

Unearthing the Subaltern: Literary and Historical Interventions on Manual Scavenging in India

Amit Kumar Wadaskar, Government College Dipka

Abstract: This article looks at manual scavenging through the combined lenses of subaltern theory, history, and Dalit literature. By putting the lived experiences of sanitation workers front and center, the research shows how deep-rooted caste hierarchies survive despite strict legal bans (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998). Relying on Gramsci's (1971) ideas about cultural hegemony and Spivak's (1988) questions about who gets to speak for the marginalized, this paper argues we need new narratives to challenge traditional history. We can see this reclamation of identity in autobiographies like Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) and Bama's *Karukku* (2011). The research also breaks down how caste and gender overlap, leaving female manual scavengers to face entirely unique layers of discrimination (Guru, 1995). Ultimately, this article calls on the academic community to prioritize subaltern voices. Merging literature and history might be our best tool to redefine how we understand both oppression and resistance.

Keywords: subaltern; manual scavenging; Dalit literature; caste; gender

Introduction

We often talk about manual scavenging as if it were simply a 'sanitation issue'. It isn't. The manual cleaning, carrying, and disposal of human waste remains one of the darkest realities of India's social fabric. Undoubtedly, it is a job that breaks the body and that not only attempts to obliterate human dignity but also possesses the very capacity to destroy it.

The Government of India attempted to put an end to such inhumane practices. They passed the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in 1993, and later followed up with a stricter 2013 Act. Yet, if you look at the ground reality, the laws seem to exist only on paper. The practice continues in plain sight. This massive gap between what the law says and what actually happens points to a harsh truth: legislation rarely defeats centuries-old social hierarchies overnight.

You won't find the roots of manual scavenging in economics. They are buried deep in the exclusionary rules of the Hindu caste system. B.R. Ambedkar (1936/2014, p. 264) referred to this as the "division of labourers." For generations, specific Dalit sub-castes—like the Valmiki, Hela, and Mehtar communities—were forced into this work simply because of the family they were born into. It is a system of "graded inequality." Gopal Guru (1995, p. 2548) rightly points out that a "moral economy of caste" keeps the scavenger invisible to society, even while society completely depends on them to keep cities clean.

To truly grasp this crisis, we must look beyond the official data. Bhasha Singh (2014, p. 45) reveals how this labour is intensely gendered; Dalit women are the ones primarily forced to clean dry latrines in rural villages. In our cities, activists like Bezwada Wilson have exposed

what is essentially "institutional murder" occurring inside sewer lines. Suraj Yengde (2019, p. 82) argues these deaths happen because the state simply values clean streets more than the people cleaning them.

This paper brings together history, literature, law, and social work to see how marginalised groups are fighting back. Using Dalit epistemology, we can move past seeing sanitation workers purely as victims. Instead, we can find incredible liberating power in their life stories, their legal battles, and their grassroots movements.

1 Historical Context and Caste-Based Division of Labour

Manual scavenging didn't happen by accident. It was engineered by India's entrenched caste system, which assigned jobs based on ideas of ritual purity and pollution. This system forced Dalit's into tasks society deemed "impure." It wasn't about the economy; it was a religious mandate meant to institutionalise humiliation. Ancient texts essentially categorized occupations by birth, creating a moral framework that made inequality look normal and kept Dalit's pushed to the absolute margins (Ambedkar, 1936/2014).

When the British arrived, they didn't fix this. They actually codified these caste identities into their censuses and municipal systems. Instead of breaking caste lines, modern colonial administration just hired Dalit's to be manual scavengers for the public sanitation sector, officially institutionalising the degradation (Dirks, 2001, p. 5; Pathak, 1999, p. 22).

Today, despite Article 17 of the Constitution banning untouchability, and despite the 1993 and 2013 Acts, the labour continues. Why? Because there is a severe lack of political will, paired with a society that still quietly accepts these caste roles. The 2014 Human Rights Watch report put it bluntly: "The manual carrying of human faeces is not a form of employment, but an injustice akin to slavery" (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 2).

Because the state frequently drags its feet on mechanization programs and fails to provide real alternative jobs, workers are trapped. Manual scavenging remains the clearest proof we have that traditional caste discrimination is still alive and well inside modern government operations.

2 Subaltern Theory and the Politics of Silence

If we want to know why a banned practice still happens every day, we need to look at the invisible power structures in our society. Academics refer to the people trapped at the bottom as the "subaltern." Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 55) coined this term for people who are entirely locked out of social and political power.

