

# The grim reality of manual scavenging in India: A human rights perspective

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## CITATION

Chawla G. (2024). The grim reality of manual scavenging in India: A human rights perspective. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 8(8): 4623. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i8.4623>

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 12 February 2024  
Accepted: 22 April 2024  
Available online: 22 August 2024

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**Abstract:** Manual scavenging refers to the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling human excreta from dry latrines and sewers. It is one of the most dehumanizing and deplorable practices that violate basic human rights and dignity. This practice is linked to India's caste system where so-called lower castes are expected to perform this job. Despite being outlawed in 1993, manual scavenging continues to exist in India due to socio-economic discrimination and lack of rehabilitation of manual scavengers. This paper attempts to provide an in-depth understanding. The harsh realities by qualitative systemic review of manual scavenging in India and how it negatively impacts human rights. It reviews relevant literature on the prevalence, causes, adverse effects, and laws against manual scavenging. The results indicate that manual scavenging is still practiced across many states in India. Manual scavengers face grave health hazards and socio-economic hardships. The laws against manual scavenging have failed to abolish this practice due to administrative apathy, lack of rehabilitation support for liberated scavengers, and continued prevalence of dry latrines necessitating manual disposal of excreta. The paper emphasizes the need for more concerted efforts by the government and civil society to end manual scavenging to uphold human rights, dignity, and justice for all. There is an urgent need for extensive awareness campaigns, social support, and proper rehabilitation of liberated scavengers into alternative professions.

**Keywords:** manual scavenging; sanitation; caste; rehabilitation; human rights

## 1. Introduction

Manual scavenging refers to the inhuman practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling human excreta from dry latrines and sewers (Narayan, 2014). This practice involves manually removing human excreta from bucket latrines or pit latrines by using basic tools such as buckets, brooms, metal scrapers, etc. (Doron and Jeffrey, 2018). The excreta is loaded into cane baskets or buckets and disposed off or cleaned from open drains. Manual scavengers are exposed to highly toxic gases like ammonia and carbon monoxide and direct contact with human waste each day (SR Sankaran, 2018).

Manual scavenging is one of the worst surviving symbols of untouchability linked to India's appalling caste system where so-called lower castes' have been condemned historically to clean human waste, considered impure in Hinduism (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This is a gross violation of basic human rights, dignity, health, and justice.

The caste system is a sort of social structure that is very widely persisted in India to stress on path of lineage, craft, and social stratification. It traditionally consists of four main varnas or classes: Brahman (the priests and scholars), Kshatriya (the warriors and holders of power), Vaisya (industrious people who trade and carry on business dealings), and Shudra (craftsmen and laborers). Furthermore, there is a category of Dalits (which was identified as the "Untouchables" formerly) that are

forced into perpetual subordination to the being rendered to the caste of the next-to-the-lowest social strata experiencing discrimination and facing social isolation.

Despite being legally abolished in 1993, the practice still persists largely because of the continued existence of dry latrines and socio-economic discrimination. Overwhelming majority of manual scavengers are Dalits, belonging to scheduled castes (Shah et al., 2015). They are compelled to render this labor due to their desperate socio-economic conditions, lack of rehabilitation support, and deep-rooted caste hierarchies perpetuating their historical role as manual scavengers (Hoque, 2024).

The scope of this study is to conduct a qualitative review of the manual sugan system in India to create an overall picture concerning its prevalence, causes, foreseeable dangers, and laws' effectiveness. The research on the existing literature and the dire situation of manual scavengers which include grave health hazards and socio-economic difficulties, has its focus on the long-term challenges and loopholes that have always made way for manual scavenging even though it was forbidden in 1993. Also, it seeks to accentuate the importance of the joint undertaking by the state and civil community to pull down the unpleasant system of manual scavenging and instead uphold human rights, dignity, and justice for all by creating a program that will enable the welfare of the released scavengers to new jobs.

**Tables 1 and 2, Figures 1 and 2,** provide state-wise data on estimated numbers of manual scavengers and households engaged in manual scavenging as per major national surveys and can be used to create graphs and charts depicting the prevalence across different states in India.

