than just a way for an individual to gain influence. Rather, she describes it as a tool for becoming a citizen, and here introduces the concept of rhetorical citizenship (Storm Villadsen 2008: 37).

For Storm Villadsen, the word citizenship includes a normative and prescriptive expectation that everyone, as citizens, have access to ways of influencing collective decisions. Each individual is thus assigned a role in public life - whether you are a member of a particular group, a citizen equipped with a critical consciousness, or an activist at a grass-roots level (2008: 38). Further, she argues that rhetorical citizenship can serve as a framework for the study of alternative ways of manifesting contributions to society in relation to more traditional political channels. Since communication is central to this study, this, together with the fact that the political engagement of Dalit women occurs outside of traditional political channels, makes the concept of rhetorical citizenship of great importance to this study.

In Kvinnlig frigørelse – en oxymoron3 (2003) Khors Cambell shows that negotiations for citizenship are problematic for the female part of the population. First of all, she argues, most women spend their lives with men who control them (fathers, husbands, employers). Secondly, many women have very negative self-images, so negative that they cannot see themselves as an audience - in other words, they do not perceive themselves as “agents of change”. Khors Cambell claims that these two factors contribute to a powerful and pervasive force that counteract feminist rhetoric.

In order to break already existing patterns, it is important to make the oppressed women aware of their situation (Strandberg 2002, Khors Cambell 2003, Mattson 2010: 11). According to Khors Cambell, awareness must be the result of a rhetorical campaign involving meetings in small groups, where the goal is to make “the personal political”. In these groups there is no leader, no rhetor, no expert. Everyone participates and leads, and everyone is seen as an expert. These kinds of groups form a kind of sisterhood where the women’s perception of their own identities is modified (ibid). Together, the women may create awareness (through shared

3 English title: The rhetoric of women’s liberation
experiences) about things that seemed like personal shortcomings and individual problems which in fact are something shared and common – a result of being a woman (Khors Cambell 2003).

Calman (1989) also discusses the impact of participation in a movement on the oppressed, and highlights the social impact on women, arguing that it leads to an increased knowledge about their own situation, increases personal autonomy, and makes the women aware of their own potentials. In addition, it also generates self-esteem; both on individual and on group levels. However, Khors Cambell draws our attention to the difficult rhetorical situation of female emancipation. Participation in a deliberating rhetorical process may, in fact, mean that women violate gender norms for behaviour. This means that the role as a rhetoric actor, if it involves autonomy, confidence and independence, is a crime against the role as a female (Khors Cambell 2003: 23). The situation may also threaten the institutions of marriage and family, as well as the norms that govern the education of adolescents and the gender roles of men and women (ibid. 22).

3.3 Bourdieu and doxology

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, active during the latter part of the 20th century, conducted social analysis, developing a theory that revealed the games and forces that play out in various social activities, something he termed *fields*. Each field is defined by the actions and interests that are specific for the field in question.

> For the field to function requires both efforts, and people who are ready to play the game and having a habitus that includes both knowledge and recognition of the game's inherent laws, its actions, etc. (Bourdieu 1992: 42)

Thus, fields are all the arenas in which acts and interactions take place, where there are rules, written and unwritten, that the players have to relate to. Different social fields affect each other, but each field also has a form of "internal self-government" in which players decide basic rules and define values. Bourdieu terms whatever is considered as a given in a certain field, be it thinking patterns, language habits, ways of dressing and so on, as *doxa* (1992: 45, Rosengren 2002: 69).
Habitus and capital are other key concepts in Bourdieu's theory. Habitus is the way you think, choose and act, as determined by social background and relations (Bourdieu 1992: 51).

Capital is what the player brings and develops to the playing field. In each field there is field-specific capital that builds on, but also challenges the structure of the current field (ibid. 43) In Den manliga dominansen⁴ (1999) Bourdieu writes about the established world order, and expresses his surprise that dominance so often is looked upon as acceptable, even natural. He argues that the most prominent example of social dominance is male dominance, which he describes as a "paradoxical submission" caused by symbolic violence (ibid. 11). Symbolic violence is the unseen domination that everyday social habits exert on a victim. Male dominance is explained and understood as natural because of the biological and anatomical differences between the sexes. Because masculine dominance is a part of habitus, women are doomed to realization that, in every moment, there is a natural basis to their socially reduced identity (ibid. 47-56).