In India, being subaltern is intrinsically tied to the caste system's purity-pollution scale. Gramsci argued that the ruling class keeps its power not just with violence, but by controlling the "ideology" of the masses. This explains why, for centuries, Dalit communities were conditioned to believe that cleaning waste was their *dharma* (moral duty), rather than realizing it was systemic abuse.

The Problem of "Being Spoken For"

A massive issue in social work is representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, p. 283) asked a famous question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Her point was that even when marginalized people yell, the system isn't built to listen. When a sanitation worker talks to a government panel, their raw experience is usually translated and filtered by bureaucrats or elite

activists. Spivak calls this the "imperialism of representation." The worker's actual voice gets lost, and they just become a "data point" in a policy brief.

The Double Silence: Caste and Gender

We also can't treat the subaltern as one giant, identical group. Gopal Guru (1995, p. 2549) and Clarinda Still (2017, p. 35) warn us about the double marginalization of Dalit women. They face public oppression from higher castes, and private oppression from patriarchy at home. Still's research even shows how some Dalit communities try to gain respect by mimicking upper-caste "honour" codes, which usually just means restricting women even more. If social workers want to help, they have to tackle both the caste and the gender dynamics at the exact same time.

Reclaiming the Voice to break this cycle, society needs a massive ethical shift. Gramsci's idea of Cultural Hegemony perfectly explains how elites make sewer work look like a "traditional occupation" instead of a human rights disaster. Fighting back against this narrative is a radical act. When a Dalit author writes a memoir, they are shattering these invisible walls and refusing to let anyone else write their history.

3 Literary Representations: Autobiographies and Fiction

For people fighting caste oppression, literature is a survival tool. It offers a way to document trauma and reclaim autonomy. While mainstream literature often ignores or romanticizes the Dalit experience, Dalit autobiographies force the reader to look at the structural violence head-on.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) is a perfect example. The title means leftover food—the scraps society throws at Dalit's. Valmiki shows how his caste dictated his entire life, laying bare the severe psychological damage caused by this inherited labour.

Bama does something similar in *Karukku* (2011), but she brings us right into the visceral reality of a Dalit woman. She exposes the heavy burdens of gender and caste inside both Hindu and Christian spaces. "When I think of the hardships I went through... a terrible anguish wells up inside me," she writes (Bama, 2011, p. 27). She calls out religious hypocrisy directly, noting that even in the convent, they gave her the lowest jobs simply because they knew her caste.

We also see this in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), which uses oral histories to destroy the idea that Dalit women are just helpless victims. In fiction, writers like Ajay Navaria use local dialects and stark realism to highlight the emotional cost of caste. By throwing out traditional, upper-caste writing styles, Dalit literature turns storytelling into a literal battleground for identity.

Comparative Analysis of Dalit Life-Narratives

To truly understand how subaltern literature operates as a tool for social work and sociological mapping, it helps to look at the thematic overlaps in these foundational texts. They don't just tell sad stories; they map out the exact architecture of caste trauma.

Table 1: Thematic Overlaps in Foundational Dalit Autobiographies

Thematic Axis	Joothan (Omprakash Valmiki)	Karukku (Bama)	Sociological Implication
Space & Segregation	The physical isolation of the Chuhra community on the village outskirts.	Segregation within the church and the spatial divide in the village.	Caste dictates physical geography, enforcing untouchability visually.
Education as Battleground	Teachers forcing Valmiki to sweep the schoolyard instead of studying.	Nuns assigning Bama menial labour despite her academic capabilities.	Institutions meant for emancipation often reproduce caste violence.
Food and Dignity	The humiliation of begging for <i>joothan</i> (leftovers) from upper castes.	The meager, degrading wages paid in kind for backbreaking labour.	Economic dependency is deliberately engineered to destroy self-worth.
Intersectionality	Focuses heavily on the systemic crushing of the Dalit male ego and labour.	Focuses on the "double burden" of being both Dalit and female.	Rehabilitation policies must differentiate between male and female experiences of caste.

Source: Author's own synthesis based on the textual analysis of Valmiki (2003) and Bama (2011).

4 Activist and NGO Interventions

Politicians love to say manual scavenging is a thing of the past. Grassroots organizations know better. The Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) has spent years holding the government's feet to the fire. In their 2017 campaign report, they didn't hold back, stating that "the continued deaths of sewer workers amount to institutionalized murder, where caste and occupation intersect lethally" (Safai Karamchari Andolan, 2017, p. 22). This completely changed the conversation. It wasn't an "occupational hazard" anymore; it was structural violence.

Legal activism is speeding up, too. In 2025, the Snehansh Foundation took the Rajasthan High Court by storm with a Public Interest Litigation (PIL). They exposed unacknowledged sanitation deaths, forcing local governments to finally hand over safety audits and employment data. It proved that mechanization policies were failing miserably.