**Table 1.** State-wise estimated numbers of manual scavengers in India (2018).

| State          | Estimated Number of Manual Scavengers |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Uttar Pradesh  | 64,785                                |
| Maharashtra    | 24,970                                |
| Rajasthan      | 12,985                                |
| Gujarat        | 10,462                                |
| Madhya Pradesh | 9903                                  |
| Andhra Pradesh | 9123                                  |
| Telangana      | 8416                                  |
| Karnataka      | 8384                                  |
| Tamil Nadu     | 8249                                  |
| Punjab         | 4846                                  |
| Haryana        | 4640                                  |
| Bihar          | 4070                                  |
| Uttarakhand    | 3010                                  |
| West Bengal    | 2670                                  |
| Odisha         | 2430                                  |
| Other States   | 6687                                  |
| Total          | 180,630                               |

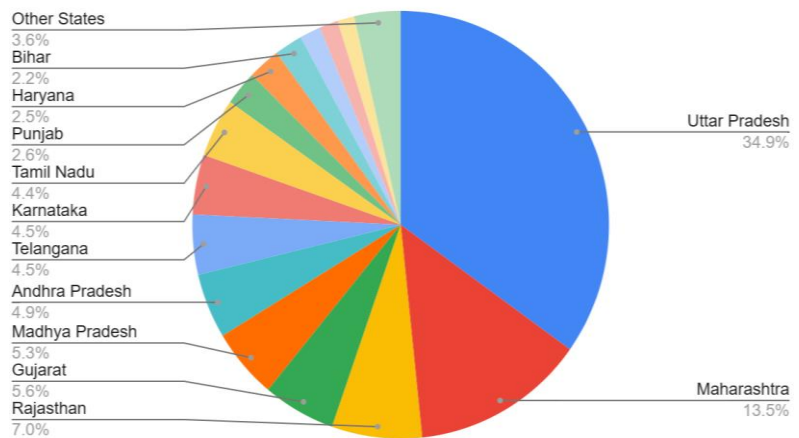
Source: MS Survey (2018).

**Table 2.** State-wise number of manual scavenger households in India (2011).

| State          | Manual Scavenger Households |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Maharashtra    | 63,713                      |
| Madhya Pradesh | 37,379                      |
| Uttar Pradesh  | 32,888                      |
| Tripura        | 28,770                      |
| Karnataka      | 15,375                      |
| Assam          | 12,734                      |
| Haryana        | 11,724                      |
| Gujarat        | 9990                        |
| Punjab         | 9890                        |
| Rajasthan      | 9745                        |
| Other States   | 47,489                      |
| Total          | 2,80,657                    |

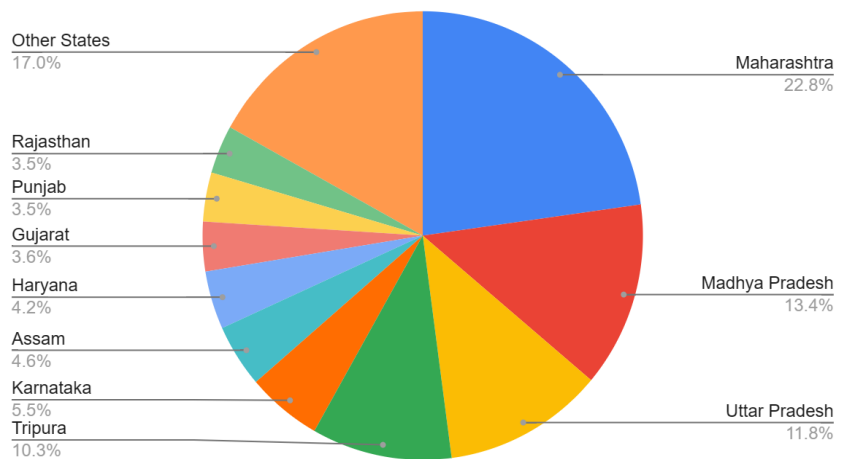
Source: Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) (2011).

Estimated Number of Manual Scavengers



**Figure 1.** Pie-chart representing the state-wise estimated numbers of manual scavengers in India (2018).

Manual Scavenger Households



**Figure 2.** Pie-chart representing the state-wise number of manual scavenger households in India (2011).

## **2. Review of literature**

There are several studies and reports that have examined the persistence of manual scavenging in India even after it was legally abolished. These highlight the lack of political and administrative will to end this practice.

A survey conducted by Safai Karamchari Andolan found that there were still more than 130,000 manual scavengers across India in 13 states as of June 2018 despite laws against this practice (Dheeraj Mishra, 2018). Another study estimated that up to 260,000 individuals were engaged in manual scavenging for their livelihood (Doron and Jeffrey, 2018). Most manual scavengers belong to Dalit communities in rural areas (Human Rights Watch, 2014; NCAER, 2010).

The socio-economic vulnerabilities and caste-based discrimination against Dalit communities is a key reason why they are forced into this inhuman profession (Singh, 2017). A study found that 98% of manual scavengers in India are Dalits and within this, 95% are women (Shah et al., 2015). Another survey across 4 states revealed 97% of women workers engaged in manual scavenging are Dalits (UN Women, 2014). Dalits have limited access to education, land ownership and alternative livelihoods options, perpetuating their dependence on manual scavenging to earn a living (Hoque, 2024).

