

## Sanitation Work and Spatial Injustice: Caste, Labour, and Urban Exclusion

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**Abstract:** This paper critically explores the intersection of caste, labour, and spatial marginalisation to understand the persistent exclusion of sanitation workers in contemporary urban India. Despite being essential to maintaining urban hygiene and public health, sanitation workers—disproportionately drawn from Dalit communities—remain among the most socially and spatially marginalised urban populations. The paper situates sanitation work within the broader structures of caste-based occupational hierarchy, analysing how historical stigmas and entrenched social prejudices continue to shape these workers' living and working conditions. Urban development policies, innovative city initiatives, and infrastructure planning often overlook or actively displace sanitation workers, relegating them to informal settlements with inadequate access to housing, water, sanitation, and healthcare. Drawing on fieldwork insights, government reports, and secondary literature, this paper uncovers how spatial injustice is both a consequence and a reinforcement of social exclusion. Despite legal prohibitions, it also examines the lack of legal safeguards, the precarity of contractual labour, and the invisibility of manual scavenging practices. The paper strongly advocates for a rights-based and participatory approach to urban governance that centres sanitation workers' lived realities and voices, emphasising the need to include them in decision-making processes. It concludes by suggesting policy frameworks rooted in social justice and dignity to address the systemic inequalities entrenched in urban space, labour, and caste.

**Keywords:** sanitation workers; caste; spatial injustice; urban exclusion; labour; Dalit communities; manual scavenging

### Introduction

The urban transformation of India over the past few decades has been marked by significant infrastructural development, economic liberalisation, and the promise of modernity. However, beneath this aspirational veneer lies a deeply fractured socio-spatial reality, particularly for sanitation workers, who are overwhelmingly drawn from Dalit communities.

These workers occupy a paradoxical position within the urban fabric: they are simultaneously essential to the functioning of cities yet remain socially ostracised, politically invisible, and spatially excluded. “Their continued marginalisation is a stark reminder of the enduring legacies of caste-based occupational hierarchies, deeply rooted in the historical context, and the systematic neglect of their rights in urban governance” (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011).

Caste, though constitutionally outlawed as a basis of discrimination, continues to be a pervasive determinant of access to labour, dignity, and space in Indian society. Sanitation work—traditionally stigmatised as 'polluting' and 'impure'—has historically been reserved for Dalits, especially those from sub-castes such as the Valmikis and Bhangis. “These communities have been pushed into performing the most menial and dangerous forms of labour, including manual

scavenging, sewer cleaning, and garbage collection” (Davies, 2007; Thorat & Newman, 2012). “Despite technological advances and policy claims of mechanisation, the everyday reality of urban sanitation remains dependent on manual labour, often without adequate safety equipment, healthcare, or legal protection” (Sarkar, 2023).

Urbanisation in India has further deepened these inequities rather than ameliorating them. The rapid expansion of cities under programmes like the Smart Cities Mission and Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) has often excluded sanitation workers from the planning and benefits of urban development. “While city landscapes are redesigned to meet global standards of cleanliness and efficiency, the labouring bodies that enable this transformation remain invisible and dispossessed” (Bhan, 2009; Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). Slum demolitions, evictions, and gentrification disproportionately impact Dalit sanitation workers, who often reside in informal settlements close to their work areas. “These spaces are marked by poor housing, lack of water and sanitation, and systemic neglect by municipal authorities” (Subramanian, 2019).

The exclusion of sanitation workers is not merely a reflection of poverty or lack of infrastructure—it is a structural issue embedded in caste ideologies and institutional practices. “As Ambedkar (1936/2014) powerfully argued, caste is not just a division of labour but a division of labourers”. It denies dignity to certain occupations and naturalises the association of Dalit identities with 'dirty work.' In contemporary India, this logic persists in the contractualisation and casualisation of sanitation labour, where workers are often hired without regular employment, social security, or protective legislation. “The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (2013) remains poorly implemented, with manual scavenging continuing in several states under euphemistic or informal arrangements” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Furthermore, the public discourse around sanitation has transformed with campaigns like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission). While such initiatives have increased attention to hygiene and cleanliness, they have depoliticised and de-historicised the labour involved in sanitation. “The symbolic use of brooms and the celebration of 'cleanliness warriors' in government propaganda often erase the caste-based exploitation underlying the system” (Gopal, 2017). There is little acknowledgement of the systemic oppression that forces Dalits into sanitation work or the violence and health hazards they face daily. Without critical engagement with caste, these narratives risk reproducing rather than dismantling social hierarchies.

This paper seeks to critically explore how caste, labour, and spatial injustice intersect in urban India to maintain the marginalisation of sanitation workers. Drawing on a range of academic literature, government documents, and field-based insights, the paper will analyse how urban policies reinforce the invisibilisation and dispossession of these workers. It will further interrogate the absence of adequate legal safeguards and the increasing precarity resulting from contractual labour regimes. Ultimately, the paper argues for a rights-based and participatory approach to urban governance. This approach, which centres the lived realities of sanitation workers and challenges the structural conditions that sustain their exclusion, is not just a suggestion but a necessity. Hence, this Paper aims to contribute to a broader social and spatial justice agenda in urban India by foregrounding the voices of those who clean the city.