This litigation highlighted the severe failure of mechanization policies—a reality grimly reflected in recent data. For instance, the Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM) recorded 43 sanitation worker deaths just in the early months of 2024. Their report was damning: most of the dead had no formal employment records and absolutely zero safety gear (DASAM, 2024). Even global bodies are weighing in. A 2019 report by the WHO and ILO flagged India as a massive high-risk zone for sanitation workers, pointing to toxic exposure and deep psychological trauma.

The Anatomy of State Apathy: A Policy Breakdown

For social workers trying to navigate the legal landscape to secure rights for these workers, understanding the evolution (and the failures) of the law is critical. The state has constantly updated its language, but the implementation continues to fail because the laws rely on the very institutions perpetuating the crime.

Table 2: Legislative Intent vs. Ground Reality

Policy / Legislation	Stated Intent (The Promise)	Ground Reality (The Practice)	The Systemic Flaw
The 1993 Act	Banned the employment of manual scavengers and construction of dry latrines.	States denied the existence of dry latrines. Zero convictions recorded in the first decade.	Punishments were incredibly weak. Required states to voluntarily declare their own guilt.
The 2013 Act	Expanded definition to include sewer/septic tank cleaners. Promised rigorous rehabilitation.	Municipalities outsourced cleaning to private, unregulated contractors.	The "Dependency Paradox"—municipalities are asked to report and punish themselves.
Supreme Court Guidelines (Balram Singh, 2023 & Jan 2026)	Absolute ban on scavenging. Mandated ₹30 Lakh compensation for deaths (retrospective for unpaid cases), ₹20 Lakh for permanent disability, and High Court monitoring.	Municipalities still attempt to dodge liability by blaming contractors, forcing families into prolonged legal battles for unpaid claims.	Despite robust financial mandates, the system still relies heavily on victims initiating "circumventive legal resistance" to force compliance.

Source: Author's own compilation based on the 1993 and 2013 legislative frameworks, the Supreme Court judgments in *Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India* (2023 & 2026), and critical analyses by Bauman (2022) and Sanaka (2019).

5 Recent Court Judgments and Legal Developments

Judges are finally starting to lose patience with state negligence. In April 2023, the Supreme Court of India took up the issue of sewer deaths on its own (*suo motu*). In the case *In Re: Deaths in Sewer Work* (2023), the Court slammed municipal authorities for “criminal negligence.” They ordered every state to hand over affidavits proving what they were actually doing about mechanization and sewer contracts.

The Rajasthan High Court took it a step further in 2025. Following the Snehanish Foundation's PIL, the court ruled that if someone dies cleaning a septic tank manually without safety gear, it will be treated as culpable homicide. This was a game-changer because it finally put private contractors and civic agencies in the legal crosshairs, even if enforcement across the country is still patchy.

That same year, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issued a blunt advisory. They reminded the country that “manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks is banned by law, yet continues due to administrative inertia” (NHRC, 2025). They demanded state-level task forces to actually enforce the 2013 Act (Hindustan Times, 2025).

In a crucial step to protect the lives and dignity of sanitation workers, the Supreme Court of India (*Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India*) strongly condemned manual scavenging as a “blot on the nation's conscience.” By officially calling sewer deaths a systemic failure rather than mere workplace accidents, the Court shifted the entire legal landscape.

In this landmark intervention, the Court mandated strict accountability. They made it absolutely clear that local governments can no longer dodge responsibility by passing the blame to private, unregulated contractors. The financial directives attached to this ruling are just as forceful:

- **Death Compensation:** The payout was tripled from ₹10 lakh to ₹30 lakh for lives lost during sewer or septic tank cleaning. Crucially, as the Court clarified in January 2026, this applies retrospectively to unpaid cases from before October 2023.
- **Disability Support:** Acknowledging the severe physical toll of the pits, the Court ordered ₹20 lakh for permanent disability caused by this hazardous work, and up to ₹10 lakh for other related injuries.

To ensure this absolute ban doesn't become just another ignored law, the Supreme Court placed the burden of enforcement directly on the local judiciary, tasking all High Courts to strictly monitor implementation across every state and Union Territory.

But the courts can't fix this alone. Thorat and Newman (2007, p. 4123) describe caste as an "economic apartheid" that stops people from moving up in the world. To beat that, marginalized communities—especially women—have to engage in what Silliman Bhattacharjee (2025, p. 62) calls “circumventive legal resistance.” They have to creatively use the law to demand a complete system overhaul, not just a compensation check after someone dies.

