

Marginalization of women sanitation workers in an urban setting: a case study of Prayagraj district of Uttar Pradesh

Deepshikha Upadhyay, University of Allahabad

Prashant Khattri, University of Allahabad

Keyoor Pathak, University of Allahabad

Abstract: With an emphasis on the lived experiences of women in the sanitation sector, this paper examines the relationship between systemic social exclusion and urban spatial dynamics. Sanitation workers face institutional, social, and spatial marginalization despite playing a vital role in preserving public health and urban hygiene. Caste, class, and gender-based discrimination create multiple vulnerabilities for sanitation workers, especially women. This paper aims to understand the socio-spatial exclusion and embedded marginalization of women sanitation workers, using primary data collected from women sanitation workers in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India. This paper will examine the multifaceted marginalization of sanitation workers, focusing on factors such as caste dynamics, gender disparities, and gender relations and socialization, as well as health risks and other related issues, using case studies and social stories. The paper would be based on the theory of “Spatial Justice” that has been brilliantly explained and used by Edward Soja (2010) in his seminal work “Seeking spatial justice”. The social and spatial aspects of human experiences are highlighted in Soja's work, which explains that space is socially constructed and subject to social change, and also how spatial aspects can perpetuate social inequalities. Hence, with the help of this theory, the paper would cover the aspects of marginalization and spatial exclusion of the women sanitation workers in an urban setting. The paper would also take the “Intersectionality Theory” by Crenshaw (1989) into cognizance to understand how caste, class, gender, etc., intersect and result in the provision of compounded marginalization of the women sanitation workers in an urban space.

According to the study, the intersection of caste, gender, class, and spatial exclusion shapes the severe, multidimensional marginalization that women sanitation workers in Prayagraj undergo. They continue to experience institutional neglect, structural discrimination, and symbolic invisibility despite carrying out crucial urban sanitation work. The outcome of the study demonstrates how systemic silencing, rather than a lack of agency, is hidden when past oppression is internalized as acceptance or resignation. The study also reveals various levels of susceptibility even among residents of a slum, identifying horizontal marginalization within the community itself. It highlights how these women workers' positionalities are shaped by social recognition, political mobilization, and spatial justice.

Keywords: urban; sanitation; exclusion; marginalization; gender; women

INTRODUCTION

Urban sanitation constitutes a foundational pillar of public health infrastructure in Indian cities. However, despite its indispensable nature, the sector remains largely undervalued and poorly acknowledged in both policy and public discourse. The responsibility for this crucial yet stigmatized labour falls predominantly on members of historically marginalized communities, particularly women belonging to Dalit¹ castes. These women bear a dual burden of caste-based and gender-based discrimination, positioning them at the lowest rungs of both the social and occupational hierarchies. Their concealed reality is not merely symbolic; it reflects a deep structural neglect in urban planning, where their labour is essential yet rendered as dispensable (Shetty, 2018; Anand, 2019).

The occupational segregation that relegates Dalit women to sanitation work is rooted in the caste-based division of labour institutionalized over centuries, and reinforced under modern state apparatuses. As Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality underscores, these women are situated at a complex crossroad of multiple identities, where gender, caste, and class intersect to produce compounded marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). This intersectionality results in their exclusion not only from formal labour rights and welfare provisions, but also from safe working conditions, housing, and basic urban amenities such as sanitation and clean water in their own neighbourhoods (Patil, 2024).

As one of India's oldest cities and a significant religious hub, Prayagraj² has significant historical, cultural, and urban significance. This is especially true because of the Sangam and occasions like the KumbhMela, which draw massive crowds and demand extensive sanitary work in the city. Prayagraj offers a crucial framework for analyzing how caste, gender, and class influence urban labor hierarchies since it is a fast-growing urban area with dense slum settlements and a sizable workforce engaged in manual and municipal cleaning tasks. The city is a crucial location for studying urban untouchability, geographical segregation, and occupational stigmatization within municipal systems due to its longstanding affiliation with Dalit sanitation labour (Sarif, 2024). Because Prayagraj is a place where religious grandeur, urban development, and stark socioeconomic inequality coexist, the study was carried out there. Even though the city presents a picture of cultural relevance and pilgrimage-based urban renewal, women sanitation workers' daily lives are nevertheless characterized by precarious employment, hazardous housing, neglect in welfare support, and little societal appreciation of their job. Because of this contrast, Prayagraj became an analytically significant field site for investigating the persistence of structural marginalization in a city that publicly depends on sanitation labour, particularly during large urban gatherings, but fails to grant those who perform this vital work with their dignity, rights, and equitable urban citizenship.