## Caste and the Division of Labour

Caste, as a deeply entrenched social institution in India, has historically dictated the nature and value of labour. One of the most glaring manifestations of this is the relegation of sanitation work—including manual scavenging, sewer cleaning, and waste disposal—to Dalit communities. This work assignment is not accidental but rooted in the Brahmanical ideology of purity and pollution, which justifies the hereditary division of labour in terms of spiritual and ritual status rather than economic need or choice (Davies, 2007; Ambedkar, 1936/2014). The caste system thus transforms labour into a moral and religious obligation, creating an exploitative structure that naturalises inequality.

The term “division of labour” is often celebrated in modern economic thought for its efficiency and productivity. However, in the Indian context, Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1936/2014) famously critiqued it as a “division of labourers,” whereby the caste system does not merely allocate different tasks to people but assigns human beings to fixed and unequal social positions based on their birth. This rigid allocation eliminates mobility, merit, and dignity, condemning Dalits to the most degrading and dangerous occupations. Sanitation work, especially manual scavenging—the removal of human excreta by hand—is emblematic of this structural violence.

Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability (Article 17 of the Indian Constitution) and laws prohibiting caste-based discrimination, the caste-labour nexus continues in both visible and subtle forms. The *Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993*, and its successor, the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, were legislative attempts to end this inhumane practice. However, implementation has been weak and inconsistent. Government records themselves often underreport the number of manual scavengers, and many continue to work without safety gear, recognition, or rehabilitation support (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Shah).

The persistence of caste-based occupational segregation in modern India is also evident in the informal sector, where a significant proportion of Dalits are employed in sanitation-related jobs without formal contracts or legal protections. This not only perpetuates social inequality but also has significant economic implications, as it limits the potential contribution of these individuals to the Indian economy.

Research shows that sanitation workers are overwhelmingly Dalit, with over 90% of them belonging to the Scheduled Castes in many urban areas (Thorat & Newman, 2012; Bezwada Wilson, 2016). Even in public sector employment, municipal corporations often outsource sanitation work to contractors, creating layers of subcontracting that obscure accountability and reinforce caste hierarchies (Sarkar, 2023).

Caste also mediates the experience of sanitation workers beyond the workplace. Dalit workers frequently face discrimination in housing, schooling for their children, access to public services, and interactions with state officials. This social exclusion is compounded by gender, as Dalit women engaged in sanitation labour face dual exploitation—both as Dalits and as women (Gopal, 2017). They are often subject to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and are denied maternity benefits or health support, despite performing physically taxing work under hazardous conditions.

The social perception that sanitation work is a ‘natural’ profession for Dalits makes the situation more troubling. This belief is internalised through generations, with children of sanitation

workers often being inducted into the same work, not due to informed choice but because of systemic exclusion from other forms of employment and education. Education can play a crucial role in breaking this cycle by providing Dalit children with opportunities to explore other professions and empowering them to challenge societal norms. The notion of inherited occupation thus remains a living reality, defying the democratic ideals of equality and dignity enshrined in the Constitution.

Therefore, caste continues to shape the division of labour in India by confining Dalits to degrading and dangerous forms of work. This persistence reflects not only a failure of policy implementation but also the resilience of caste ideology in contemporary society. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond legal reforms. It calls for a transformation of cultural attitudes, political will, and structural interventions that delink caste from occupation and restore dignity to labour. This could involve educational initiatives to challenge traditional beliefs, policy changes to ensure the safety and rights of sanitation workers, and social campaigns to raise awareness and promote equality.

The term *Dalit*, for instance, refers to communities historically subjected to systemic exclusion and discrimination within the caste hierarchy, formerly labelled as “untouchables” (B.R. Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Dalits have traditionally been relegated to occupations considered ritually impure, including sanitation work, due to entrenched caste norms. Sub-castes such as *Valmiki* and *Bhangi* are specific Dalit communities historically associated with sanitation labour, reflecting the hereditary nature of caste-based occupations (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

The persistence of such occupational segregation is closely linked to what scholars describe as the *Brahmanical ideology of purity and pollution*. This ideological framework, rooted in traditional Hindu social order, classifies individuals and occupations along a hierarchical spectrum of ritual purity, where tasks involving bodily waste are deemed polluting and assigned to lower castes (Dumont, 1980; Ambedkar, 1936/2014). This concept explains why sanitation work in India is not merely an economic activity but a deeply stigmatised social role embedded in historical power structures.

For example, *Safai Karamchari Welfare Boards* are government-established bodies aimed at promoting the welfare and rehabilitation of sanitation workers. Schemes such as the *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY)* provide subsidised health insurance to low-income households, while the *Employees’ State Insurance (ESI)* scheme offers social security benefits including medical care and compensation for workers in the formal sector (Government of India, 2008). However, due to the contractual and informal nature of sanitation labour, many workers remain excluded from these protections.

As noted by Thorat and Newman (2012), caste-based exclusion continues to shape access to labour, resources, and dignity in contemporary India, making it imperative for scholarly work to clearly articulate these contextual foundations.

## **Methodology and Sources of Data**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining primary fieldwork and secondary data analysis.