6 The Intellectual Landscape: Beyond the Journals

The way academics talk about this issue has drastically changed. It is no longer just a problem for the city's plumbing department. It is recognized as a violent crash between caste, gender, and modern economics.

As India jumped into the global market, oppression just got a paperwork upgrade. Sanaka (2019, p. 5) points out that by outsourcing sanitation to private contractors, the government gets to look the other way. By calling these workers "contractual," they strip them of their rights under the 2013 Act. Sanaka rightly calls this a "state-sponsored evil."

The health data is genuinely terrifying. Tiwari (2021) found that a sewer cleaner in India rarely lives past 40 or 45 years. Forcing a human being to climb into a pit of methane without a mask isn't just administrative laziness; it is "structural abandonment."

When it comes to the law, scholars like Bauman (2022) point out a massive flaw in the 2013 Act. The law asks local municipalities to report illegal scavenging. But since the municipalities are usually the ones illegally hiring the scavengers, they never report it. That's why the conviction rate is basically zero. On top of that, Arora and Patel (2020) remind us that state rehabilitation programs usually only target men, completely ignoring the "triple burden" faced by Dalit women working in rural areas.

7 Subaltern Resistance and Dalit Movements: Reclaiming the Human

People are done grieving in silence. The resistance against manual scavenging is now loud, organized, and furious.

Bezwada Wilson and the SKA lead the charge. One of the most powerful things they do is publicly burn the *tokri* (the wicker basket used to carry waste). It is the literal burning of a caste

identity. Their campaigns force the government to look at the bodies being pulled out of sewers, demanding civil rights rather than pity.

Activists are also fighting what you could call a "Constitutional Insurgency." They are using Article 21 (The Right to Life and Dignity) to drag the state into court (Wankhede & Kahle, 2023, p. 115).

Dalit women are at the very front of this war. Groups like the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) fight for land and education so they can snap the chain of "labour inheritance." Regional groups like the Madiga Dandora challenge caste politics in the south, while theatre groups like Jai Bheem Natya Manch take to the streets to mock the government's sanitized PR campaigns. Add in viral digital movements like #StopManualScavenging, and you have a local fight that has successfully captured global attention.

Social Work Interventions: Moving from Rescue to Rehabilitation

For the field of Social Work, the manual scavenging crisis requires a complete overhaul of how we view "intervention." Traditional charity models do not work here. Providing a worker with gloves or boots is not a solution; it is a mechanism that makes an illegal, dehumanizing practice slightly safer.

Effective social work in this arena relies on the **Rights-Based Rehabilitation Model**, heavily championed by organizations like the Navsarjan Trust in Gujarat and the SKA globally. This model operates on three distinct pillars:

1. **Legal Literacy as Empowerment:** Social workers act as facilitators, teaching sanitation workers how to file FIRs (First Information Reports) under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. The goal is to move the worker from a passive recipient of welfare to an active claimant of justice.
2. **Dismantling Hereditary Labour:** Rehabilitation cannot mean moving a Dalit worker from cleaning dry latrines to cleaning government office floors. Social work interventions focus on massive reskilling programs—training women in tailoring, driving, or computer literacy—to aggressively snap the generational link between caste and sweeping.
3. **Psychosocial Healing:** Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of social work in this field is trauma care. As Dalit autobiographies highlight, the psychological damage of untouchability is profound. Modern social work involves creating safe community spaces where workers can process the "civilizational trauma" of their imposed identity, helping them rebuild their fractured sense of self-worth.

Conclusion: Toward Epistemic and Structural Justice

Manual scavenging still exists in India not because of failed policies, but because of a sick socio-cultural system that relies on caste hierarchies and systemic neglect. This paper has tried to amplify the voices of the people at the margins—the people whose actual lives expose the massive holes in the government's development plans.

By looking at subaltern theory, legal activism, and Dalit literature, it is clear that manual scavenging survives because society quietly agrees to let it. The voices of the subaltern—

whether in a memoir, a courtroom, or a street play—are vital reminders that the fight to end caste is far from over.

Fixing this takes more than handing out compensation money. We need epistemic justice, which means actually listening to the knowledge and testimony of sanitation workers. And we need structural justice, which means tearing down the caste infrastructure through land rights, real jobs, and cultural respect. The fight against manual scavenging is really just a fight for basic human dignity. It requires radical empathy and the absolute courage to build a society where caste no longer exists.

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Author's Address:

Dr. Amit Kumar Wadaskar
Guest Lecturer, Government College Dipka
Korba, Chhattisgarh 495452
+9575568177
wadaskara90@gmail.com