In contrast to Calman and Young, who were introduced under Empowerment, Bourdieu argues that possessing awareness and intention in itself does not necessarily mean that symbolic violence can be defeated. According to him, symbolic violence remains engraved in the body, even after the social preconditions have are removed. Thus, it is the case that oppressed groups, even with the abolishment of the external constraint, still exclude themselves. This may lead to a perception among other members of society that the oppression is a result of the free will of the victims of oppression. Bourdieu argues that the belief that the liberation of women comes about automatically as an effect of awareness means being blind to the fact that the social structures are part of the woman body (ibid. 53).

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⁴ English title: Masculine domination
4. Methodology and data

In this chapter the method of the study is described, detailing how the data was collected and how the interviews were carried out. In addition, the ethical considerations taken into account are discussed.

4.1 Choice of method

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate narratives as arguments, narrative interviews were chosen as the method to collect the data, adopting the position of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s when he describes the human being as "essentially a story-telling animal" (MacIntyre 2007: 216). MacIntyre argues that narratives can organize the external stimulus which makes up our experience of the world, making it possible for us to make sense of the people, places, events and actions of our lives. Following this, by carrying out narrative interviews a period of time that is of importance for the interviewed person, can be identified, and in addition the life story of the person as seen from their horizon is evoked (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 147).

Ricoeur considers the life story to be a method for self-understanding (Ekman 2004: 17). According to Ricoeur, telling and listening to a story creates an understanding of the past as well as a pre-understanding of the future. This makes the stories of the women interesting to investigate from a narrative perspective.

However, the narratives have not been analysed in a traditional way - instead, the narratives that emerged from the stories of the women in this study have served as data to illustrate their arguments, describing why they did not stop the practice earlier, and what it was that made them join the campaign. Their stories may also reveal arguments that confirm that they made the right decision to quit the manual scavenging work.
4.2 Implementation of method

The data was collected during five days spent in Dewas and Mandsaur in the India district Madhya Pradesh. Together with an interpreter, a driver, and an employee of Jan Sahas, we visited seven villages where the Garima campaign has been active for the past five to ten years. The visits to each village took approximately two hours, one of which was dedicated to the interviews. The women whom I interviewed were all former manual scavengers now engaged in the Garima Empowerment group.

In an early stage of this essay I wanted to interview the Dalit women one by one, in order to reduce the risk of them being distracted by one another. For example, one of the questions was about the reaction from their families when they decided to join the campaign. Talking to them face to face might result in a more personal story, because then they would have the time and courage to say things, knowing that their husbands (or other relatives) were not listening. Therefore, it was decided to do one-to-one interviews with five or six women. However, on arriving to the village, a totally different scenario played out. All the former manual scavengers gathered in a circle on the ground outside, and around them men, other women and a lot of children were sitting. This forced me to rethink, to catch kairos. Since Berg (2001) emphasized the importance of interviews being carried out in an environment in which the informant feels secure, it was decided to change the form of the interview, from one-to-one interviews to a group interview. How this affected the results is the subject of further discussed in chapter 6 Discussion.

The interviews were based on Kvale & Brinkmann's narrative interview method with openly framed questions. The questions were divided into four parts, with one specific question for each part: life before Garima, their first contact with Garima and the decision to join, the life after they had stopped manual scavenging, and their thoughts about their future. The assumption was that if the person related their experiences in a chronological order, this would make analysis easier. However, as the women were talking almost all at once, hence not following any chronological order and it was decided to not interrupt them: since the overall purpose of the interview was to listen to their life stories, it did not matter in what order their answers arrived.

5 Kairos is a rhetorical term meaning "the right moment" (Hellspong 2004: 88).
4.3 Processing the data

The interviews-cum-group-interviews were both recorded and written down, in order to capture the statements accurately. Active listening is important in narrative interviews, since I, as an interviewer, through my questions, nodding and silence, became a co-creator of their stories (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 171). Not all recordings were transcribed in full, in order to save time, as well as the fact that the recordings are only copies of the words of the interpreter and not exact quotations of the women.

