

## Exploration of living conditions of a marginalized community: A case study on Harijan Community Settlement, Kastoghar Sweeper's Colony, Sylhet

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### Abstract

Although sweepers play a crucial role in our society, they are frequently subjected to disregard and contempt in the social paradigm of Bangladesh. Their occupation includes the removal and disposal of human waste and other forms of garbage, so indisputably enhancing the cleanliness and hygiene of our living environments. Regrettably, the economic and lifestyle conditions in this town are highly unsatisfactory. In Bangladesh, where the Muslim population is the majority, the Hindu minority is further segregated into many castes. Sweepers are the most marginalized and deprived group. They are deemed "unclean" and reside in segregated communities, distinct from the "clean" factions. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we acknowledge their valuable contribution to society and furnish them with the essential provisions they need in order to sustain themselves. The goals of this study were to uncover the genuine levels of housing contentment among the inhabitants of the Harijan sweeper colony, Sylhet, to acquire useful knowledge about the needs and experiences of the residents and to utilize this information to provide recommendations to enhance the living conditions of the community. The methodology involved physical survey, interview to collect primary data along analyzing relevant secondary data from diverse sources. The findings indicate that the households are deficient in socio-economic and civic amenities, such as education and healthcare services. Both the government and private sector should proactively enhance their means of subsistence by enhancing their living conditions and guaranteeing universal access to all rights and amenities available to the public

**Keywords:** Harijan Community; Sweeper's Colony; Low Income Housing; Civic amenities; Living environments

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, opinions have changed significantly on how housing provision should be made for low-income families in Third World countries. In the 1960s and even into the 1970s, despite the fact that historically housing had been an individual responsibility and that is in the economic sense [1]. The role of housing is part of the social environment rather than the personal environment. That is why the reputation of an area and the people living in that area are stronger predictors of resident's psychosocial benefits, such as autonomy, comfort, and status [2,3]. Satisfactory housing quality has evident connection with the mental health and personal relations [4]. Despite having several public housing facilities for different income groups along constitutional obligation to ensure equal opportunity for all citizens, housing environment and facilities remained below the optimum level for low-income groups in Bangladesh [5].

Sweepers are marginalized and undervalued group in Bangladesh [6] commonly known as 'methor' in Bangladesh, though nowadays in Chittagong city they are called "Shebok" which means helper. They were named 'Harijan' (son of God) by Mahatma Gandhi [7]. They are also called "Dalit" (suppressed or broken into pieces). Their service to the society never brought them any recognition, rather they are considered as 'untouchable' by the society. There are about 3.5 to 5.5 million sweepers in Bangladesh today. About 300 years ago sweepers were brought to this country by the British colonial rulers. They were mainly from Madras, Kanpur, Hyderabad and some other places of South India. They were

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the low caste peoples among the Indian Hindu communities and were generally very poor people and came here with a hope for better life. They were given jobs which involved cleaning public places, removing human sludge from pit latrines etc. Because it is their only profession, it has become their traditional job. Someone born in a sweeper family has no other choice than becoming a sweeper thus being confined in invisible captivity [6].

In the past, it has been prohibited for the sweepers to hire community centres or go to restaurants. They were even not allowed to pass by the houses of the elite Hindus. The harijans also could not send their children to schools because they were mistreated as untouchable. They were deprived of healthy housing facilities. Their housing sites were intolerably filthy. There was no gas and electricity connection and they suffered because of water and sanitation problems. Unavailability of potable water was another severe problem that often has created unrest in the community. As a result, the community had to pass miserable times in their day-to-day life. Their rights to civic amenities were always neglected. Thus they always remained socially excluded because of their profession. Scarcity of safe drinking water in sweeper colonies all over the country is common. Along with this, inaccessibility to improved latrines has increased their daily sufferings to the utmost [6]. Therefore, it is essential to ensure a better living environmental for the sweeper dwellers. Poor housing is responsible for the social, physical, and mental diseases of the occupants and maladjustment of a different kind, which are barriers to economic development [8]. This study will depict an explicit exemplary image on the housing condition of Sweepers in Bangladesh.