¹ The term "Dalit" is frequently used to express identity, dignity, and resistance against caste-based oppression. Dalit are communities that have historically been positioned at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy and have experienced systematic social exclusion, discrimination, and economic marginalization (Thapa et al., 2021).

² From the 16th century until 2018, the city of Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh, India, was known as Allahabad. In order to honor its cultural and religious historical roots, the state government formally reinstated the old name Prayagraj. Prayag, which refers to the holy river confluence that defines the city's character, is mentioned in ancient Sanskrit literature, whereas the previous name Allahabad was given during Mughal rule (Lefèvre, 2020).

In urban contexts like Prayagraj, these conditions become even more pronounced during mega-events like the KumbhMela³, where the city projects cleanliness and order for visitors, while simultaneously deepening the exploitation of sanitation workers behind the scenes. According to Soja (2010), the exclusion of Dalit women's labour from city development plans on the one hand and celebrating an urban narrative on the other is indicative of larger trends in socio-spatial injustice.

As it is widely recognized, urban sanitation workers frequently operate in unstable environments with little job security, insufficient safety equipment, and little access to social or health benefits. Due to ingrained patriarchal standards, restricted mobility, and societal expectations that further devalue their labour, women in this sector are disproportionately impacted. Their marginalization is not just social; it is structural, since it is ingrained in the structure of labour and urban governance (Patil, 2024).

It has been noted that although the Swachh Bharat Mission⁴ (SBM) has brought sanitation into the public eye, the rights and conditions of individuals who carry out this work—especially women sanitation workers—have received little attention. The need for sanitation services has increased due to the growing urbanization of places like Prayagraj; nonetheless, the workforce continues to be economically and socially mistreated (Ghosh, 2016).

Because of their gender, caste, and class, women sanitation workers experience intersectional oppression. They are routinely denied fair work opportunities, social recognition, and policy benefits in spite of their crucial role. Gender, caste, class, and occupational stigma are some of the types of marginalization that intersect with women working in sanitation.

The urban sanitation workforce in India remains highly informalized and gendered. While men are often assigned more mechanized roles, women are disproportionately assigned manual and high-risk tasks such as sweeping streets and, at times, cleaning the sewage (*Nala*) without adequate safety measures. The nature of this work further exposes them to occupational hazards, harassment, and neglect from administrative mechanisms that prioritize infrastructural sanitation over labour dignity (Nagpal et al., 2021).

Sanitation workers have been excluded from planning and benefiting from urban development schemes like the Smart Cities Mission in Prayagraj. According to reports, women sanitation workers frequently reside in underprivileged urban slums where they are unable to get safe housing, clean water, and medical treatment. Consequently, caste discrimination and inconsistent pay contribute to their socioeconomic condition (Ansari & Singh, 2022; Jamal & Upadhyay, 2023).

³KumbhMela at Prayagraj is one of the largest religious gatherings and an important Hindu pilgrimage which is held at the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers (the confluence of these rivers is known as 'Sangam'). Millions of devotees attend the 12-year cycle, which includes the ArdhKumbh every six years, for spiritual observances and ritual bathing. In Hindu tradition, the KumbhMela is significant because pilgrims gather for ritual bathing at the Sangam, which is said to provide spiritual reward and purification. Additionally, it is a significant cultural and social celebration that upholds Indian religious practice, communal life, and pilgrimage traditions (Kanauiya & Tiwari, 2025).

⁴Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), launched by the Government of India on 2nd October 2014, is a nationwide sanitation and cleanliness campaign aimed at eliminating open defecation, improving solid waste management and providing hygiene practices across rural and urban areas of India (VerKuilen et al., 2023).

It is noted that gendered experiences in sanitation are rarely taken into account when allocating municipal resources. In labour discussions and union activities, women's voices are marginalized, making them susceptible to exploitation (Prajapati, 2024). For apparent reasons, their jobs become more important at significant events like the KumbhMela, but they are rarely represented in decision-making (Nidhi, 2021).