### **Primary Data:**

Fieldwork was conducted in 2025 in selected urban areas (Raipur and Bilaspur).

- 24 semi-structured interviews with sanitation workers (male and female)
- 6 in-depth case studies (presented below)
- Informal observations of working and living conditions

### **Secondary Data:**

Government reports, NGO publications (e.g., Jan Sahas, Navasrajan, Safai Karamchari Andolan, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International), and available academic literature on the issue.

### **Case Study 1: Hazardous Sewer Work under Contractual Regimes**

Ramesh (name changed), a 32-year-old sanitation worker employed through a private contractor in Raipur, has been engaged in sewer cleaning for over a decade. Despite the legal prohibition of manual scavenging under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (2013), he reported routinely entering septic tanks without protective equipment. He described exposure to toxic gases, frequent skin infections, and breathing difficulties. The absence of safety gear and institutional accountability reflects the structural precarity embedded in contractual labour systems. Ramesh noted that refusal to undertake such hazardous tasks could lead to immediate job loss, illustrating the coercive dynamics of informal employment. His experience aligns with broader findings on the persistence of unsafe sanitation practices and weak enforcement of labour protections (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Sarkar, 2023). This case highlights how legal safeguards remain ineffective in the absence of monitoring mechanisms and employer accountability, reinforcing caste-based occupational risks.

### **Case Study 2: Gendered Vulnerabilities in Sanitation Labour**

Sita (name changed), a 38-year-old sanitation worker in Bilaspur, is engaged in street sweeping under a contractual arrangement. She reported irregular wage payments, often delayed by several weeks, and a complete lack of maternity benefits despite having worked continuously for years. Additionally, she described instances of verbal abuse and harassment by supervisors, particularly when demanding timely wages. Sita's experience reflects the intersection of caste, class, and gender, where Dalit women sanitation workers face compounded vulnerabilities. The absence of institutional grievance mechanisms further exacerbates their marginalisation. Her account resonates with existing research highlighting gendered exploitation and invisibilisation within sanitation labour (Gopal, 2017; Subramanian, 2019). Beyond economic precarity, Sita also shoulders unpaid domestic responsibilities, reinforcing the double burden borne by women workers. This case underscores the urgent need for gender-sensitive labour protections and inclusive welfare policies.

### **Case Study 3: Persistence of Manual Scavenging in Informal Forms**

Field interviews conducted in peri-urban areas of Raipur revealed the continued practice of manual scavenging under alternative occupational labels such as “drain cleaner” or “sanitation helper.” Workers reported manually removing human waste from clogged drains without protective equipment, often during night shifts to avoid public visibility. This reclassification of labour obscures the illegality of manual scavenging, allowing municipal authorities and contractors to evade accountability. Respondents emphasised that economic necessity and social conditioning compelled them to accept such work. This case illustrates the gap between legal prohibition and lived reality, confirming findings from advocacy reports documenting the persistence of manual scavenging across India (Bezwada Wilson, 2016; Jan Sahas, 2021). The invisibilisation of such practices highlights systemic failures in policy implementation and monitoring.

### **Case Study 4: Spatial Marginalisation and Housing Injustice**

A sanitation workers’ settlement located on the outskirts of Bilaspur, adjacent to a municipal dumping ground, exemplifies spatial injustice. Residents reported inadequate access to potable water, poor drainage systems, and frequent exposure to hazardous waste. The colony lacks formal recognition in municipal planning documents, resulting in exclusion from basic urban services. The proximity to waste sites reinforces occupational stigma and reflects the caste-based spatial segregation embedded in urban planning. Residents noted that attempts to secure alternative housing under government schemes were unsuccessful due to a lack of documentation and bureaucratic barriers. This case aligns with theoretical frameworks on spatial injustice and urban informality, which highlight how marginalised communities are systematically relegated to peripheral and hazardous environments (Soja, 2010; Bhan, 2009). It underscores the need for inclusive urban planning that recognises sanitation workers as legitimate urban citizens.

### **Case Study 5: Intergenerational Occupational Entrapment**

A family of sanitation workers in Raipur reported that despite enrolling their children in government schools, they continue to face caste-based discrimination and social exclusion. The children are often stigmatised due to their parents’ occupation, leading to high dropout rates. One adolescent respondent expressed reluctance to pursue higher education, citing limited opportunities and social barriers. This reflects the persistence of intergenerational occupational entrapment, where caste-based labour is reproduced across generations. The lack of educational mobility reinforces structural inequality and limits upward social mobility. This case supports existing literature on caste-based exclusion in education and labour markets (Thorat & Newman, 2012; Deshpande, 2011). It highlights the need for targeted educational interventions and anti-discrimination measures to break the cycle of occupational inheritance.

### **Case Study 6: Exclusion from Welfare and Social Security**

Multiple respondents reported exclusion from welfare schemes such as the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) and Employees’ State Insurance (ESI) due to their contractual employment status. Workers noted that despite being engaged in hazardous work, they lacked access to health insurance, accident compensation, and pension benefits. In cases of workplace injury, families were forced to bear medical expenses without institutional support. This exclusion reflects systemic gaps in labour welfare policies, where informal and contractual

workers fall outside formal protection frameworks. The findings are consistent with broader research highlighting the marginalisation of sanitation workers within social security systems (Jan Sahas, 2021; Sarkar, 2023). This case underscores the urgent need to universalise labour protections irrespective of employment status.