The lack of proper rehabilitation is another major cause for the continuation of manual scavenging. A study on the status of rehabilitation programs in 5 states found major gaps in their implementation (Hoque, 2024) The budget allocated for rehabilitation schemes is inadequate and there is lack of inter-departmental coordination in execution of programs at state level. Monitoring committees are ineffective (SR Sankaran, 2018). Many liberated scavengers face challenges in availing loans, acquiring new skills, gaining acceptance in alternative professions, and sustaining livelihoods with dignity (Mander, 2014).

The building of new dry latrines and continued manual cleaning of septic tanks and sewers necessitates the persistence of manual scavenging (Mander, 2014). The insanitary latrines require manual scavengers to lift excreta by hand and carry it for disposal at dumping sites. Despite dry latrines being illegal, the pace of their demolition has been lethargic (Human Rights Watch, 2014). There are still millions of bucket and pit latrines in both rural and urban areas. Authorities have failed to modernize the sanitation system and provide access to flush latrines, Sewage Treatment Plants (STP) and sanitation infrastructure.

The studies indicate that deeply entrenched caste attitudes, lack of accountability of authorities and negligence in enforcing laws has allowed manual scavenging to persist despite legal ban. There is a need for stringent enforcement, extensive awareness drives, socio-economic empowerment of scavengers and modernization of sanitation infrastructure to abolish this practice.

## **3. Materials and methods**

This study utilizes a qualitative review and analysis of existing literature on the prevalence of manual scavenging across India. Relevant books, journal articles, civil society reports, and news reports on manual scavenging published in the past decade were reviewed. The secondary data from these sources was analyzed to determine the

following:

- 1) State-wise prevalence of manual scavenging: Government websites: For example, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in India may provide relevant statistics. Reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on sanitation issues.
- 2) Key causes and factors behind the continuation of this practice: Academic journals: Websites like PubMed, JSTOR, or Google Scholar may have research articles on this topic. Reports from human rights organizations and advocacy groups.
- 3) Discriminatory caste attitudes that perpetuate it: Websites of organizations specializing in caste-based discrimination and Dalit rights. Scholarly articles available on academic databases.
- 4) Adverse socio-economic and health effects on manual scavengers: Reports from healthcare organizations and NGOs working with manual scavengers. Research articles available on academic databases.
- 5) Gaps in rehabilitation support and livelihood options: Reports from government agencies responsible for rehabilitation programs. Studies and reports from NGOs and civil society organizations advocating for manual scavengers' rights.
- 6) Failures in implementing laws against manual scavenging: Reports from human rights organizations documenting instances of non-compliance or inadequate enforcement. Legal research articles analyzing the enforcement of anti-manual scavenging laws.
- 7) Recommendations on ways to abolish this practice by various civil society organizations: Websites of NGOs and advocacy groups focusing on sanitation and human rights issues. Reports and campaign materials developed by civil society organizations.

The analysis helps develop a holistic understanding into the harsh ground realities of manual scavenging and why its eradication remains a challenge. The evidence indicates poor implementation of laws, lack of accountability of authorities and negligence in modernizing sanitation infrastructure as key reasons for continuation of manual scavenging despite legal ban. Caste discrimination, poverty and lack of livelihood options confines the Dalit community to this inhuman profession. The degrading working conditions and lack of rehabilitation support violates basic human rights of the manual scavengers.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. State-wise prevalence of manual scavenging**

The practice of manual scavenging is most prevalent in the following states as per the Safai Karmachari Andolan survey in 2018 (Dheeraj Mishra, 2018):

- Uttar Pradesh: 64,785
- Maharashtra: 24,970
- Rajasthan: 12,985
- Gujarat: 10,462

Other states with sizable numbers include Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttarakhand and West

Bengal.

While India has over 200 million bucket and pit latrines, the states with most insanitary, dry latrines requiring manual scavenging are (Doron and Jeffrey, 2018):

- Uttar Pradesh: over 200,000 dry latrines
- Maharashtra: around 100,000 bucket latrines
- Gujarat: around 50,000 dry toilets

According to the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census, 180,657 households are engaged in manual scavenging for a livelihood (Singh, 2017). Among all states, Maharashtra has the highest number of manual scavenger households at 63,713. Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura, Karnataka, Assam and Jammu and Kashmir are other states with large numbers.