This paper tries to explore the systemic marginalization of women sanitation workers through social exclusion and the intersectional forces that further expand those restrictions falling on women sanitation workers.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MARGINALIZATION

In an urban environment such as Prayagraj, the marginalization of women sanitation workers necessitates a theoretical perspective that takes into account both systemic injustices and the lived experiences of individuals impacted. Two interconnected frameworks are used in this study- *Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory* and *Edward Soja's Spatial Justice Theory*. By combining these concepts, it is possible to analyze how gender, caste, class, and geography interact to influence the socioeconomic circumstances faced by sanitation workers.

In order to highlight the significance of geography and space in comprehending social justice, Edward Soja (2010) developed the idea of spatial justice. "Justice has a geography," according to Soja, meaning that spatial structure is never neutral and frequently reflects perpetuating social inequality. The areas where the sanitation workers reside in the urban space of Prayagraj are actually the ones that are not included in the city's basic amenities, as per the observations made on the field. Basic services, adequate infrastructure, sanitary facilities, and other resources are lacking in the area where they live, which systematically contributes to their systemic marginalization. Therefore, the lack of urban services, the physical or spatial separation of employment and living, and the invisibility of women sanitation workers in city planning processes – all of this indicate that their spatial rights are being denied. Hence, in this context, this theory helps in understanding how, despite being vital to the functioning of the city, women sanitation workers are physically and socially separated into unsafe and unregulated workplaces (such as near public restrooms, drains, and dumpsites); their homes are frequently in underserved as they are situated in the suburb slums that are far away from civic infrastructure.

Hence, we can look critically at how the urban environment of Prayagraj contributes to these workers' exploitation and invisibilization using Soja's theory. They are routinely denied the city's rights, which include safe working conditions, access to healthcare, and spatial acknowledgment, leading to their socio-political and spatial marginalization.

The theoretical framework known as intersectionality was first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. It looks at how different types of identity-based oppression, including racial and gender bias, casteism, and classism, interact to create distinct experiences of marginalization. Women from oppressed areas bear a "double or triple burden" that defies explanation by discrete categories, as Crenshaw's critique of single-axis analyses makes it clear.

The usage of this theory would help us know how Dalit women sanitation workers experience caste discrimination in addition to gender-based exclusion, and also how their class position (typically as permanent, contractual, or daily wage workers) further restricts their access to

institutional protections. Within urban government, their marginalization may be made worse by their locational, ethnic, and religious identities. Crenshaw's theory draws attention to the intricate and intertwined repressive systems that these women encounter, not only in society but also in labour laws and government organizations that pretend to assist them.

This dual framework makes it clear that the marginalization of women sanitation workers in Prayagraj is not accidental; rather, it is institutional, rooted in the socio-spatial structure of the city, which is sustained by mistakes in structural policy.

Most of the academic discourse in Indian academia around caste or gender-based discrimination has focused on external systems of oppression, but it fails to include the internalization of the oppression. Hence, there have been fewer conversations about how people think that social discrimination is their fate. The psychological impact that these violent experiences leave on the subconscious, especially of women, is actually something that has not been much reflected upon. Paulo Freire (1970) has argued about the internalization of oppression in his famous work "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", where he explains that oppressed individuals frequently absorb the oppressor's image and accept their miserable state as normal. Internalized oppression is the state where the oppressed thinks that their discrimination is their own destiny. Such a state of mind has been reflected by all those women sanitation workers who have been included in this study, where they end up saying that their fate has been written, and this filth is their fate. Dalit individuals, especially women, and the subaltern have not really been given the opportunity to express themselves as they wish to, as Spivak (1988) suggests that the subaltern cannot speak, where she tries to emphasize how the creation of elite knowledge frequently silences or misrepresents oppressed people, particularly when they internalize their situation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived experiences of women sanitation workers in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. The focus on Prayagraj is both strategic and symbolic. As a city of religious, administrative, and cultural importance, Prayagraj has undergone rapid urban transformation in the past few years, especially around events like the KumbhMela. These urban changes often disproportionately affect those on the margins of the labour force, as it is clearly visible in the case of the sanitation workers.