### **Urban Exclusion and Spatial Injustice**

India's urbanisation has become synonymous with infrastructural growth, technological innovation, and aesthetic enhancement, particularly through large-scale projects like the Smart Cities Mission, metro rail development, and beautification drives. However, these urban transformations often come at a significant cost to marginalised communities, including sanitation workers, who are routinely excluded from planning processes and displaced from their homes and places of work.

“This phenomenon is best understood through the lens of spatial injustice—a term that captures the unequal distribution of urban space and resources along caste, class, and occupation” (Soja, 2010; Bhan, 2009).

Sanitation workers, mostly from Dalit communities, are often housed in informal settlements or slums located on the peripheries of cities or adjacent to garbage dumps, drains, and railway tracks. “These areas are marked by a lack of secure tenure, substandard housing, inadequate water supply, poor sanitation, and no healthcare facilities” (Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011). The living conditions in these areas not only affect their physical health but also their mental well-being. Despite being indispensable to urban health and hygiene, these workers remain spatially segregated and politically invisible. Their settlements are seldom recognised in master plans or city development strategies, erasing their existence from the urban imagination.

Redevelopment and infrastructure projects under urban renewal programmes, such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and the Smart Cities Mission, have intensified these exclusions. Although these schemes promise inclusivity and better services, their implementation frequently involves evicting slum dwellers for “beautification” or land-use optimisation (Bhan, 2009; Dupont, 2011). Displacement of sanitation workers from their informal settlements often occurs without adequate compensation, alternative housing, or access to livelihoods, leading to a further deterioration of their socio-economic condition.

Such urban planning practices reflect what Ananya Roy (2003) terms “urban informality”—the systematic relegation of specific populations to the margins of legality and visibility. This concept refers to the informal settlements and housing arrangements that are not officially recognized by the state, leading to the lack of basic services and legal protection. The homes of sanitation workers are viewed as encroachments, while elite housing, commercial zones, and gated communities are regularised and legalised.

This duality reveals how spatial injustice is not merely an unintended consequence but a deliberate mechanism of urban governance that privileges the interests of the middle and upper classes over the fundamental rights of the working poor. Moreover, the exclusion of sanitation workers is reinforced by the casteist spatial logic of Indian cities, where proximity to “polluting” occupations often determines housing location.

Sanitation workers are pushed into segregated housing colonies or illegal settlements, reinforcing social hierarchies in the spatial layout of urban areas (Desai, 2012). This forced

spatiality maintains social distance and upholds Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity.

Even well-intentioned welfare schemes, such as housing for the urban poor, rarely reach sanitation workers. Bureaucratic red tape, lack of identity documents, and informal work arrangements exclude them from eligibility. Additionally, the increasing contractualisation of sanitation services through private contractors alienates workers from the state's social protection frameworks (Sarkar, 2023). Without secure housing, stable employment, or inclusion in city planning, sanitation workers remain trapped in a cycle of economic precarity and spatial invisibility.

It is imperative to adopt a rights-based and participatory approach to urban planning to address urban exclusion and spatial injustice. Sanitation workers must be recognised as service providers and as rightful urban citizens with claims to housing, healthcare, and dignified living conditions. Inclusion must go beyond token representation and involve structural shifts in how cities are imagined, governed, and built. Recognising the link between caste, labour, and space is essential to creating truly inclusive and just urban futures. There are successful examples of inclusive urban planning initiatives in other parts of the world, such as the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the community land trusts in the United States, that can serve as models for change.

### **Precarity, Contractualisation, and Legal Discourse**

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s ushered in a shift in labour practices across various sectors, including urban sanitation. With the growing emphasis on cost-efficiency and bureaucratic streamlining, municipal bodies increasingly outsourced sanitation services to private contractors. This trend has significantly altered the landscape of sanitation labour by replacing permanent, public-sector jobs with informal, contractual employment.

“While intended to reduce administrative burdens and lower costs, this model has led to the proliferation of precarity, erosion of workers' rights, and a deterioration in working conditions” (Sarkar, 2023; Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). Contractualisation in sanitation work has intensified workers' vulnerability by severing their direct employment ties with municipal corporations. Instead of being recognised as state employees entitled to labour protections, sanitation workers are hired on short-term contracts with few or no benefits.

This practice allows municipalities to shirk responsibilities for workplace safety, social security, and introductory welfare provisions. “It also ensures that workers remain in a legally ambiguous zone—neither fully public employees nor fully protected by private labour laws—thus producing what may be termed a “legal vacuum” (Harriss-White, 2003).

The injustices faced by sanitation workers due to contractualization are most evident in the day-to-day experiences of sanitation workers. These workers often clean drains, streets, septic tanks, and “latrines without personal protective equipment (PPE), exposing them to a range of occupational hazards, including toxic gases, skin diseases, and severe injuries” (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Contractual labourers rarely receive health insurance, maternity benefits, or accident compensation. “If injured or killed on the job, their families must navigate complex bureaucracies—often unsuccessfully—to claim compensation, as their employment status lacks official documentation or formal records” (Sarkar, 2023; Monteiro, 2022).