Jenny Schauman provided valuable help during the interviews, noting down the answers and allowing me to concentrate on and be more active in the interaction with the women. Both recordings and the notes were used as the basis for the transcriptions of the interviews. On the whole, going on this field trip as a pair was beneficial. Firstly, there was a tight schedule and the topic to explore a major one; together, our studies gave us a broader view of the campaign and enabled us to explore the subject more in detail. Secondly, we were of great help to each other when it came to discussing and reflecting on our experiences. What we experienced during these weeks in India differ greatly from our own everyday life.

Even though I and Jenny Schauman have cooperated closely during our stay, the resulting studies were independently written and highlight different aspects of the Garima Campaign and how it has affected Dalit women, the studies complementing each other in such a way as to give broader understanding of the subject.

4.4 Limitations and clarifications

Even though manual scavenging exists all over India, this study is limited to the Indian district of Madhya Pradesh, as it was in this district the campaign began. It was also here that the field study was conducted.

Due to the fact that 95 – 98 per cent of the people performing this practice are women, as well as the fact that women are oppressed even within their families, the investigation targeted the stories of Dalit women, avoiding focusing on the stories the men related during the interviews - even though their stories of course are important to an understanding of the situation of the Dalits.
As noted in 2.3 *The situation of the Dalits*, the caste system nowadays is so ingrained in Indian society that there are Dalits in all religions. The caste system is, however, derived from Hinduism, which prompted a focus on stories of Hindu Dalit women exclusively. Stories told by the Muslim Dalit Women who worked with manual scavenging are nevertheless an important part of the background data (see 4.6 *Background data*).

As previously noted, seven villages in the Madhya Pradesh area in India were visited. Out of these seven, interviews conducted in five villages were chosen to as material for this essay. In one of the villages not included in the study, the recording quality came out too poor to be used, while the second interview not included was conducted in a Muslim village.

I am aware of the fact that the limitations of the sampling mean that the data has to be handled with caution, as the findings might not be transferable to all Dalits, or not even all manual scavengers in India or Madhya Pradesh.

### 4.5 The interpreter

Due to the fact that Dalits only speak Hindi, an interpreter was needed for conduction of the interviews. A male field officer employed at ActionAid with language skills and knowledge of the context was assigned by the organization to serve as my interpreter, guide and companion during the field study. Kvale and Brinkmann emphasizes that the interviewer needs time to learn the new culture to reduce the risk of misunderstandings when doing interviews over cultural borders (2009: 160). Because of the busy schedule, time constraints limited the ability to learn about the new culture, which made his contextual knowledge invaluable for formulating questions which were suitable to the women.

In order to overcome constraints caused by lack of knowledge of context, as well as lack of skills in Hindi, I discussed my questions with the interpreter beforehand in order to make him conscious of the subject matter. I also asked him to frame the questions in such a way so as to be suitable for the women (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 147). Therefore, it is not possible to say how the questions were framed exactly. However, since it - according to Riessman - does not matter how the questions are framed as long as they encourage the person to tell their story (Scott 2004: 76) this was not regarded as a problem.
I am aware of that in using an interpreter, the contextual meaning is lost in translation to some extent, and it is difficult to perform an objective analysis on words not spoken by the women themselves. The interpreter was trained as a lawyer and his knowledge in interpreting, as well as in rhetoric, may have been weak. Therefore, it is unsure if everything the women said was translated to me in the same way I would have understood it if I was the one talking directly to them.

4.6 Background data

In March 2012, the Indian Social Institute in New Delhi held a national hearing on the rehabilitation of manual scavengers and their children (Garima Abhiyan 2012), and the purpose of the meeting was described as giving the members of the Dalit community a platform from which to speak out about their situation and discuss the results of the rehabilitation project. Former manual scavengers now active in the movement participated in this public hearing, attended by representatives of social and community organizations from ten states, giving witness to the fact that untouchability still exists in India.

The interviews with ActionAid and NGO offices located in different parts of India carried out by Jenny Schauman also makes up part of the background material for the interviews with the women themselves.