#### 4.2. Findings

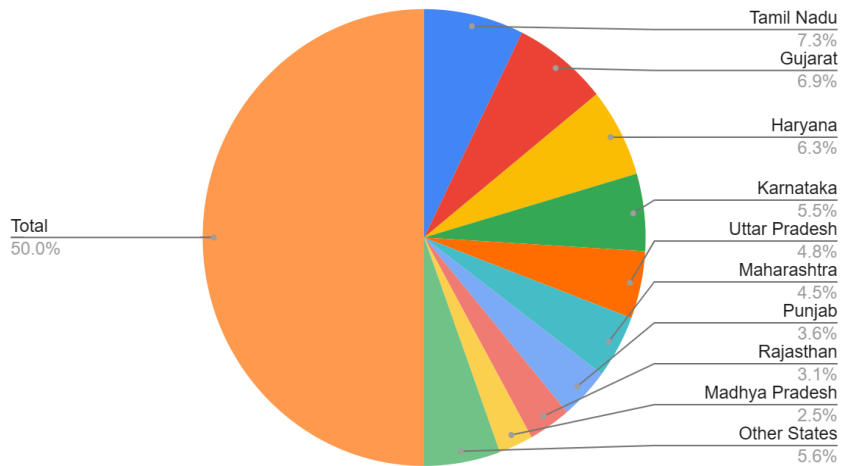
- A survey in 2017 found that there are still 80,630 manual scavengers in the states count and names mentioned in India (Dheeraj Mishra, 2018) in **Table 1**.
- Dalit women constitute 95% of female manual scavengers as per a study (Shah et al., 2015). They face intersectional discrimination due to both caste and gender.
- Children of manual scavengers are also forced into this profession due to lack of education and poverty, continuing the cycle.
- Over 60% of manual scavengers are landless and 90% live in rural areas (SR Sankaran, 2018). This increases their socio-economic vulnerabilities.
- Estimates suggest around 800–1000 manual scavengers die every year from health hazards and accidents while cleaning sewers and septic tanks (Human Rights Watch, 2014).
- Even after rehabilitation, over 75% of formerly manual scavenging households still live Below Poverty Line according to a survey (Hoque, 2024) **Tables 3** and **4**, **Figures 3** and **4** provide state-wise statistics on reported deaths of manual scavengers during 2011–2019 as well as their major causes of death due to the hazardous working conditions. The data can be used to create compelling charts and graphs to support the findings.

**Table 3.** State-wise number of manual scavenging deaths reported (2011–2019).

| State          | Number of Deaths |
|----------------|------------------|
| Tamil Nadu     | 160              |
| Gujarat        | 152              |
| Haryana        | 138              |
| Karnataka      | 120              |
| Uttar Pradesh  | 105              |
| Maharashtra    | 98               |
| Punjab         | 80               |
| Rajasthan      | 68               |
| Madhya Pradesh | 55               |
| Other States   | 122              |
| Total          | 1098             |

Manual scavengers have been identified in 18 States in India (The Hindu, 2019).

Number of Deaths



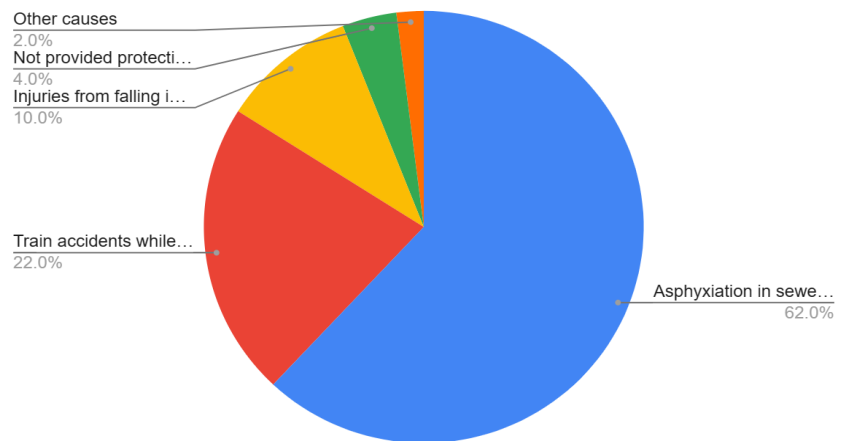
**Figure 3.** Pie chart representing state-wise number of manual scavenging deaths reported (2011–2019).

**Table 4.** Causes of deaths among manual scavengers.

| Cause   | Percentage of Total Deaths |
|---|----------------------------|
| Asphyxiation in sewers/septic tanks             | 62%                        |
| Train accidents while cleaning tracks           | 22%                        |
| Injuries from falling into open drains/manholes | 10%                        |
| Not provided protective gear                    | 4%                         |
| Other causes                                    | 2%                         |
| Total   | 100%                       |

Source: India Today (2023).

Percentage of Total Deaths



**Figure 4.** Pie chart representing the causes of deaths among manual scavengers.

### 4.3. Key causes and contributing factors

The inhumane practice of manual scavenging arises from multiple factors deeply rooted in India’s oppressive caste system, systemic discrimination, lack of modern sanitation infrastructure, government negligence, and inadequate implementation of reforms (Arunbalaji Selvaraj, 2024).