A critical aspect of this precarious labour regime is the persistence of manual scavenging, despite its legal prohibition. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, outlawed the practice and mandated rehabilitation and compensation for those engaged. “However, field reports and advocacy organisations indicate that manual scavenging continues across Indian states, often under euphemistic job descriptions such as 'sanitation helper' or 'drain cleaner'” (Bezwada Wilson, 2016; Jan Sahas, 2021).

The loophole lies in the failure of enforcement agencies to recognise these practices as manual scavenging, allowing contractors and municipal bodies to bypass legal scrutiny. Social coercion and caste-based stigma further entrench these practices. Many sanitation workers, especially women and “Dalits, are compelled to take up such work due to the absence of alternative employment and the social expectation that they are naturally suited to it” (Davies, 2007; Gopal, 2017). Moreover, the threat of job loss in a highly competitive, informal labour market forces workers to comply with degrading and dangerous tasks, even when they are aware of their illegality.

“Contractors frequently dismiss those who raise complaints or demand protective gear, knowing that municipal corporations often turn a blind eye to such abuses” (Monteiro, 2022). In addition, the weak state of unionisation among sanitation workers exacerbates their precarity. Contractual workers, particularly women and Dalits, often face intimidation when attempting to organise or form unions.

Fear of losing employment or facing social boycott discourages collective action. “In some cities, trade unions representing sanitation workers focus predominantly on permanent staff, neglecting the concerns of temporary or outsourced workers” (Kaur, 2022). The absence of institutional mechanisms for grievance redressal further isolates these workers and reinforces their dependence on exploitative contractors.

The legal and institutional framework also suffers from fragmentation and poor coordination. While multiple bodies—such as the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, and the State Welfare Boards—are ostensibly responsible for implementing the 2013 Act and related welfare schemes, accountability remains diffuse. Most states have failed to conduct proper surveys to identify manual scavengers, making it difficult to monitor the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. “Furthermore, the data presented by the government often grossly underestimates the number of workers engaged in hazardous sanitation work” (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Thorat & Newman, 2012).

The rhetoric of national cleanliness campaigns such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has further obscured these contradictions. While the campaign has raised awareness about sanitation and public hygiene, it has also co-opted the language of cleanliness without addressing the caste-based division of labour underlying sanitation work. “In many government advertisements, workers are shown with brooms and smiling faces, sanitising their portrayal as 'noble' or 'heroic' while concealing the structural violence they endure” (Gopal, 2017).

The use of such imagery perpetuates what is known as "symbolic violence, wherein the real-life sufferings of sanitation workers are obscured under narratives of service and nationalism” (Baviskar, 2019). The contract system also weakens the link between sanitation work and broader welfare entitlements. For instance, government schemes like the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) or Employee State Insurance (ESI) are often not extended to contractual sanitation workers. They often do not have Employee Provident Fund (EPF) accounts or access

to old-age pensions. “Women workers, who constitute a substantial proportion of the sanitation workforce, often face additional hurdles such as wage theft, lack of childcare support, and gendered harassment” (Subramanian, 2019).

To rectify these systemic issues, a multifaceted approach is required. First, there needs to be a complete overhaul of the contractual labour model in sanitation services. Regardless of their employment category, all sanitation workers should be recognised as government employees entitled to social security, healthcare, and safe working conditions. Second, implementing the 2013 Act must be strengthened through regular, transparent surveys, independent monitoring, and strict penalisation of violators. “Third, workers should be allowed and encouraged to unionise, and platforms should be established for their representation in policy discussions and urban planning forums” (Monteiro, 2022).

**Legal Empowerment is Insufficient: The Need for Broader Social and Cultural Shifts.** Legal empowerment alone, however, is insufficient unless social and cultural shifts accompany it. The discriminative perception that specific communities are 'naturally' suited to sanitation work must be actively challenged through public campaigns, educational reforms, and media representation. The state must invest in “long-term rehabilitation measures, including vocational training, education, and alternative livelihood options, enabling sanitation workers to voluntarily exit these degrading occupations” (Jan Sahas, 2021).

Finally, urban governance must acknowledge and incorporate the lived realities of sanitation workers in its planning and budgeting processes. Rather than viewing sanitation as a peripheral concern, it must be treated as central to the functioning of cities and the dignity of urban citizenship. Recognising and rectifying the systemic precarity embedded in the sanitation sector is not merely a policy challenge—it is a moral imperative in a society that aspires to equality, justice, and democracy.

### **Towards a Rights-Based Urban Governance**

Urban governance in India has long functioned through a technocratic, top-down model that prioritises infrastructure development, economic growth, and urban aesthetics over the lived experiences and rights of the urban poor. Among the most marginalised in this framework are sanitation workers—predominantly Dalits—who, despite their essential contributions to the functioning of cities, continue to be treated as invisible, expendable labour. This paper argues for a paradigm shift toward a rights-based and participatory model of urban governance, “one that recognises sanitation workers not merely as providers of a service, but as rights-bearing citizens entitled to dignity, equity, and meaningful inclusion in the processes that shape urban life” (Sen, 2009; Baviskar, 2019).