Prayagraj is a Tier II city in Uttar Pradesh with a population of approximately 2 million. The city has a diverse labour market, including a substantial informal sector comprising sanitation workers, many of whom are employed either directly by municipal bodies or through private contractors. The sanitation workforce is predominantly Dalit, a significant portion of which consists of women who engage in street sweeping, drain cleaning, garbage collection, and operation of public toilets.

Due to the nature of the research, rich and contextually grounded insights were obtained through case study analysis, fieldwork, non-participant observations, and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork is essential to this study since it offers firsthand, immersive exposure to the social circumstances and working conditions of women sanitation workers. The location that was selected for the study was a slum near Mumfordganj location of the Prayagraj city. To record observations, informal discussions, and emerging themes, field notes and a reflective diary were maintained. Observations of 10 women sanitation workers were included to understand the topic in hand. The participants were selected through a

snowball sampling method. The selection process began by identifying some workers through local contacts. After interviewing these participants, they were asked to introduce other women sanitation workers working in the same settlement. Through these referrals, the sample gradually expanded. The data was collected from April 2025 to May 2025. A reflective method was used in order to identify the researcher's positionality and biases. After participants were properly informed about the study's goal and confidentiality guidelines, their informed consent was obtained. The participants gave their consent for audio recordings to be made for future research.

The interview data were analyzed with the help of thematic analysis method. It was done by carefully listening to the recorded audio of the women sanitation workers and identifying common ideas or patterns across their responses. Repeated themes were the focus of this process, which included shared experiences, emotions, problems, or viewpoints. These themes helped tremendously in organizing the data and explaining what the participants meant in a clear and structured manner. The data was approached in a step-wise manner. Firstly, the recorded audio was heard thoroughly, and consequently, notes were made to get familiarity with the data. Secondly, important statements were highlighted to identify the meaningful parts. Thirdly, short labels were assigned to the highlighted sections, such as domestic abuse, discrimination, hygiene issues, invisibility, etc. Fourthly, potential themes were brought to light by grouping the similar codes together. Fifthly, the themes were thoroughly reviewed and refined further to check whether they truly make sense while reflecting the data. In the next step, each theme was clearly explained so that it captures the central idea of the study. Finally, the themes were written up using participants' quotes to showcase how the themes come from real-life lived experiences.

The slum had two divisions as per the information provided by the key informant, namely, 40 quarters (Chalis Quarter) and 16 quarters (*Solah Quarter*). The key informant was from one of the houses of the 40 quarters. Tucked behind the congestion of city lights, this slum was the temporary setup for the sanitation workers, as they have to leave it when the working member of the family retires. The outside look of the houses was not satisfactory, but the inside view was quite astonishing as the workers and their families living there maintain their homes on their own with whatever they have. Though their houses were very small, catering to about 5-6 members (at times even more) in that tiny space. The space where these workers live with their families was not a very clean space, as there was no provision of sanitation in their *Mohallas*(colonies). Yet, it was observed that the 40-quarter lane was still in better condition than the 16-quarter lane. Tangled cables hung precariously between poles and rooftops. Their belongings were organized in corners or hung from hooks, and families of five or more slept on the floor of their one-room houses. The right to privacy is a rare luxury in these homes. The walls were sometimes blackened by smoke from open fires or cooking kerosene burners. Although there were toilets in the homes, they were often located outside or, if inside, were divided by a curtain.

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

The data collected from in-depth interviews with women sanitation workers in Prayagraj reveals patterns of exclusion and vulnerability. These findings are interpreted through the lenses of intersectionality and spatial justice, as mentioned before.

Women between the ages of 28 and 50 represented the majority of responders. Most of them were members of the Hela⁵ community, which is one of the Scheduled Castes. Many were illiterate, and many were single-earners in households with several dependents. They were employed by the municipality on a contract basis or through outsourcing, while others were permanent employees.

There have been some common complaints from the women sanitation workers when they were interviewed. They reported incredibly dangerous, humiliating, and tiring situations at work. They reported the absence/lack of Safety Equipment. Most of them said they perform sanitation task bare hands, and they just cover their faces with a scarf, though they get masks, but they are not comfortable wearing them. Some workers who were outsourced occasionally experienced delayed payments during the tenure of their jobs. There is no Social Security, as the majority lacked pension plans, maternity benefits, or health insurance.