The medieval Hindu caste system has historically categorized certain Dalit sub-

castes like Valmikis as ‘untouchables’ confined to do menial jobs like waste disposal and scavenging (The Hindu, 2023). This has trapped generations of such marginalized communities in an inter-generational cycle of poverty, leaving scavenging as the only livelihood option for entire families. Dalits have been socially ostracized and denied education, resources and capital needed to access alternative professions. This increases their vulnerability to exploitation as manual scavengers.

The persistence of insanitary dry bucket latrines across villages necessitates the manual cleaning of human excreta daily. Such unhygienic on-site sanitation infrastructure perpetuates the inhuman practice of manual scavenging. The Indian government’s failure to modernize sanitation by demolishing existing dry latrines and facilitating access to flush toilets and sewage management reflects the administrative negligence and apathy towards oppressed castes who are compelled to handle other people’s excreta to earn a livelihood (Chhara, 2023).

While laws have been passed prohibiting manual scavenging and construction of new dry latrines, their poor enforcement allows the practice to persist illegally due to lack of political will for reforms and accountability of officials (Diya Rastogi, 2021). Deeply entrenched casteist attitudes in society and discrimination against Dalits also stifles their acceptance in alternative professions even if the practice gets abolished legally. Rehabilitation programs for uplifting marginalized communities out of scavenging too suffer from issues like corruption, lack of coordination across departments, insufficient funding and exclusion errors denying benefits to target populations - resulting in inadequate implementation (Bright et al., 2018).

The interplay of these systemic factors - caste-based oppression, lack of modern sanitation, government negligence, societal discrimination and ineffective enforcement of laws—perpetuates the practice of manual scavenging imposing severe indignities upon the marginalized castes trapped in this inhumane occupation for generations (Wankhede and Kahle, 2023). Strong political commitment coupled with an intersectional strategy encompassing legislative reform, judicious law enforcement, nationwide modernization of sanitation infrastructure, and upliftment through education, resources and alternate livelihood programs can help abolish this practice violating basic human rights (Vice-President of India, 2023).

#### **4.4. Socio-economic adversities faced by manual scavengers**

The practice of manual scavenging arising from India’s caste system subjects the oppressed Dalit communities to extreme socio-economic adversities and abject living conditions amounting to gross human rights violations (Chhara, 2023).

With extremely low wages ranging from Rs. 200–1000 per month, manual scavengers are forced to live in utter destitution in unhygienic slums lacking basic amenities like clean water, electricity or sanitation (Diya Rastogi, 2021). Rampant malnutrition is common among scavenger children arising from poverty and lack of access to adequate food. Recording high incidences of diarrhea, cholera and typhoid, their mortality rates are considerably higher than other social groups due to lack of nutrition, clean water and access to healthcare.

Kept out of the education system historically, the literacy rate among scavenging communities is dismally low. Most have never attended school due to social boycott



and poverty (D + C—Development + Cooperation, 2024). This severely disadvantages them for accessing any skilled employment outside of scavenging which requires barely any formal skills beyond physical labor. Scavenging becomes an inter-generational practice where children of scavengers can aspire to no other profession but to take up the same stigmatized tasks as their parents.

Young girls are compelled to clean human excreta from dry household latrines from a very early age. Many become victims of sexual harassment from male members of households where they work (Kayser et al., 2019). The degrading working conditions devoid of any protective gear pose grave threats to the health and dignity of women scavengers.

Most scavenging families have little or no productive assets. They own neither land nor housing. With no collateral, it becomes impossible to get institutional loans needed for alternative livelihoods. This traps them in debt bondage having to depend on exploitative high-interest private loans from upper caste money-lenders to make ends meet. Scavengers find themselves locked in a vicious cycle of poverty, oppression and humiliation.

The appalling living and working conditions imposed upon manual scavengers highlight the gross indignities arising from a caste system that socially ostracizes, economically disempowers, politically marginalizes, and psychologically demeans entire communities designated as ‘untouchables’. It deprives them of fundamental human rights, dignity and justice (Diya Rastogi, 2021). Uplifting their socio-economic status through education, livelihood programs, access to resources and eliminating caste discrimination is imperative.

#### **4.5. Health hazards and indignities suffered**

Manual scavengers are routinely exposed to severe and often fatal health hazards due to direct contact with human waste without any protective gear leading to a myriad of infectious diseases (Mala et al., 2023).

As they clean human excreta from unsanitary dry latrines or open drains, the toxic gases that get released expose them constantly to chronic ailments of the skin, eyes, lungs, and stomach. The most common afflictions suffered are diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid, trachoma, salmonella and helminth infections. They frequently suffer from nausea, breathlessness, vomiting, itching and anemia.

The lack of gloves, boots, masks or any protective equipment during scavenging leaves them completely vulnerable to the biohazards present in excreta. Women scavengers handling menstrual waste in dry toilets also risk exposure to pathogens causing reproductive tract infections (Nyati et al., 2018).