## 2. Methodology

A preliminary field survey has been conducted along user group interview. Additionally, secondary sources of data such as journals, newspapers, and magazines have been thoroughly investigated during literature review phase. The specified colony accommodates a total of 117 households. 92 households were selected from these 117 households to collect data. The focus was to examine the social circumstances and living environment assessment of the sweeper colony. A thorough analysis has been carried out on different utility services and community facilities in the colony. This encompassed various amenities such as lodging facilities, water, electricity, gas supply, pedestrian facilities within the colony, educational institutions, drainage systems etc. Inhabitant's perception and satisfaction levels concerning these services and facilities have been recorded by on spot interview and observations.

## 3. Study area

### 3.1. Site location



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361597742>

**Figure 1** Study area location



**Figure 2** Study area includes three accommodation buildings and surrounding land use

### 3.2. Site brief

Sylhet is the north-eastern division of Bangladesh that includes the city of Sylhet which is the administrative center of this division. It is one of the most economically important cities in Bangladesh after Dhaka and Chittagong. Century old tea industries, rich cultural and historic value along with popular tourism destinations added special identity to this place.

The site is located almost at the center of the city and has fairly compact settlements all around. It is a highly inhabited place. Total site area is 38 decimals (0.38 acres). There is a 15 feet wide road which is serving as the access road to the study site. Nearest major city transportation vein is a 40 feet wide road northward of the site. The property is surrounded by commercial enterprises, including hardware stores, motels, restaurants, and a few residential blocks. There is no green area on the site. There are open drains across the area. There are no schools or medical facilities nearby.

## 4. Field Survey and findings

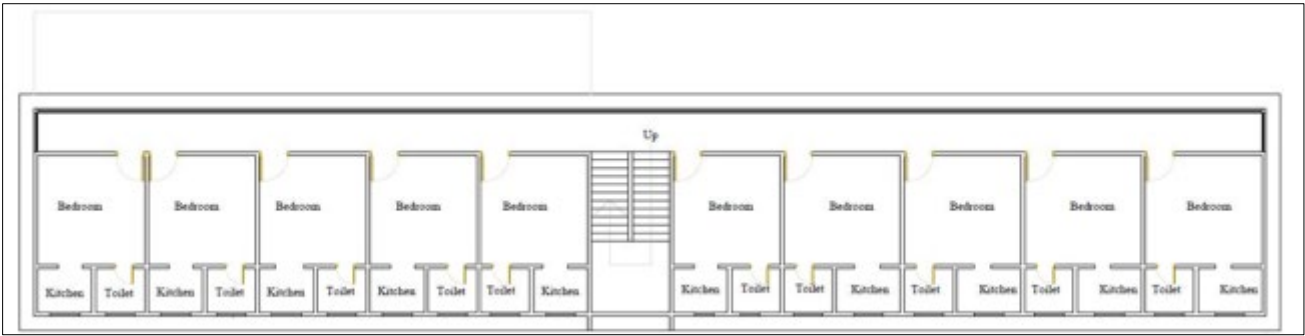
### 4.1. Facilities for housing

This research takes into account the basic demand for accommodation in Bangladesh, as stated in the country's constitution. The study area contains three buildings consists of three, four, and six stories. All

three accommodation buildings have been surveyed. The respondents of building 1 and 2 stated that each family was given a single room by the municipal authority. Due to the lack of adequate living space, these small living spaces are being used by extended families with members of new generation. This particular issue has been pointed out as the common major complain by the residents. It's challenging for a joint family to manage all the domestic tasks in one space. Adding more rooms or walls to a house might create unintended outdoor spaces. In some cases, residents attempt to add extra space with their rooms or partitioned the room to accommodate their living needs. The indoor area is crowded with basic furnishings, gasoline, clothing, food, water, and everyday necessities. However, the newest building counted as building 3 in this study contains better facilities compared to the older two.