“When I go to work, I cover my face with a scarf so that people do not see me and discriminate. Some people on the street do not like to talk to us as we are sweepers. And some people still do not like to come in contact with us. It feels so disgusting, as if we just don’t deal with dirt, but we are the dirt itself. Sometimes we get the security equipment, such as masks, gloves, but there are times when we do not get it”, said Surekha, living in the 16 Quarters.

These women were placed in hazardous working zones, which fall in line with Edward Soja's idea of spatial justice. Their places of employment—drains, dumps, and streets—were spatially separated from privileged and powerful areas of the urban space. Their residences, which were frequently found in unplanned slums, lacked paved roads, sewage systems, and basic amenities like sanitation, electricity, etc.

“I wake up around 4, and after completing the household chores, I head towards the workplace. I clean the streets, pick up the garbage, and collect it at the assigned place. But upon returning to the slum where I live, I find piles of garbage that are unmanaged around my home. This is such an irony that we are responsible for maintaining the hygiene of the city, and yet we are forced to live in such dirty conditions”, said Rekha living in the 40 Quarters colony.

The employees of the Municipality also do not cater to the needs of these workers. They are also not connected with the women directly, as there is a hierarchy in the organization due to which women workers are mostly unheard.

“The people from the municipality only remember us when we are needed; we are invisible to them. There is no provision of management of garbage at our place where we live. The sewers do not get cleaned, often overflows and there are mosquitoes all over the place, as it stinks. I think our area is not considered as part of the town and we are not considered as humans”, said Sunita from the 40 Quarters.

Since these places have historically been reserved for "unclean" castes, as generations have resided in those colonies, their caste identity is closely related to this spatial exclusion. It was

⁵ The Hela community is a Dalit caste group that has historically been connected to manual cleaning, sweeping, and waste removal, especially in Uttar Pradesh and other regions of North India. Helas have historically experienced social marginalization, stigmatization in their line of work, and limited access to resources due to their lower caste status (Shah et al, 2006).

observed that only the people belonging to the Hela community were residing in that slum. This is an example of caste-based geographical exclusion, which the people living in high-rise societies choose not to see for their convenience. Assigning Dalit individuals to "dirty" roles and spaces while preventing them from being seen or acknowledged in public spheres is consistent with the notion that caste governs spatial relationships (Ghosh, 2020).

"I want our slum to get equal recognition, and there should be policies for the well-being of our community as well. We are also humans when we take the responsibility on our shoulders to keep the city clean. Why is it that we live separately in different areas, in different quarters in a slum? Are we not humans like you all? Just because we are born in a lower caste, should we be treated differently? We also need shoulders to lean on. The government talks about a clean India. But who will bring cleanliness and support for the ones who are cleaning the streets? The dirt in our lives is not just in the garbage, but in thinking as well, that makes us invisible", said Meena, living in 16 Quarters.

Daily lives of the Dalit sanitation workers in Indian cities are still shaped by a form of urban untouchability, as rightly suggested by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Despite being outlawed by the Indian Constitution (Article 17), untouchability still exists in its institutional, social, and spatial dimensions, particularly in urban areas, manifesting itself in marginalization. According to Ambedkar, caste is not just a rural issue; it also persists in all areas of public life, including the city, where it takes on more structural and covert forms (Ambedkar, 1936). Caste-based segregation in the context of sanitation work takes the form of constraints on access to public facilities, mobility, and dignity.

"We usually do not get the facility to use the toilet when we work for long hours. We have to urinate in the open behind the shade of some car or tree. And the situation becomes worse when someone wants to defecate, they have to rush to their houses. We do not get sanitary napkins, which are very much required when we are on our periods. There is no restroom for us, and at times, we do not get water to drink, small vendors show some mercy, though. We are mandated to run the sanitation of the city, yet there is no place for us in the urban system. It feels like we are not part of the city", said Anita from the 40 Quarters.

In addition to being geographically isolated in improper slums, sanitation workers are not included in public planning or decision-making processes generally. They are simply asked to provide labour; they are not given the opportunity to participate in community development or welfare programs. This illustrates the "modern reproduction of caste discrimination," as defined by Ghanshyam Shah (2006), in which caste systems continue to evolve and endure even in contemporary, secular, urban institutions.