Those manually cleaning tracks fall prey to fatal accidents by speeding trains. Over 1000 scavengers have died on railway tracks since 1993. Death due to asphyxiation is common when scavengers descend into sewer lines and manholes to unclog them without (The Hindu, 2023). The toxic gasses present inside cause them to lose consciousness after which they drown in the sewage. At least one worker dies every five days due to suffocation while cleaning sewers manually.

A shocking 80 percent of male scavengers die before the age of 60. The average life expectancy of a scavenger is just 40–45 years compared to the national average of

68 years—a direct outcome of chronic ailments they contract much younger from their hazardous work (Cleaning Human Waste, 2023).

Women scavengers face the added indignity of sexual abuse and harassment. The nature of their work entering private households invites lewd comments and sexual violence at the hands of male members who take advantage of their vulnerability which forces them to remain silent.

Having to manually handle and dispose of other people's excreta without any dignity or bodily safeguards poses severe risks of infections and disease to the community. It causes mental trauma stripping them of self-worth having to undertake society's most demeaning tasks due to their oppressed caste status. The systematic denial of their health, dignity and civil liberties is a human rights crisis requiring urgent redressal (Prashant Bhaware, 2022).

Manual scavengers suffer severe and often fatal health hazards (SR Sankaran, 2018).

- 80% of male scavengers die before 60 years due to chronic ailments like hepatitis and respiratory infections caused by direct contact with human waste.
- Around 800–1000 scavengers die every year due to asphyxiation while manually cleaning sewers and septic tanks.
- Women face added vulnerabilities like sexual harassment and abuse.

This violates basic human rights to health, dignity and life free from danger. Authorities fail to provide protective gear, worsening their situation.

#### **4.6. Human rights violation**

Various national and international laws uphold the rights and dignity of manual scavengers. But these laws are frequently violated amounting to gross human rights violations:

- Article 17 of Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability and its practice in any form. But manual scavenging persists.
- Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 bans employment of scavengers and construction of dry latrines requiring manual excreta cleaning. But dry latrines continue to exist necessitating persistence of manual scavenging.
- Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 prohibits manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks without protective equipment. Violations continue unabated.
- UN Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination mandates ending descent-based discrimination against communities forced into manual scavenging.
- Forced labor conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) recognize manual scavenging as being among the worst forms of child and forced labor.

These violations deny marginalized castes their civil liberties, justice and access to alternate dignified means of livelihood - perpetuating their oppression.

The practice arises from the historical injustice of restricting and confining Dalit sub-castes to undertake tasks considered extremely 'polluting' like waste disposal and

latrine cleaning, which relegates them into being ‘untouchables’ within the Hindu caste hierarchy. This historical oppression and forced segregation into degrading tasks continue to deny these depressed classes their fundamental civil rights and liberties even almost seven decades after India’s independence from the British.

By compelling the manual cleaning of human excreta upon marginalized communities, the practice only further perpetuates the segregation into ‘untouchable’ castes right from birth based on the accident of birth in a particular community. This is unethical, unjust and a gross violation of human rights of those condemned historically into undertaking such undignified work that deprives them of alternative livelihood options.

The nature of manually picking up human waste with bare hands and disposing it into baskets exposes the scavengers to serious health hazards due to absence of any protective gear like gloves, masks, proper equipment or healthcare facilities in case of infections. This violates their basic human right to health, dignity and life free from danger and disease.

At least 22,327 manual scavengers have died from 1993 to 2019 while cleaning sewers and septic tanks without ventilation - which amounts to over 50 deaths every month (Pti, 2023). Such fatalities could have been easily prevented if proper protective gear was provided. But casteist attitudes of society, which treats these humans as dispensable, robs them even of the basic right to life.

By denying the scavenging castes access to education, resources, capital and skills training required for alternative livelihoods, they are trapped into the hereditary practice of excreta disposal even today. Depriving entire generations of marginalized communities the knowledge, capabilities and choice to transfer into dignified professions is unethical, unjust and dehumanizing.

The few laws enacted to prohibit manual scavenging have been poorly enforced and monitored. This results in low conviction rates of employers violating the ban indicating the apathetic, if not implicit, acquiescence of local administrations towards continuance of such degrading practices arising from historical oppression of certain castes. The state’s failure to strongly intervene against manual scavenging condones the public violation of human rights of the oppressed castes.

By failing to transition its sanitation infrastructure, practices and attitudes towards more progressive rights-based models that uphold dignity, equality and justice for all—irrespective of caste identities—India fails to uphold its own constitutional ideals and the global commitments made towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals leaving no one behind.

The deeply entrenched caste discrimination still prevalent across rural India normalizes the practice of manual scavenging even today subjecting fellow human beings to unspeakable indignities and life-threatening health hazards. It reflects the apathy of local governments marked by inaction to abolish existing dry pit latrines or rehabilitate scavengers into alternative professions.

