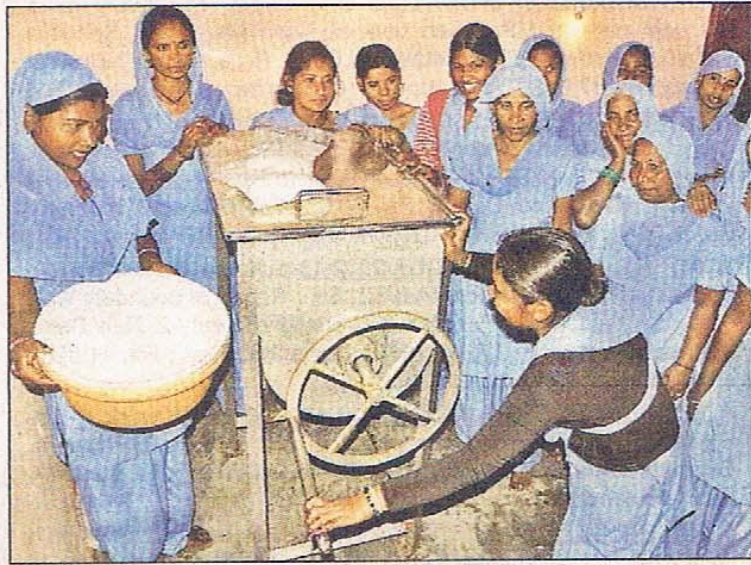
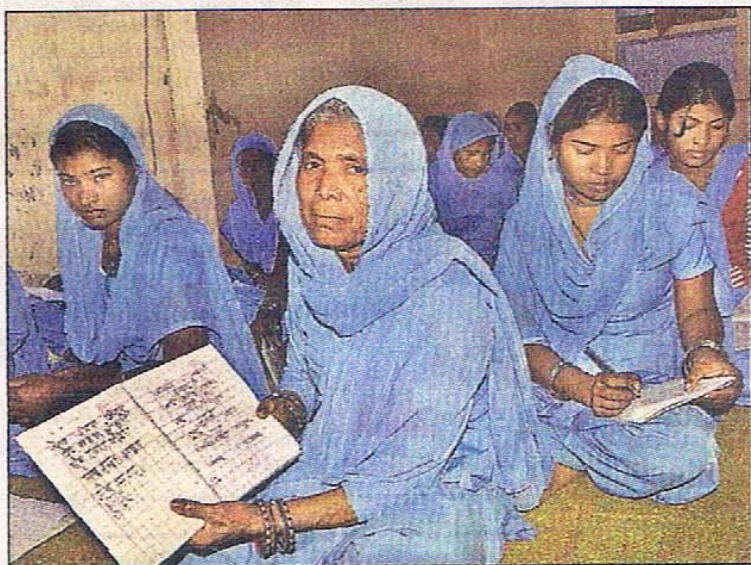


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Moving ahead in dignified manner



Women, who worked as manual scavengers in Ghaziabad, learn to read and write. (Right) They learn to make washing powder. SAKIB ALI/HT

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GHAZIABAD: Sixty-five-year-old Ballo, who earlier worked as a manual scavenger, is now learning to read and write and trying to master her stitching art. Also, she is learning to make washing powder at Nekpur village in Murad Nagar town of Ghaziabad — 60km from the national Capital. Her daughter-in-law Suman, 35, also accompanies her.

Ballo and Suman are among 21 women, who were earlier engaged in manual scavenging work at Nekpur village. Now, these women have joined a facility that aims to provide financial empowerment to them. The facility is being run by Sulabh International, a social service organisation.

Recalling her days as a

manual scavenger, Ballo said, "She was forced by her in-laws to adopt the family practise of lifting human excreta from temporary toilets in the locality."

"When I recall how I used to lift human excreta from temporary toilets — with the help of a metal piece and dumped it in my basket — it gives me goosebumps. Each time I used to put the basket on my head, I had to cover my face with my dupatta to avoid the stench and shame as I crossed the streets," she said.

The trend continued even after her daughter-in-law Suman arrived. She, too, was forced to lift human excreta on her head. "We opened a shop and tried to start some small-time occupation. But no one came to us," she said.

Like Ballo and Suman,

24-year-old Priyanka also resisted her in-laws' order of adopting the practise, but had to give in.

Preeti, 23, shared similar views. "After I started working as a manual scavenger, I developed some health problems. But I had no other choice to support my family. I felt that people wanted all our generations to do the same job till I joined this facility," she said.

But the plight of such women changed for the better when Sulabh International constructed more than 100 permanent toilets in the village in August 2012.

"Constructing permanent toilets was the only way to help these women. In our facility, we teach the women how to read and write. We also impart training in vocational jobs to them," said Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International.

Now, the women are studying and learning skills such as stitching, preparing washing powder, etc, to support their families. Now, they can even sign cheques in English.

"We never thought we could earn in a dignified manner. Earlier, my children could not study at school due to social stigma. Now, they go to school. Things are changing, but more needs to be done for our uplift," said Baleshri, 35.

When HT contacted Monika Rani, sub-divisional magistrate (Modi Nagar), she said during her 7-8 month tenure in the area she did not receive any complaint of women manual scavengers. "We will ask the block development officer to get the things checked and submit a report," she said.