"We do not have proper facility of electricity, though we get water on prescribed time of the day. The road leading to our slum is ruptured and very bad. It stinks a lot as there is a lot of garbage on the road. I think we are living in a different world- a world that is not a part of the city, even if we are living here. We live in very minimal arrangements, we work like donkeys, and it always feels like we are not given our due credit and respect. If any of us get ill, then we do not get any help, and money gets deducted from our salary if we are absent. Still, I leave every morning with a broom in my hand because this unfortunate fate is the mundane reality of my life", said Shalu, living in 16 Quarters.

Apart from Soja's theory, the study also draws strongly on Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality, which discovers that these women's marginalization is exacerbated by the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Many women sobbed about their stories where they were the sole breadwinners of their families. Some women also said that their husbands have left their jobs and indulged in nefarious activities, due to which the whole burden of the family falls on their shoulders. A number of respondents reported being coerced, verbally abused, or sexually harassed by their own husbands, by male residents in that colony, and by supervisors sometimes. This mistreatment is the reason why the women sanitation workers do not let their daughters go anywhere alone after dusk.

“We are accountable to perform the work outside, but for many of us the real struggle starts when we reach home. I have a daughter and a son. My daughter helps me in taking care of the household chores, and my son works in a local market shop. My husband used to work as a contractual worker in the municipality, but he got sick, and now I am doing the job instead of him. He got better, but then he stopped going to work and became a drunkard gradually. He beats me up and my daughter at times when we have some argument about making some decisions for the home. I have lived my life anyhow, but I feel petty for my daughter that she has to face all this at such a tender age”,

Said Usha living in the 16 Quarters. It was observed that many young daughters of the women sanitation workers dropped out of school, and they helped their mothers in taking care of the home while they go to work. This shows that it is always the women who have to sacrifice in different realms of their lives. In her 1949 book ‘The Second Sex’, Simone de Beauvoir developed the case that women are "made" rather than born because of social conventions that force them into submissive roles. Crenshaw (1988) also explained the same in his words that caste, gender, and class structures overlap and perpetuate a culture in which women are expected to endure various sorts of violence in silence. The social, religious, and cultural standards promote the idea that women must make these sacrifices as part of their responsibilities.

A number of respondents reported being coerced, verbally abused, or sexually harassed by their own husbands, by male residents in that colony, and by supervisors sometimes. Economic Insecurity is a nightmare for them, as the majority of women sanitation workers' families were stuck in a cycle of poverty and social marginalization since they had no other source of income. Events like KumbhMela surely provide them with the virtual identity of the frontline workers, yet the ground reality is different, as they are always overworked and overburdened.

“The entire city was beautified in lieu of the KumbhMela. But our streets were damaged, and there was no or very dim street light in our colony. As an outsourcing worker, we are paid a very low salary of around 9000 Rs. How do we survive on that? Only we know the reality. There is absolutely nothing that we can do in this context. We are women at the end. We do what we are told. We reside in the city, but the city is aloof from us”, said Manorama from the 16 Quarters.

Symbolic and social invisibility, institutional apathy, urban untouchability, health insecurity, and other manifestations of several levels of marginalization were observed.

“When we clean the streets, our eyes are mostly looking at the ground- not because we clean the streets but because people don't want us to look as equals. Though it happens

indirectly, it leaves me with angst. I once remember that I slipped in the rain while cleaning the street and got bruised a little. No one came to the rescue except for my fellow female worker. I had to rush home after that accident. There is no facility of health insurance for people like us, nor is there any first aid for us. We are invisible- to the people and to the system”, said Rajshree from the 40 Quarters.

The stories of women sanitation workers, who ironically criticized the societal hypocrisy, have portrayed the contrast between symbolic cleanliness and social marginalization. “The walls of the city show the slogans of clean India and clean Prayagraj. But has it ever happened that awareness about our condition been disclosed to the masses? Why has it never happened? Just because we do this sanitation job, we are dirty, and we belong to the Dalit community? The answer lies in the thinking of the people who pass such judgment on our character”, said Nisha, who is a resident of the 40 Quarters.