In order to get a broader view and gain a deeper understanding of the situation of the Indian Dalits I also have been having informal conversations with children about their school situation, with men never personally involved in the manual scavenging practice, and with former manual scavengers from a Muslim community. Furthermore, ActionAid and Jan Sahas provided much valuable information for my understanding of the subject. Informal interviews were conducted with the leader of Jan Sahas and the ActionAid-assigned interpreter.
4.7 Reliability, credibility, relevance

This essay was made possible thanks to valuable help from ActionAid, and Jan Sahas, and a large part of the material used in this essay originates from them, something which of course brings up the question of credibility and possible bias. However, I have high confidence in the trustworthiness of the organizations as well as in the relevance of their information. This essay and that of Schauman might help bring more publicity and outside attention to the Garima campaign, benefiting both organizations since they rely on donations from people around the world. Hopefully the essays will also be able to contribute outside perspectives on the work of the campaign.

The questions of power relations are of particular importance when it comes to the validity of the results presented in this essay. As noted in 2.4 Manual scavenging, the Dalit women are the most marginalized group in Indian society, something which may lead to them cautiousness in sharing their personal opinions when interviewed by non-Dalits. Kvale and Brinkmann argue that power asymmetries sometimes make the interviewees say things that they think the interviewer wants to hear (2009: 50). Following this, three facts of the present investigation have to be taken into particular consideration.

Firstly, the interpreter is an employee at ActionAid, one of the organizations supporting the Garima campaign. The women are dependent on help from ActionAid, a situation which might have affected the women in their telling of how the campaign changed their lives as well as in giving their opinions on the Garima empowerment group. In other words, they might have been more restrictive about expressing themselves unfavourably about the campaign than if the interpreter had been neutral.

Secondly, the interpreter belonged to a higher caste, and taking into account the facts related under 2.2 The caste system, the stories of the women might have assumed a more personal character if the balance of power had been more level, with a lower-caste interpreter.

Thirdly, and correspondingly, because of the patriarchal structure of Indian society, having a female interpreter might have been useful. These women are not supposed to talk to men and are not even allowed to show themselves without their veils. Even if the interpreter told them to take the veil off, this may have affected the way they experienced the interview situation.
Our own participation also demands the question of power to be taken into consideration, as recommended in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 50). Seen from a global perspective, being a student from Sweden means possessing more symbolic capital than the former manual scavengers. It is difficult to do something about this fact; it is impossible to change our skin colour and background. In order to show respect and to minimize the differences between us and interviewee, we were dressed in traditional Indian clothes, but we cannot know for sure how our participation may have affected the answers of the women as well as our own interpretations of the responses we received.

4.8 Ethical considerations

The ethical guidelines appropriate for this type of survey have been followed, the study thus adhering to the ethical guidelines issued by Vetenskapsrådet, and what Kvale and Brinkmann single out as ethically relevant to research (2009).

In the villages, I introduced myself and explained my study before starting on the interviews. I asked for permission to record what was said, explaining that this was only to make it easier to remember and understand the content of the interviews. I told the participants that subsequently only I, Jenny and my supervisor would have access to the recordings.

When interviewing informants, it is important to receive informed consent, which means that the people interviewed must be aware of and agree to the fact that the collected data will be published (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 87, Ekström 2010: 31). All the participants in the interviews and other parts of this essay were aware that this essay will be publicly available, and nobody objected to this this, instead, they actually seemed satisfied and proud to tell their story, knowing that it would be made public.

This study contains data that could be used by others to identify participants, and according to Kvale and Brinkmann, this kind of information has to be accepted by the participants (2009: 88). All participants in this study agreed to participate under their own names. This was also seemingly a decision made with pride.

Finally, all participants were participated in the interviews voluntarily and had the opportunity to stop the interview at any time.
5. From scavenging to sisterhood

This part of the essay concerns the results of the interviews. As noted in 4 Methodology & data, I went to seven villages where they had quit working as manual scavengers, and out of these seven, five were chosen as material for the essay. The stories of the women were similar to one another to a great extent. Therefore I have chosen not to present the answers from each village separately, instead presenting a thematical summary of the most important things that came up.

5.1 Life before Garima

My first question to the women related to life before they joined the Garima campaign. How they ended up with the occupation, and what they used to think about it. Somewhat tentatively, the women started to tell their stories.