The intersecting discrimination across class, caste and gender dimensions further exacerbates the marginalization of dalit women engaged in manual scavenging who are triply disadvantaged.

Therefore, a strong political commitment is needed to recognize manual scavenging as among the worst forms of labor that deprives humans of their dignity,

justice, health, life and livelihoods. The Indian state must demonstrate an urgent will to eliminate this practice through a multi-pronged strategy encompassing legislative reform, judicious law enforcement, nationwide modernization of sanitation infrastructure, and rehabilitative measures to uplift oppressed communities and ensure their integration into mainstream economic activities with a life of dignity.

The practice of manual scavenging is antithesis to the basic values of human rights, justice and dignity that modern India aims to achieve for all citizens. It is among the most dehumanizing and violative practices arising from historical and continuing caste-based discrimination. Its persistence indicates vast gaps that remain in achieving substantive equality and social reform needed to demolish oppressive old barriers to evolve into an egalitarian, just and humane society. Uprooting this practice requires zealous political commitment, administrative resolve, social reform and asserting the universal rights of deprived communities to live and work with dignity.

#### **4.7. Inadequacy of rehabilitation support**

While self-employment schemes exist on paper for rehabilitating scavengers, they fail to produce tangible outcomes on the ground due to:

- Lack of inter-department coordination in implementing state-run rehabilitation programs.
- Antyodaya ration cards are not provided in some states, depriving access to food security.
- Low awareness among scavengers about existing government welfare schemes and entitlements.
- Loans meant for alternative livelihoods not reaching actual beneficiaries due to bureaucratic obstacles and corruption.
- Scavengers unable to provide collateral security due to lack of assets, preventing bank loans.
- Lack of counseling, motivation and hand-holding to transition into new professions.
- Mindset barriers in offering alternative jobs to former scavengers due to discrimination.
- Lack of effective skill development for professional roles like masonry, plumbing, tailoring etc.
- Harassment from money-lenders due to unpayable debts compelling return to scavenging.
- Sustaining new livelihoods is challenging due to health conditions like anemia and post-traumatic stress disorder.

#### **4.8. Ineffective implementation of laws**

India has passed several laws prohibiting manual scavenging. But these remain ineffective due to gaps in enforcement, monitoring and implementation:

- Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993—Weak enforcement saw persistence of practice.
- 2013 Act prohibits manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning of sewers under Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act.

But violations continue.

- State governments are apathetic in proactively identifying and demolishing existing dry latrines as mandated by law. Their approach lacks urgency.
- Manual scavenging is still not recognized as the worst form of child labor or a gross human rights violation. Authorities fail to intervene strongly to abolish it.
- Monitoring committees formed under the 2013 Act to oversee implementation are non-functional in many states.
- Very few have been prosecuted so far for employing manual scavengers indicating poor execution of existing laws.
- Authorities fail to provide protective gear to sanitation workers or implement standard operating procedures for cleaning sewers, septic tanks etc.

## **5. Key recommendations**

A multi-pronged strategy is required to completely abolish the inhumane practice of manual scavenging.

- 1) **Strong Political Determination:** Authorities need to demonstrate urgent will to eliminate manual scavenging as a top policy priority. Mindsets that tolerate oppression must change.
- 2) **Stringent Enforcement of Laws:** The laws against manual scavenging need strict implementation, monitoring and accountability of officials. Employers violating bans must be penalized.
- 3) **Modern Sanitation Infrastructure:** Flush toilets with proper underground drainage and sewage management is required in all areas to eliminate open defecation and necessitate manual cleaning.
- 4) **Access to Entitlements:** Marginalized castes must be given access to ration cards, housing, land, electricity, loans, healthcare and education. This will uplift their socio-economic condition.
- 5) **Skill Development for Alternate Livelihoods:** Intensive vocational training should be provided to scavengers to gain skills for alternate dignified livelihoods. Counseling can help transition to new occupations.
- 6) **Rehabilitation Support:** Pension schemes, subsidies, concessional loans and housing assistance should be provided along with Antyodaya ration cards to rehabilitated persons.
- 7) **Eliminate Employment Discrimination:** Sensitize employers to stop discrimination in hiring liberated scavengers for alternate jobs. Affirmative action needed.
- 8) **Awareness Drives:** Extensive campaigns should be launched to highlight evils of untouchability and caste-based practices. These violate basic human rights.
- 9) **Accountability of Authorities:** Officials must be monitored and held accountable for progress in rehabilitating scavengers and abolishing manual scavenging in a time-bound manner.
- 10) **Proper Protective Gear:** Sanitation workers handling waste should be mandatorily provided gloves, masks, safety harnesses and shoes. Violations must be punished.

The practice of manual scavenging and continued oppression of marginalized castes is a blot on India's human rights record. Concerted efforts are needed across

administrative, legislative, economic, social and health interventions to abolish this dehumanizing practice by upholding justice, dignity and equality for all citizens.