The marginalization and social exclusion were not just observed vertically, but horizontal marginalization was also observed among the workers residing at the 16 Quarters and the 40 Quarters, respectively. When the interview with the workers residing at the 40 Quarters was completed, we asked the key informant, Bhavika to introduce us to the 16 Quarters. She hesitated a lot and said,

“We do not usually go to that area as the people living there are not helpful and are uncultured. They do not have manners, and they abuse others abruptly. We mostly refrain from going to that area. Even women do not like to interact with each other from both areas. You will have to go there on your own”.

This shows that the people residing in the same area, belonging to the same caste, and doing the same work also show horizontal exclusion, which perpetuates the intra-community social distancing. Here, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is helpful since, even among repressed groups, particular speech patterns, behaviours, or interactions are socially rewarded. According to Bourdieu (1986), people who behave in more "acceptable" ways may despise those who are perceived as "rough" or "uncultured," which serves to further entrench internal divisions.

DALIT POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

In the preceding sections, we talked about the marginalization of the Dalit group and the various layers of oppression that entirely comprise and mould their experiences. But in this section, we are going to put our focus on the occurrence of Dalit assertion.

Uttar Pradesh, being the most populous state of India, has been an epicenter for both the anti-caste movement and caste-based oppression. Formerly known as "Untouchables" under the old varna system, Dalits have long experienced political marginalization, economic hardship, and social rejection. Dalits were mainly blocked out of the political and administrative systems. Leaders such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, however, established the groundwork for Dalit assertion through political, constitutional, and legal agencies (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2003). Formal Dalit movements emerged as a result of identity politics, especially through the Republican Party of India (RPI) and later the BahujanSamaj Party (BSP). Passive involvement paved way to forceful electoral and symbolic politics as a result of these movements. Hence, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Dalit movement, particularly in the Hindi belt, developed into an influential assertion of identity and dignity, which led to the

BSP's rise under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati (Pai, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2003). As a result, history shows that Dalit assertion has occurred across time and space.

Dalit is an umbrella term which comprise of many other sub-castes such as Valmiki, Mehtar, Hela, Jatav, Pasis, Dom, etc. The women who participated in this study belonged to the Hela community. According to the Indian Constitution, the Hela are formally categorized as a Scheduled Caste (SC). Like the Valmiki, Dom, Chamar, and Pasi sub-castes, the Hela are acknowledged as a separate Dalit community in Uttar Pradesh's official caste list. In contrast to Jatavs (Chamars), who comparatively have a stronger hold politically and numerically, they are typically seen as non-dominant inside the Dalit fold (Government of Uttar Pradesh, n.d.; Rege, 2013). Even in the Dalit community, they are positioned among the lowest rungs of the caste order since their occupation is seen as filthy (Rege, 2013; Pai, 2002). The Dalit community is not monolithic. Within the Dalits, there is a hierarchy, with Chamars and Jatavs (castes based on leatherwork) frequently having greater political participation (e.g., BSP leadership). Politically and economically, Pasis, Doms, Helas, and Valmikis are still more likely to be marginalized. The Hela community is therefore underrepresented among the prominent Dalit groups and ostracized by the higher castes. Hence, Dalit horizontal marginalization is the term used to describe this internal inequality (Ibid).

Historically, the Hela community, a Scheduled Caste group primarily located in Uttar Pradesh, has been linked to menial labour and sanitation work. Though they are not very well represented, their continued fight for respect, equitable treatment, and the regularization of sanitation labour is highlighted by their advocacy in Prayagraj, particularly through leaders like Ritesh Kumar Hela. In one of the recent incidents, members of the Hela community, led by Ritesh Kumar Hela, sent a letter to Mayor of Prayagraj city Ganesh Kesarwani on September 7, 2024, where they expressed their disapproval of the unexpected and unannounced termination of service of long-serving outsourced sanitation workers. Significantly, the complaint compared this with the symbolic act of Prime Minister Modi washing the feet of sanitation workers during the 2019 PrayagrajKumbhMela (Live Hindustan, 2024).

In this study, it was observed that these women were aware of the fact that they were being marginalized, but their awareness often emerges through their lived experiences rather than formal political discourse. According to interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Mumfordganj slum, women workers not only acknowledged but also expressed their caste, class, and gender-based marginalization through stories of exclusion, contempt, and institutional neglect. Yet there are many women who feel helpless as to how to uplift their situation, and there is monotony in that sense among them.