They told me that the practice is the same from generation to generation, and when they got married they inherited it from their mother-in-laws. Some of the women were no more than 12 years old when they got married with a man they had never met, forced to move to a village where they had never been before and starting to work with, among other things, manual scavenging there. None of the women liked the practice but felt that they did not have a choice.

“It was a forceful work, but we had no other option.”

“It was a life in hell. I could not think of another way to provide for my family.”

As manual scavengers they were not allowed to enter the village at any other time than early in the morning when they went about performing their work. The toilets needed to be emptied daily, and each woman used to clean 5-7 households. With the aid of a broom and a basket they scraped the toilet clean and put the faeces into the basket. Afterwards they scattered ashes over the toilet, and put the baskets on their heads. It was really hard work, and sometimes they needed to remove the faeces by hand. The basket filled with the excreta was then brought to the landfill site, the baskets being carried on their heads. When walking through the village they were obliged to wear a face-covering veil. Often, the excreta sipped through the basket, causing them different kinds of health problems.

One woman described the situation thusly:

“During hot days and rainy days, the excreta I carried would trickle down my face and body. I was not able to eat because of the odour.”
The women did not receive any proper payment for this work; sometimes they got 10 rupees a day\(^6\), but most of the time they were paid in bread. Sometimes they also got used clothes. Their economic situation forced them to become dependent on higher castes, a fact which became an argument to continue with the practice.

“The higher caste people meant that God had made something bad with us, and that’s why we can’t give our children proper food”.

“People from higher castes used to say that ‘you are from a manual scavenging community so don’t come near us, you must not come near us.’”

The majority of the women told me that their husbands used to get drunk and beat them, and their in-laws used to abuse them because of them performing this dirty work.

The women also expressed that what made them dislike the practice was the way their children were treated at school. First of all, they were treated badly because they were Dalits. They were beaten by their teacher, forced to sit in the back of the classroom, and the way they were served their food was debasing. Secondly, they were treated even worse because the occupation of their mothers. They were called “son of a manual scavenger”, and their teacher forced them to clean the toilets.

“My own children used to hit me for doing this practice. They used to complain that they were badly treated in school, and called nicknames as “son of a manual scavenger.”

The women told me that they were really sceptical about the Garima campaign when it first arrived to their village. Even if the women wanted to believe in what the activist told them, they did not stop the practice.

“This is a legacy that we have got from our ancestors, and it’s also the way we got our livelihood, so why should we stop?”

It is clear that the women did not see themselves as a rhetorical audience, as agents that could make a change. This will be discussed further in chapter 6 Discussion.

5.2 Decision to join the campaign and attitudes from family and society

When they were asked about the reaction of their families to their decision, the answers were spontaneous. Some women said that their families were very supportive; telling them that it was good for their dignity - but some met strong opposition. In these cases, their decision was not

\(^6\) Approximately 1.50 SEK
welcomed warmly by their families. Their in-laws used to abuse them and said that the women needed to continue the tradition, while their husbands used to get drunk and hit them when they said that they wanted to quit the practice.

“They [the Garima activists] told me that it was slavery and that we did not have to do it.”

“They [the Garima activists] talked about dignity – something that we had lost.”

When I first heard about this campaign I was very scared. Many people come and go, but I have to stay in the village, so if I got into something and they just left, I would have to stick to it later on. I was really scared of Ashif. Then Ashif convinced me and I started to believe in him. He started to talk about my legal rights, told me about their life and how it must go on. After a while I started to believe in the campaign.

According to the women, their husbands did not want to work, so they needed them to earn money for the family.

We used to get free bread and used clothes, so our men thought that they did not need to work to provide support for their families. They opposed us when we first said we want to stop this practice. Now when we do not bring daily food, many of our men have started to work for the first time in their lives.

The Garima activists started talking to the husbands of the women, and when they realized that quitting manual scavenging to start doing another work would lead to them earning more money, they gave their permission for the women to stop the practice. For the men the economic argument was stronger than anything else, even the dignity of their wives.

Their decision resulted in harassment and threats from the rest of the society:

“Who will clean our toilets?”

“If you stop doing this practice we will not give you any other work.”

“You have to do this”. It is a legacy you have to follow. If you don’t do this, who will?”