### 4.2. Building- 01

Date of establishment: 1986; Storey number: 3; Total family: 30; Per floor family: 10; Total inhabitant: 360 (approximate); Total room: 30; Per room with: 1 attached kitchen, toilet & prayer space; Central veneration space; (named as Om Harijan Sangha Puja Mandir)



Source: Author

Figure 3 Typical floor plan (Building 1)

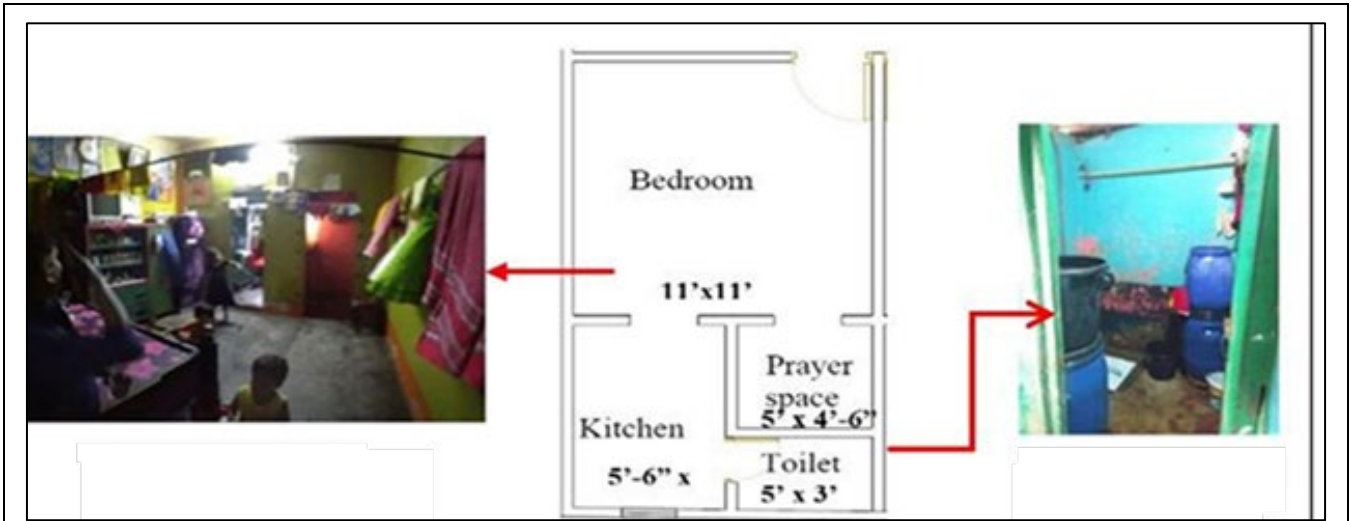
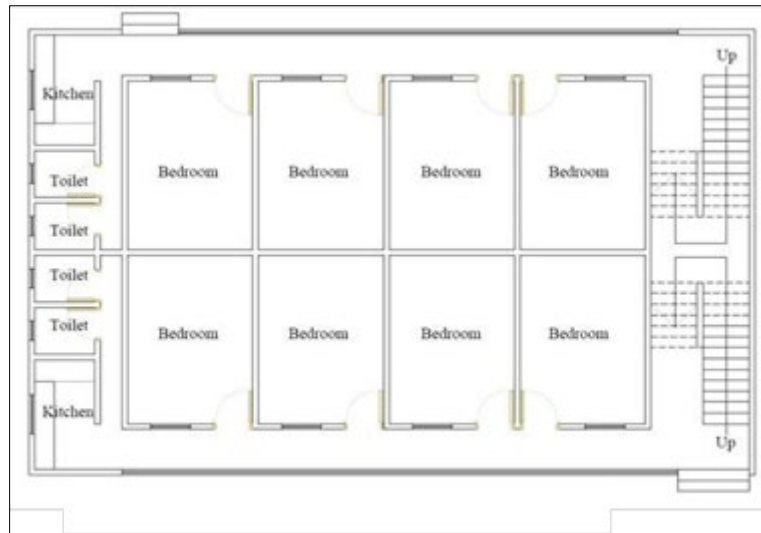