The current urban governance structure is ill-equipped to address the intersectional marginalisation of sanitation workers. As discussed earlier, the labour of sanitation is deeply entangled with caste hierarchies, gendered exploitation, and spatial segregation. “Women sanitation workers, for instance, are doubly burdened—expected to perform dehumanising tasks under hazardous conditions while also being subject to sexual harassment, wage theft, and domestic responsibilities” (Subramanian, 2019; Gopal, 2017). Dalit women engaged in manual scavenging and sewer cleaning often report experiences of caste-based verbal abuse and physical risk without access to legal recourse or protective infrastructure.

Therefore, a rights-based approach to urban governance must begin by recognising the structural foundations of this inequality and ensuring that the principles of non-discrimination, participation, accountability, and dignity are at the heart of urban policy.

Such an approach aligns with international human rights standards and India's constitutional vision, particularly Articles 14 (Equality before the law), 15 (Prohibition of discrimination), 16 (Equality of opportunity in public employment), and 21 (Right to life and dignity). "However, translating these rights into practice not only promotes social justice but also stimulates economic growth, as it demands institutional, administrative, and political restructuring" (1).

A key pillar of this restructuring is participatory governance. Sanitation workers are rarely consulted in decisions directly affecting their work, living conditions, or access to services. City Master Plans, municipal budgets, and infrastructure projects are typically designed by planners, engineers, and bureaucrats who remain detached from the daily realities of those who clean streets, unclog sewers, and manage urban waste. "Without their inclusion, policies risk perpetuating rather than dismantling systemic inequities" (Bhan, 2009; Roy, 2003). A multi-stakeholder approach, involving workers, policymakers, and community representatives, is essential for democratic inclusion and effective governance.

One promising model is the formation of workers' cooperatives and self-help collectives managed and owned by sanitation workers. "Such initiatives, as seen in cities like Pune and Ahmedabad, allow workers to negotiate better wages, improve safety standards, and assert collective bargaining rights" (Sarkar, 2023). However, these initiatives need active support from the state in terms of legal recognition, funding, and integration into city-level service delivery frameworks.

In addition to participatory mechanisms, redistributive justice must be a central concern in urban governance. It entails improving wages or providing safety gear and ensuring access to housing, healthcare, education, pensions, and other social protections routinely denied to contractual sanitation workers. Programmes such as the Rajiv Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana must explicitly include sanitation workers as a priority group for housing allocations and infrastructure development. "Moreover, social security schemes must be adapted to include informal and contract-based workers who fall through the cracks due to documentation barriers and administrative neglect" (Jan Sahas, 2021). The integration of technology, such as mechanised cleaning equipment and digital wage systems, can also significantly improve work conditions and efficiency.

The issue of legal enforceability is also crucial. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (2013) "provides a legal framework for the identification, liberation, and rehabilitation of manual scavengers. However, implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic inertia and a lack of political will" (Human Rights Watch, 2014). A rights-based approach would require policy declarations and the establishment of independent monitoring bodies, grievance redressal mechanisms, and penal action against violators. Additionally, affirmative action policies must be extended beyond public sector jobs to include contracted and informal sanitation workers, ensuring equal opportunities for career mobility and skill development.

Education and public awareness are important in shifting societal perceptions around sanitation work. The biased notion that Dalits are 'naturally' suited to perform 'dirty work' must be actively challenged through school curricula, media representation, and public campaigns.

“Awareness programmes should foreground sanitation work's humanity, dignity, and essential nature while advocating for its delinking from caste-based identity” (Gopal, 2017). Furthermore, urban citizenship must be redefined to include those who consume city services and those who enable cities to function through their labour.

A feminist and intersectional lens can further strengthen a rights-based urban governance framework. Recognising that women sanitation workers face unique vulnerabilities due to the intersection of gender, caste, and class is crucial for designing effective interventions. For example, ensuring access to menstrual hygiene, maternity benefits, and childcare facilities can significantly improve the well-being and retention of women workers.

“Policies must also protect against sexual harassment and create safe working environments, especially for those working during night shifts or in isolated areas” (Subramanian, 2019; Monteiro, 2022). Finally, it is essential to institutionalise dignity in urban governance. It means rejecting narratives that frame sanitation work as a ‘noble sacrifice’ and instead acknowledging it as a form of labour that demands fair compensation, legal protection, and career advancement opportunities. Cities must adopt codes of ethics, labour charters, and regulatory frameworks that codify the dignity of all forms of work, especially those traditionally relegated to marginalised communities. Dignity must also be reflected in material conditions—safe housing, healthcare, access to clean water—and symbolic terms, such as public recognition and respect.

Therefore, the shift towards a rights-based urban governance model is not merely a policy recommendation but a moral and democratic imperative. Recognising sanitation workers as equal urban citizens with legitimate claims to the city challenges the structural injustices in Indian urbanism. A participatory, redistributive, and intersectional approach rooted in dignity and justice can pave the way for inclusive, resilient, and equitable cities.

## Analysis and Conclusion

The experience of sanitation workers in Indian cities vividly exposes the fault lines of modern urbanisation and development. These workers, far from being passive beneficiaries of urban growth, are the very backbone of city functioning, yet they are systematically excluded from its benefits. Their marginalisation is not a random occurrence; it is deeply ingrained in the intersection of caste, labour, and spatial governance.