As described under 2.5 The Garima campaign, once the women did decide on stopping carrying out the practice, they held a rally together, burning their baskets in front of the village, singing that they would never again perform this drudgery.

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7 Ashif is one of the founders of the Garima Campaign. He is now working at Jan Sahas.

8 He visited the hamlet during approximately two years.
“When I burned my basket I felt glad and worried at the same time. Glad that I did not have to do manual scavenging any more. Worried because I had burned my source of income”.

5.3 Current life situation and Garima Empowerment group

Overall, the women described their situation as much improved since they joined the campaign and became members of the Garima Empowerment group. They told me that now they can enter the village, have tea in tea shops and go to a barbershop.

“We are living a good life now.”

However, because of their caste, they still face problem because the rest of the society consider them untouchable.

“If we come with complaints, they are often lost in the police station”.

They described their economic situation as better than before. By performing wage labour, they can earn around 150 rupees a day\(^9\) instead of 300 rupees a month. However, they add that the work is precarious since they need to rely on the higher castes to give them some work - otherwise the only thing they can do is to stay at home.

“Before we had a continuous income but now we don´t have that.”

Now, the higher caste people in the village talk to them; however, they still feel politically excluded. Kiran in the village of Bhoraza described how a woman from their Garima Empowerment group ran as an independent in the Panchayat\(^10\) election, without getting elected - nobody voted for her, not even people from her own Dalit community. When asked about the reasons behind this, she told me that first of all, the village thought that if she would have been able to enter politics by getting elected to the Panchayat, this would make it difficult for them to control the Dalit community; second of all, the Dalits did not vote for her because of the fact that her position in the community would have changed if she was elected. They would come to feel she would be superior to them because of her new social and occupational status.

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\(^9\) Approximately 20 SEK

\(^10\) The Panchayat is the village council. Here, villagers can raise local questions and bring them up to a higher level.
Garima Empowerment group

All the women were united in their answers when asked about their feelings for the Garima group, and how they think that the group has influenced them. They told of gaining courage, of feeling that they recovered the dignity they had lost; if the Garima campaign had not come to the village, they would still be stuck doing the manual scavenging.

“We were born to be manual scavengers, and we would still be doing it if the Garima Abhiyan would not have come.”

“We were on the wrong path and we had no one to help us.”

In the village of Parda, the women told me that their empowerment group is based on the slogan, “one for all – all for one”. They are organized as a Dalit group, and fight for their rights, feeling that they have the courage to stand up for their rights against the higher caste people.

“We can do anything now! We can talk to the policemen now and enter to teashops and barbershops.”

“Now that we have so much empower so we can stay in front of the police and other authority.”

When people from higher castes complain about their decision to stop the practice they say:

“Now we have quit the practice so come to us and clean our toilets.”

“We are now getting aware of things and this became possible because of our empowerment groups. They inspire us to fight.”

An old lady told a story of how her son was getting married; he insisted on riding a horse - so she went to the high caste people and asked for a horse and got it. But they would not help if there were any troubles. Just because they could, they started the procession outside the high caste person’s house. She ends the story with the exclamation:

“We are empowered now!”

Photo: Anna-Carin Svensson
The women organize the Garima Empowerment group meetings themselves about once every month. During the meetings they discuss subjects relating to the treatment of them as Dalits. If somebody in their group has been treated badly, they discuss what to do about the problem. They also sing songs and read the poems of the Indian poet Kabir.

*Just awaken yourself, enlighten yourself now Dalit. Upon when will you sleep? It is time to wake up. Enlighten yourself and wake up*\(^\text{11}^\).

The women are also planning their work to convince other women that are still working with manual scavenging. When asked about how they encourage other women to stop the practice, the reply was.

“We tell them that ‘we have stopped so you can also stop this practice.’”

They tell them:

> We got rid of the disgusting practice by burning our baskets, when would you give up? You should do it for the sake of the honour of your community and for self-respect. What do we get by engaging in this dirty work? Stale bread, two handfuls of grains and some money: but also heaps of hatred and contempt from others! People go to temples in the morning and we poor souls go to people’s toilets for cleaning them!

### 5.4 What about the future?

When it comes to the future all the women are united: it is all about securing education for their children. They are not too concerned about themselves; most of the women are old and have no big plans for the future.