Figure 4 Bedroom	Figure 5 Typical Room Plan	Figure 6 Toilet & Wash
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Source: Author

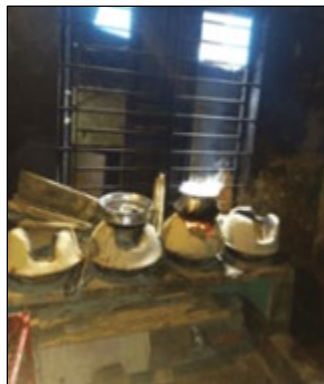
4.3. Building-02

Date of establishment: 2008; Storey number: 4; Total family: 32; Per floor family: 8; Total inhabitant: 340 (approximate); Total room: 32; 1 combined kitchen (with 4 mud stove) for 4 families; 2 toilet & 2 bathroom for 4 family; No prayer space; Corridor is used as both circulation & storage



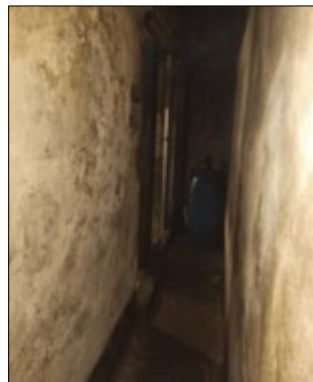
Source: Author

**Figure 7** Typical floor Plan



Source: Author

**Figure 8** Kitchen

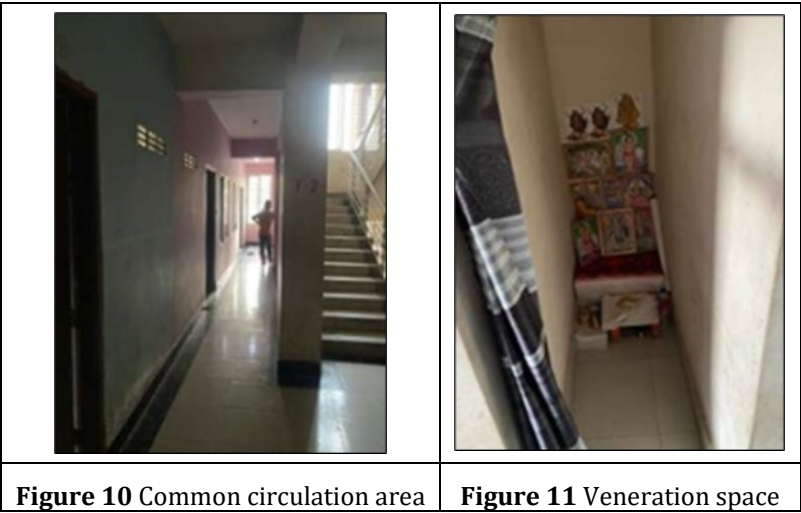


Source: Author

**Figure 9** Corridor to Toilets

There is a high population density, which means that people are squeezed into limited places. Unfortunately, the room does not have sufficient ventilation. It is not possible to achieve the expectations since the corridor area is restricted, and there is not sufficient circulation. The cooking area, the bathroom and the toilet all have insufficient space to accommodate them due to a lack of personal space. At current time, there is no health complex in existence. One of the