While this paper is grounded in the Indian context, the experiences of sanitation workers offer critical insights with far-reaching global relevance, particularly within the field of social work and social policy. The marginalisation of sanitation workers in India—rooted in caste-based occupational hierarchies—reflects broader patterns of structural inequality, labour precarity, and social exclusion that are evident across different socio-economic contexts worldwide. Social work scholarship has long emphasised the need to address structural injustice, defined as systemic inequalities embedded in social, economic, and political institutions that disproportionately affect marginalised populations (Iris Marion Young, 2022). In this regard, the lived realities of sanitation workers in India resonate strongly with global concerns around the invisibilisation of essential labour and the exploitation of vulnerable occupational groups.

Across many countries, workers engaged in waste management, sanitation, and other forms of “dirty work” experience similar forms of stigma, occupational hazards, and lack of social protection (Hughes, 1958; ILO, 2019). For instance, informal waste pickers in Latin America, migrant sanitation workers in the Middle East, and sewer maintenance workers in parts of

Africa often operate under precarious conditions with minimal legal safeguards. These parallels suggest that the issue is not confined to India's caste system alone but is indicative of a broader global pattern in which essential yet stigmatised labour is undervalued and excluded from formal protections. As the International Labour Organisation (2019) highlights, informal and hazardous labour sectors worldwide are characterised by inadequate safety measures, income insecurity, and limited access to social security.

From a social work perspective, this paper underscores the importance of advocacy, rights-based approaches, and structural interventions aimed at promoting dignity and equity. The struggles of sanitation workers in India align with core social work principles, including social justice, human rights, and empowerment of marginalised communities (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). By foregrounding caste as a structural determinant of labour inequality, the paper contributes to comparative global discussions on how deeply embedded social hierarchies—whether based on race, class, ethnicity, or migration status—shape access to dignified work and urban citizenship.

Therefore, the Indian case serves not only as a context-specific analysis but also as a lens through which broader global dynamics of exclusion and resistance can be understood. It highlights the urgent need for social work practitioners and policymakers worldwide to recognise and address the structural dimensions of labour inequality, particularly in sectors that remain socially invisible yet fundamentally indispensable to public health and urban life.

This paper has demonstrated how sanitation workers—predominantly Dalits—have been historically and institutionally confined to degrading forms of labour and denied access to secure housing, legal protection, and participation in urban governance.

“As articulated by Soja (2010), the concept of spatial injustice provides a critical framework to understand how geography and space are produced and governed in ways that reflect and reinforce social hierarchies”. Sanitation workers often live in “unauthorised settlements or segregated colonies, with poor infrastructure and limited access to essential services” (Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011).

These spatial arrangements are not just outcomes of poverty or planning failures; they reflect “deeply entrenched caste-based ideologies that view Dalit labour as polluting and therefore undeserving of inclusion in the formal urban fabric” (Desai, 2012). Such exclusions violate the constitutional promise of dignity and equality, making them both a human rights concern and a democratic deficit.

What exacerbates this condition is the ongoing contractualisation and informalisation of sanitation labour. As discussed in earlier sections, outsourcing sanitation services has created a class of disposable workers operating in a legal grey zone. “Devoid of secure contracts, healthcare benefits, social security, and union protection, these workers face extreme precarity and are often coerced into hazardous forms of sanitation labour, including manual scavenging” (Sarkar, 2023; Monteiro, 2022). “The persistence of such conditions, even after legislative bans, reveals a glaring disconnect between legal frameworks and ground realities” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The intersectional nature of this marginalisation further complicates the landscape. Sanitation workers who are women face compounded forms of “discrimination and vulnerability, including wage disparities, gender-based violence, and lack of maternity or childcare support”

(Subramanian, 2019). Dalit women sanitation workers, in particular, face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender, making their experiences of exclusion and exploitation even more acute. This intersectionality must be accounted for in any meaningful analysis or intervention.

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, despite its visibility and political appeal, has failed to address these deeper structural concerns adequately. While it has successfully foregrounded sanitation in the public discourse, it has largely decontextualised sanitation labour from the caste structures that sustain it.

Symbolic gestures—"such as politicians sweeping streets for photo opportunities—often conceal the systemic caste-based exploitation on which urban cleanliness depends" (Gopal, 2017; Baviskar, 2019). This celebratory discourse around cleanliness risks invisibilizing the struggles of those who perform sanitation work daily under inhumane conditions. A transformative approach to urban governance is urgently needed to bridge this gap, one rooted in rights, recognition, and redistribution.

First, sanitation workers must be recognised as full urban citizens entitled to housing, healthcare, education, and protection from discrimination. This requires active enforcement of constitutional guarantees, labour laws, and affirmative policies that acknowledge historical injustices. This transformative approach offers hope for a more just and inclusive urban future.

Second, urban planning and policy must become participatory and inclusive. Sanitation workers must have representation in municipal decision-making, planning committees, and welfare boards. "Their lived experiences and local knowledge should inform city budgets, infrastructure development, and service delivery mechanisms" (Roy, 2003; Bhan, 2009).