“We have already lived our lives, but we are happy that we have secured a better life for our children.”

“What about my future? I have lived my life.”

“We stay at home. Just some work we need.”

In the village of Bhoraza the women have learned how to make bags and they want to start a group so that they can sell their bags on the market. But the raw material for these bags is expensive, so they are still struggling for money. In another village, the next step is to get fish into the pond so that they can earn their livelihood by fishing. The old ladies want to do some

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\(^{11}\) The translation is made by the interpreter while the women in one of the villages were singing.
work at home, and their daughter-in-laws can do some wage labour. In three of the villages one additional last question was asked, because it was hard to understand why, if they are so satisfied with their current situation, do they not move into the village?

“We would like to live in the village, but we do not have any money to buy something, no employment or no cattle to raise?”

“That is not possible. The higher castes won’t allow us to live in the village, so we cannot do that.”

“We can talk to the village people, but the caste is always there.”

6. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the narratives told by the women in the Garima Empowerment group; I simply wanted to hear their life-stories, about their life before the campaign, about their decision to join, about their current situation and their thoughts about the future. How participation in the Garima Empowerment group has affected the self-image of the women will be discussed further below.

The women describe their former life situation as manual scavengers as “a hell” in which they were totally excluded from society, both politically and socially. They were not welcomed into the village, not even to temples, nobody wanted to be close to them. Neither did they receive proper payment for the work they carried out. These results of my study corroborate the findings of much of the previous work in the field, especially in relation to their treatment by the rest of society and was presented in The situation of the Dalits. What is interesting to reflect on is this; why is help from an organization needed in order for the women to abolish a practice they so much dislike? I argue that Foucault's theories of power structures and Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, field and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1992) are very helpful when trying to answer this question.

The power structures in Indian society are very strong and, because to the caste system, possibly more explicit than in other parts of the world. What caste an Indian is born into lays the foundation for future opportunities of him or her, affecting not only how the individual is looked upon by other people, but also the self-image of the individual. Let us consider the Dalit community as a field, defined by Bourdieu as the arena in which we act and interact (Bourdieu 1992: 45). Within this field people assume a certain habitus - written and unwritten rules - which
the Dalits must to relate to. The habitus of the Dalit women involves being considered untouchable by the higher castes, by their own community, and by their own families.

Strandberg (2002) argues that living in a society in which you are subordinated to different kinds of oppressions often leads to a situation where power structures become normalized and the powerless start to consider their own subordinated position as natural or justified (Strandberg 2002). This is what happened to the Dalit women. During all their life they have suffered symbolic violence, becoming indoctrinated that they are worth nothing and told that they cannot do anything about their (so called) predetermined situation. Therefore, because they were told that was what they were born to do, they never thought about questioning the work of manual scavenging. The families of the women depended on them performing the service in order to have all their basic needs satisfied. If the women did not work, who would then feed the family? In the end, this became an internalized truth which laid the ground for their outlook on life - their doxa. This finding is in agreement with Molloy (Mattson 2010), who showed that we often accept ingrained and obvious patterns rather than challenge them; we explain them away and conceal them (Mattson 2010: 32). Doxa, as well as their social position, may therefore explain why they were so skeptical about the Garima activist, and thus were unable to consider themselves rhetorical actors capable of change. However, the regular visits from the Garima activists finally paid off – the women stopped the practice, something which supports the argument that awareness enables change (Strandberg 2002, Khors Cambell 2003, Mattson 2010: 11).

There seemed to be three arguments finally convincing the women to quit work as manual scavengers. The first alone relates to their dignity. This argument is very interesting from a rhetorical perspective, since dignity and Dalits may be seen antithetical to each other. Dignity is something positive, while the Dalits are seen as the most impure group in the Indian society. Connecting Dalits with dignity may therefore seem as provoking by the rest of society - but for the Dalits, the word in itself is empowering. Secondly, it was about the knowledge of their human rights, which further supports Strandberg's (2002), Khors Campbell's (2003) and Mattson's (2010) reasoning that awareness may lead to change. The third argument is an important argument consisted of the bringing up of the fact that their children were mistreated in school and the women did not want their children to feel bad about their situation in society.
Their decision to stop the practice was, however, met with threats and harassment from the rest of society, but also with violence, since many women were beaten by their husbands. This means that the women were subject to double punishment, both for performing the chore and for wanting to stop it, and it is obvious from this study that the status of being untouchable existed even on the level of the family.