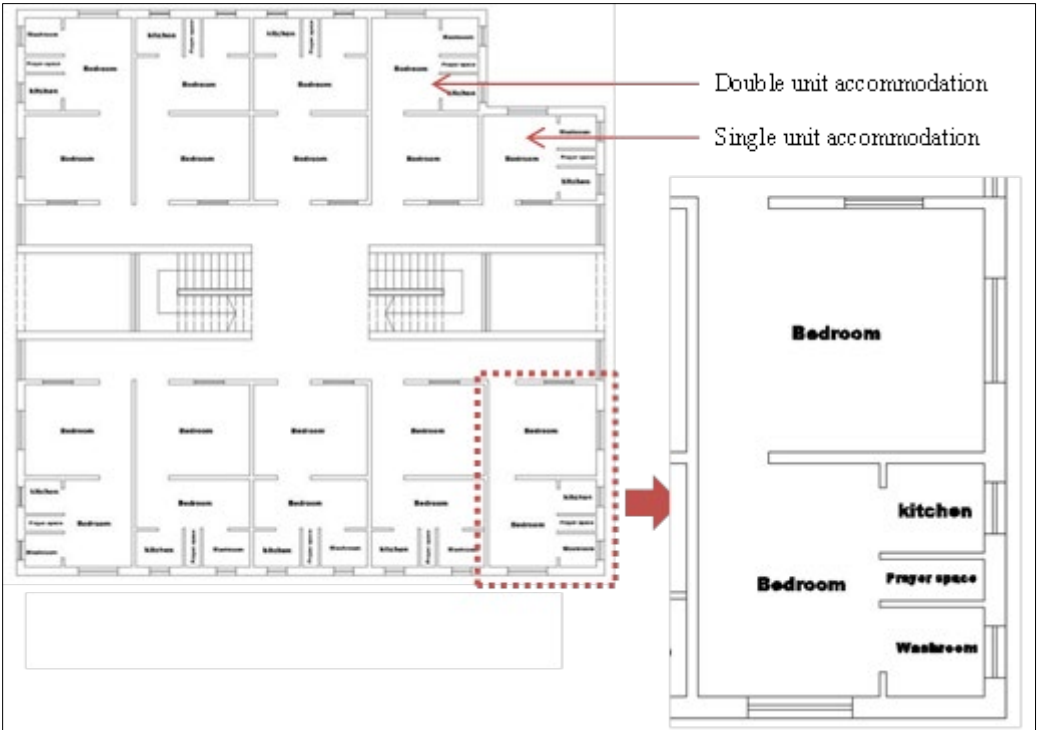
issues is that there are not enough educational facilities. This location does not have any green space, recreational space or playground that can be found anywhere in the vicinity. Celebrations of religious significance do not have a site that is ideal for their holding. There are no storage facilities available.



Source: Author

4.4. Building-03

Date of establishment: 2022; Storey number: 6; Total family number: 55; Per floor family: 10 (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> floor), 5 (ground floor); Total inhabitant: 300+ (approximate); Total room: 99 # Each unit has 1 attached toilet, prayer space, kitchen space; No storage



Source: Author

Figure 12 Typical floor plan (Building 3)



#### 4.5. Water Supply

Despite the fact that the local administration equipped the colony with a single water pump for domestic and sanitation purposes, this pump is not adequate to meet the requirements of one thousand people. Due to the absence of a tube well, residents of the sweeper colony need to purchase water in order to drink it.

#### 4.6. Gas Supply

Within the Sweepers settlement, the municipality does not offer natural gas services. Gas cylinders are utilized for the purpose of cooking by the people who live in the colony. Respondents are extremely dissatisfied since they have done nothing to ensure the supply of this facility.

#### 4.7. Drainage Facilities

Drains are exposed, filthy constructions that cause health issues in the colony. Waterlogging occurs during the rainy season due to excess drainage water. Due to a lack of open space, wastewater enters homes and causes significant harm to the colony's residents. Drains are not deep enough to collect wastewater from the entire area. The drains do not have sufficient capacity. Insufficient capacity leads to waterlogging and pollution in the colony. 75% of respondents are unsatisfied with this facility, while the remainder is displeased with the colony's drainage systems. None of them reported satisfaction with the drainage facilities. The colony's unhappiness stems from poor drain quality and insufficient capacity.



**Figure 13** Drainage



**Figure 14** Narrow pedestrian circulation

Source: Author

#### 4.8. Solid Waste Management

An integrated approach to the management of solid waste is one of the key issues that must be taken into account in order to keep the environment free of contamination. In the area that is being considered, unfortunately, there is no infrastructure in place for the collection of rubbish. Consequently, as a result of this, individuals toss trash into the body of water that is located in close proximity to them according to Figure 9. The trash in question is a contributor to the degradation of the water and air in the vicinity of the colony, which in turn poses a risk to the health of the colony.