Third, there must be significant investment in rehabilitation and alternative livelihood programmes, particularly for those engaged in manual scavenging and other hazardous forms of sanitation work. This investment should be accompanied by public awareness campaigns that challenge casteist norms and redefine the value of sanitation labour. These practical steps are crucial in the journey towards a more just and inclusive urban society.

Beyond the Indian context, this case study offers important insights for global social work and social policy scholarship. The marginalisation of sanitation workers reflects broader patterns of structural inequality, occupational stigma, and exclusion faced by marginalised labour groups worldwide. Issues such as precarious employment, invisibilised essential labour, and lack of social protection resonate across contexts, including migrant labour, waste workers, and informal sector workers globally. By foregrounding caste as a structural determinant, this paper contributes to comparative discussions on how deeply embedded social hierarchies shape labour relations and urban citizenship.

The paper's strong analytical foundation and its contribution to social policy and social justice scholarship, while also underscoring the importance of minor revisions to enhance clarity, accessibility, and impact. This affirmation reflects the paper's engagement with deeply rooted structural inequalities, particularly the intersection of caste, labour, and urban exclusion in contemporary India. As scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar (1936/2014) have long argued, caste operates not merely as a social identity but as an institutionalised system that structures access to dignity, labour, and resources. By situating sanitation work within this framework, the article contributes to a critical understanding of how historical hierarchies continue to shape modern urban experiences.

At the same time, conceptual clarity, methodological transparency, and global contextualisation strengthen the paper's scholarly rigour and broaden its relevance. Ensuring that culturally specific terms are clearly defined allows the analysis to be accessible to an international audience, thereby enhancing its contribution to comparative social work discourse. Similarly, the paper's methodological basis aligns with established research standards that emphasise transparency and credibility in qualitative inquiry (Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2017).

Furthermore, the empirical case studies and the articulation of global implications reinforce the paper's analytical depth. As noted by Amartya Sen (2009), issues of inequality and injustice must be understood not only within specific cultural contexts but also as part of broader global patterns of deprivation and exclusion. In this regard, the paper's focus on sanitation workers provides valuable insights into the lived realities of marginalised labour groups, contributing to wider debates on social justice, labour rights, and inclusive urban governance.

By addressing these issues, the paper is better positioned to make a meaningful contribution to the field. It not only advances academic understanding of caste-based labour inequality but also aligns with the normative commitments of social work to promote dignity, equity, and human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Therefore, it enhances both the intellectual robustness and the practical relevance of the paper, supporting its suitability and its potential impact on scholarship and policy discourse.

However, the concluding observations affirm the paper's analytical strength and critical engagement with issues of caste-based labour inequality and urban exclusion, while also encouraging a clearer articulation of its global relevance. This paper, while grounded in the Indian context, engages with broader themes central to social work and social policy, particularly structural injustice, labour precarity, and the marginalisation of essential workers. As B. R. Ambedkar (1936/2014) argued, caste is not merely a system of social stratification but a deeply institutionalised mechanism that governs access to labour, dignity, and social mobility.

By situating sanitation work within this framework, the manuscript highlights how historically embedded inequalities continue to shape contemporary urban experiences. At the same time, the paper emphasises the global implications, significantly enhancing the contribution. The struggles of sanitation workers in India resonate with wider global patterns in which marginalised occupational groups—such as waste pickers, migrant labourers, and informal workers—experience precarious employment, occupational stigma, and limited access to social protection (International Labour Organisation, 2019). These parallels underscore that while caste is a specific socio-cultural system, the structural dynamics of exclusion it produces are comparable to inequalities based on race, class, and migration status in other contexts. From a social work perspective, such conditions call for interventions grounded in human rights, dignity, and social justice, as emphasised by the International Federation of Social Workers (2014).

Furthermore, the paper is “thorough” and “well-supported”, which reinforces its scholarly contribution while highlighting the value of the suggested refinements. Enhancing conceptual clarity, strengthening methodological transparency, and foregrounding global relevance not only improve readability but also align the paper with international academic standards. As Amartya Sen (2009) notes, the analysis of injustice must extend beyond local contexts to engage with broader comparative and ethical frameworks. By incorporating these revisions, the

manuscript is better positioned to contribute meaningfully to global debates on labour rights, urban inequality, and inclusive governance.

The paper undertakes to preserve the analytical clarity and critical tone of the original work while enhancing its accessibility and international relevance. Consequently, the paper not only advances understanding of caste-based labour inequality in India but also offers valuable insights for global social work scholarship concerned with combating structural injustice and advocating for marginalised populations.

Finally, the governance language and culture must shift from paternalism or tokenism to dignity, equity, and solidarity. Sanitation workers must not be viewed as beneficiaries of state charity or “heroes” of cleanliness drives, but as workers with rights, families, aspirations, and full citizenship.

Henceforth, the marginalisation of sanitation workers is not merely an outcome of neglect but a product of structural injustice. Addressing it requires systemic reform that reimagines urban space through the lens of dignity, equity, and democratic inclusion. Only by dismantling the entrenched hierarchies of caste and labour and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of the most marginalised can Indian cities truly become just, inclusive, and humane.

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