In addition to this, the present study was designed to investigate how participation in the Garima Empowerment group affected the self-image of the women. As I wrote under 3.2 Empowerment, Khors Cambell argues that women who organize in small groups may create awareness of their situation through shared experience, and hence transform the personal into something political. This is exactly what is happening in the Garima Empowerment group: women identify themselves with other women in a similar situation, thus creating situational awareness. The women who I interviewed described the Garima Empowerment group in only positive words, claiming that the participation has given them a greater self-esteem as well as more power to influence their own life situation: “we can stand in front of the police and other authorities, talking about our rights”. To me, this is a strong indication that the women have left their role as a victim behind, moving away from the role into which they were born. This new role means that the women actually have acquired a certain power to effect change. They have taken up the position of rhetorical actors. Thus it can be said that they, to some extent, have become "empowered". The results are in agreement with the idea of Calman (1989), who argues that movements, aside from creating an outward change in society, also may generate personal change in the participants. Ricoeur, too, argues that telling and listening to a story creates an understanding of the past as well as a pre-understanding of the future, and sees the life story as a way of personal understanding (Ekman 2004: 17).

The results presented here highlight the importance of communication in making the women empowered. By talking about their struggles together with other women with similar experiences, the former manual scavengers may overcome the loneliness following the distress of manual scavenging, instead getting to experience a sense of community and unity (Öhlén 2004). This strength and understanding, enabled by communication, is created in their role as activists struggling to free Dalit women still practicing this inhuman toil. For example, they can say: “we got rid of the disgusting practice by burning our baskets, when would you give up?”, thereby using identification to persuade other the women still engaged in the practice to quit.
6.1 Implications of the study and further research

Even though the former manual scavengers, through their stories, seem more empowered, it is interesting to reflect, from the perspective of outsider, on what their life actually appears like. "Everything is good now" they say. But is it really? And can you trust that what they say is what they really think? These are questions that will now be addressed.

On the question of whether their life quality has improved, my answer is yes - if only you would compare their present situation to what it was like before. However, things are not satisfactory just yet. This study confirms that Dalits still are associated with untouchability, illustrated by their answers to my question about moving into the village: "yes, we would like to move into the village but it is impossible, the higher castes would not let us". Their idea of the impossibility of moving into the village and the acceptance of their inferior situation might thus confirm the theory of Bourdieu theory of symbolic violence. It seems clear that, despite the awareness of them, the social structures are still present as a part in the bodies of the women.

The strict distinction of the caste system between clean and unclean, worthy and unworthy thus remains something highly visible in Indian society. It may be easy for an outsider to notice the how prevalent discriminatory practices are within the Indian borders. However, for most of the Indians, this is part of everyday life. Therefore, it is difficult to assign some specific person or group the responsibility for the difficult situation of the Dalits (in this case the manual scavengers), because the perception of the place of the Dalits in society is so deeply rooted in the doxa of the common person. It rather seems like their situation is caused by structures permeating Indian society as a whole. A future study investigating the opinion of the Dalit situation of higher caste people would therefore be very interesting. What would it take for them to change their perception of the Dalits? What do they think would be required for Dalits to become an integral part of Indian society? This is an investigation that should be done, differing in perspective from that of the present study and also highlighting the question if the higher castes believe that the Dalits have themselves to blame for their predicament.

Another question which needs to be asked is the one regarding whether the women would have described their situation as “a hell” when they were still involved in the practice, or if the ability to express this in words is something that only came about after years of discussion and reflection in the Garima Empowerment groups? A future study investigating the stories of
women still performing manual scavenging would therefore be of great interest. A comparison of the two studies would have revealed the progress in empowerment and awareness among the women in my study.
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**Figures and pictures**

**Fig 1:** *Pyramid of the caste system.* Markville history. n.d. Available at: http://www.markville.ss.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/history/religion/caste_system_overview.html. Accessed: 1 of August 2012.