#### 4.9. Pedestrian Facilities in the Settlement

The pedestrian facility is completely unplanned within the settlement. Pedestrian routes are often built of dirt with no pavement. Poor pedestrian facilities in the colony are caused by a lack of open space, narrow pedestrian routes, lower road heights, and open drains. Drainage and transportation facilities are integrated. During the wet season, the area suffers from waterlogging caused by inadequate drainage systems. Figure 12 depicts the locations of the pedestrian roads within the research region.

#### 4.10. System of Security

Elements of liberty, human rights, and legal rights are all relevant to the quality of living environment security. Protection of legal rights is another important dimension of security. The findings of the study indicate that inhabitants of these residences have a considerable amount of discontent with the security system. The primary issues contributing to the bad quality of the security system are the lack of street lights, the prevalence of drug addiction among the sweepers, the economic disrepair and the practice of usury.

#### 4.11. Facility for Community Service

In terms of local social phenomena, Inhabitants living in these residences have been considered as the lower castes of the Hindu communities. Within this compact settlement, there are two temples that are commonly used. Every family has a prayer room within their home for their veneration setup. Flowers, water, lamps, and other implements are used in their worship. Even though they consume wine during the marriage ceremony and other occasions, there are instances which it leads to social violence within the colony.

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### 5. Discussion

The study indicates that the people of the sweeper colony in Kastogarh, Sylhet, are highly unsatisfied with their living circumstances, housing amenities, and utility services. They lead their lives in a harsh and deprived reality. They lack adequate housing, sanitation and healthcare among other deficiencies. They are deprived of fundamental constitutional rights. Their livelihoods are adversely affected by rapid population increase, an inequitable political hierarchy, a stagnating economy, prolonged poverty, and inadequate governmental activities. They exhibited a heightened degree of dissatisfaction. There is a clear correlation between the amount of satisfaction with sanitary services and the proportion of unhappiness among the populace. However, the colonial sweepers are substantially behind in terms of schooling. Although the colony is tasked with the responsibility of maintaining cleanliness in public bathrooms, sewers, and other facilities, it lacks a sufficient waste management system. Neither the government nor NGOs have made any endeavors to establish a self-sustaining colony that generates zero waste. The introduction of wastewater into residential units inside the colony leads to numerous difficulties for the residents. The existing depth of the drain is inadequate to fully capture all of the wastewater generated by the entire colony. This inadequacy leads to the buildup of water and the contamination of water bodies in the residential vicinity. The absence of open space, insufficient width of pedestrian walkways, exposed drains, and integrated drainage works are all attributed to the settlement. Waterlogging occurs due to the presence of open and inadequate drainage systems during the rainy season. The security in the low-income colonies is highly commendable, which greatly satisfies the residents, who usually make a conscious effort to avoid such regions. However, community service is greatly lacking. In general, it could be contended that the survival of the village's inhabitants was entirely due to happenstance.

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### 6. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to assess the current state of the living environment and service amenities in the Kastoghar sweeper colony, as well as to investigate the housing conditions in terms of housing facilities. Furthermore, this research would be helpful for planners and architects in formulating policies and design decisions for the future development of the sweeper colony or any other low-income dwelling area in a comparable setting. Such kind of study would also be helpful to draw attention of the municipal authority about the quality of living and relevant maintenance issues over the Sweeper colony accommodation. It is explicit that, due to social and economic disrepair, people of Harijan community are still deprived of proper housing facility. The government should take necessary measure to ensure healthy living environment in the sweeper colony of Harijan community in Sylhet as well as in other cities of Bangladesh. Planners, Architects and researchers from relevant fields can play vital role to provide solutions in terms of physical environment design along sustainable policy making on this regard. In conclusion, the results of this inquiry have demonstrated the actual present status of the environmental and living condition of the Harijan community in Sylhet city along shedding light on urgency to meet their fundamental human need.

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### Compliance with ethical standards

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#### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

Authors declare no conflicts of interests.



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