

Dear Prof. Agrawal,

This letter is in continuation with our previous letters in the last few weeks, to express our profound concern regarding the rights of the Dhobis at IITK, who have been providing an essential service to the IITK community for a long time. We write as concerned alumni, as former students who have benefited from the service of the Dhobi community.

It is mind-boggling to learn that the IITK Estate Officer and some other representatives of the Institute continue to assert that the Dhobis were illegally occupying the land and issuing eviction notices. It is a fact that they have been working in that area to wash, dry, store the laundry, etc. for decades. Because of the necessary infrastructure to enable their livelihoods, the existing sheds served as shelters too – often the entire family plays a role in this process. They have allotment papers, have paid electricity bills, have entry permits etc. It is indeed remarkable that the Estate Officer and the Institute have refused to accept the relevant documentation from the community directly during the statutory “hearings”, only admitting the same when sent through postal means. The basic fact is that Dhobis have been there, ever since they were invited and given their place of work when IITK was established on this campus, under the leadership of our first director, Dr. Kelkar.

Whether these evictions are motivated by the need of land for the buildings or the safety reasons for the existing structures, or yet another reason, it is not clear to us. What is clear though is the fact that the Dhobis have never refused a potential move; they have simply asked for an alternative place with a water source for washing, an area for drying, and a place for ironing and storing clothes.

Instead of exploring to find an alternative and a win-win situation for both the Dhobis to continue providing an essential service to staff and students on the campus and IITK's need for infrastructure development, the Institute's representatives appear to have engaged in deceit and intimidation. Remarkably, such a treatment is being met to the Dalit community at today's date and time, and we certainly hope that this was not the Institute's intention.

The students' community, both former and current, have shown deep concern on the issue of Dhobis in the campus. The current AA president, Mr. Rakesh Sharma, with whom we have spoken in detail, had a chance to meet physically with the Dhobis in campus. We learned that a few weeks ago, a meeting was held with the Student Gymkhana president, Rakesh Sharma, and that you were also present for which we are grateful to you. Again, we have learned, from different sources including Vox Populi, that in a recently held emergency meeting of Committee of

Students for Hostel Affairs (CoSHA), the current students have discussed the single agenda concerning Dhobi issue. Given all these assurances, we would like you to please confirm the following:

- The Dhobis will be able to continue to work on the campus and will be provided with proper and adequate documents and infrastructural support so that they continue to provide much-needed essential service to the community. Any new infrastructure should not be temporary but robust to ensure safety and durability.
- They will not be intimidated by the threats of eviction or bulldozing.
- That any effort toward mechanization with an objective of energy efficiency should be based on a rigorous study which considers inputs from all the stakeholders including Dhobi community and students. It should also be balanced with social factors such as loss of livelihood etc.

We certainly do not want to see our Institute become an intimidating body issuing “legal notices” that are degrading or threatening, especially when they claim falsehoods. We as alumni expect our alma mater to strive for a sense of community, compassion, respect for our fellow human beings with the values learned through our HSS education, which was a hallmark and a pride of education at IITK.

Even our Indian leaders have stated that they want all citizens of India to live in dignity and work to build a strong prosperous India. Article 21 of Indian constitution brings this point unequivocally; it secures right to life and right to personal liberty, which has been construed through several judgments as the right to live with human dignity and the right to livelihood because no person can live without the means of livelihood.

In the same spirit, we want that our Dhobis can continue to earn their living with dignity as full citizens of India. Notwithstanding their class and caste identities, they should be met with a just treatment and we believe that IITK should take leadership in dealing with them with respect and compassion.

Raj Sahai  
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On behalf of Citizens forum of IITK alumni