### **5.1. Further analysis**

The prevalence of manual scavenging even seven decades after independence indicates the weak implementation of laws, lack of political and social reform, and persistent marginalization of Dalit communities in India. While the practice is linked to caste, the rehabilitation approach of governments also reflects a caste bias. Most programs view it as simply a sanitation issue without recognizing that deliberate socio-economic disenfranchisement of Dalits is the key reason they are forced into manual scavenging. Though banned by law, the practice continues with impunity across India which highlights that caste prejudices are still dominant in society as well as administration.

The intersection of caste, class and gender makes Dalit women the most vulnerable section engaged in manual scavenging. They face severe health hazards due to lack of protective gear. The prevalence of sexual violence and denial of basic dignity is high among female manual scavengers. But rehabilitation programs hardly provide any female-specific interventions.

Overall, the Indian state has failed the country's poorest and most marginalized communities by not eliminating manual scavenging. The continuation of such dehumanizing work that exclusively employs Dalits is a black mark on India's human rights record. It is enabled by the continued presence of dry latrines, lack of modern sewage treatment plants, and unwillingness to end caste-based practices. Unless addressed holistically, manual scavenging will persist.

### **5.2. Additional recommendations**

- Gender-sensitive rehabilitation schemes with counseling, legal aid, and vocational training specifically for female manual scavengers.
- Free health screenings and treatment facilities for occupational illnesses suffered by scavengers.
- Inclusion of content on harms of caste discrimination and manual scavenging in school curriculum.
- Develop state-level plans with earmarked budgets and timelines to eliminate insanitary latrines.
- Conduct extensive awareness drives in rural areas on discontinuing manual scavenging.
- Set up fast-track courts to expedite cases of caste-based atrocities against manual scavengers.
- Enforce mandatory payment of compensation by employers for deaths of persons cleaning sewers and septic tanks.

### **5.3. Discussion**

This review highlights the shocking scale at which manual scavenging continues in India and the lack of urgency in abolishing this inhumane practice. The results show that manual scavenging persists on a large scale with an estimated 180,000 households

still engaged in it for livelihood (Singh, 2017). The four states of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat have particularly high prevalence. But all states still have dry latrines requiring manual disposal of excreta.

The deeply entrenched caste system and socio-economic vulnerabilities of the Dalit community are major factors compelling them into manual scavenging as their hereditary profession. They face extreme marginalization, poverty, illiteracy, lack of land and basic facilities. This creates a dependence on manual scavenging for survival. The continued presence of dry bucket and pit latrines necessitate the persistence of manual scavenging to clean and dispose the excreta. The Indian government has failed in its duty to modernize sanitation by demolishing existing latrines and building flush toilets and sewage infrastructure.

This practice has dire dehumanizing effects on the Dalit community. Manual scavengers are exposed every day to extremely unsanitary conditions, toxic fumes and direct contact with human waste. This results in severe health hazards and causes high morbidity and mortality. Their dignity is assaulted by the notion that their duty is to manually handle human excreta due to their low caste status. The community faces extreme socio-economic vulnerabilities, marginalization and discrimination. This is a grave violation of their basic human rights.

Despite the illegality of this practice, manual scavenging persists due to administrative apathy in enforcing the law. There are state level monitoring committees but implementation is poor. Authorities fail to identify and demolish insanitary dry latrines or prosecute those employing manual scavengers. The rehabilitation plans are invariably inadequate with little proactive efforts to provide alternative livelihoods to liberated scavengers. Caste attitudes coupled with poor law enforcement allows this abhorrent practice to continue.

## **6. Conclusion**

The review of literature unambiguously shows that manual scavenging constitutes a gross human rights violation that subjects thousands of marginalized Dalits to an undignified and dehumanizing profession. It is shockingly prevalent across India with inadequate action taken to abolish it. The blatant caste-based discrimination behind the notion of manually cleaning human excreta is illegal and morally reprehensible. It is enabled by the continued presence of insanitary dry latrines, lack of modern sanitation infrastructure, pervasive poverty among Dalit communities and institutional apathy in enforcing laws.

There is an urgent need for concerted action by the government and civil society to eliminate this practice. Along with strictly enforcing laws prohibiting employment of manual scavengers, the state must ensure their rehabilitation by providing extensive retraining, loan assistance, counseling and social support to transition into alternative dignified professions. It is imperative that India moves rapidly towards modernizing sanitation infrastructure across all rural and urban areas to permanently eliminate the requirement for manual scavenging. The human rights and justice of historically marginalized communities cannot be upheld until this extremely degrading practice is abolished. It necessitates not just administrative action but a radical social reform in attitudes. The human dignity and welfare of the most vulnerable communities must be

prioritized as an ethical imperative.

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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