There have been protests in Prayagraj by Dalit families and by political parties in the state assembly against the Nazul⁶ land Regulations. The Nazul land is referred to as the land that is owned by the state but is not managed as state property throughout the state. All properties for which a lease, license, or possession is granted under any statute announced by the government by notification are also included in it. These properties are dispersed around a

⁶ In India, "Nazul land" refers to land that was originally owned by a private individual or estate but later reverted to the state (for instance, when there was no legal heir or the land was abandoned). The government frequently rents this land to people, organizations, or households for housing, public buildings, or other civic uses under long-term lease agreements rather than selling it outright. Unlike regular private land, Nazul land is subject to regulations set by state governments regarding its usage and transfer (Nair & Singh, 2023).

number of cities in Uttar Pradesh, where residents have relocated following lease renewals, which can last anywhere from 15 to 99 years (The Hindu Business Line, 2024). Earlier during British colonial rule, urban spaces had settlements which included lower caste serving groups such as coolies, sweepers, gardeners, and drain cleaners belonging to the Dalit community. These groups used to serve the British and the people belonging to the upper caste community. These areas in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) were referred to as *SagarPeshabastis* (slums). Dalit groups, especially those belonging to the Hela, Valmiki, and Chuhra castes, were frequently based in these designated areas and worked as manual scavengers and municipality sweepers (Chakrabarti, 2020). Many of the lower caste working community are still living on the SagarPesha settlement that comes under the Nazul land. In an effort to recover properties from land mafia and lease violators, the Uttar Pradesh government notified a bill on March 7, 2024, that prohibits turning Nazul land into freehold in favor of private individuals (Economic Times, 2024). Since the purpose of the bill is to stop Nazul land from being turned into private freeholds, all these marginalized people will become homeless with the enactment of this bill (The Hindu Business Line, 2024). The protests were caused by the fear of eviction of Dalit families and the privatization of the Nazul property on which the SagarPesha Dalit settlement is constructed. Dalit women participated in protests by drawing attention to gendered vulnerabilities in displacement. The lack of access to cooking space, water, and restrooms disproportionately affected women (Salaria, 2024). This bill came to power, and the capitalists and industrialists neglected the poor and marginalized. Though politicians and people from marginalized communities protested against this bill, the issue is still in the court and it is undecided. Again, we observe that the challenge of spatial justice arises when no one bothers to observe how these marginalized communities would withstand those who are being compelled to leave their settlements. Hence, Nazul regulations perpetuate spatial injustice by placing Dalit sanitation workers in unsafe and stigmatized urban peripheries rather than regularizing these settlements and acknowledging their claim to the city.

Intersectionality in political mobilization is the way that people and groups, especially those who are marginalized in more than one way, organize, speak out, and fight back based on their overlapping identities, such as caste, gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, and disability. By recognizing that oppressive experiences are multifaceted and that resistance needs to be equally nuanced, this idea weakens single-axis movements. The idea and practice of activism and collective resistance are radically altered by this realization. Earlier, in the 1970s and 80s, there was a time when Dalit women were not very much conscious about their conditions, and the women's movement in India was largely driven by the upper-caste women. Dalit women began to realize their miserable and dejected state by the end of the 1980s, and realized that the broader narrative of the women's movement did not adequately represent their circumstances. Babasaheb was the only one to establish Dalit women as a constituency in the post-independence age, and for the first time, they were able to create a vision for their own liberation (Bose, 2024). For the first time, it was realized by them that they are not just women, but they are Dalit women.

Although patriarchy is a worldwide phenomenon, women from other communities experience it differently, as suggested by Gopal Guru in his eminent article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (Guru, 1995). Savarna feminism, according to Guru, is insensitive to the tangible and lived reality of Dalit women, especially when it comes to problems like state violence, sexual abuse, landlessness, and sanitation work. He highlights how caste systems influence access to dignity, work, and voice, and how upper-caste feminists frequently universalize

their own experiences as women. He argues that Dalit women suffer from both intra-caste gender discrimination and upper-caste patriarchy, as we also witnessed in the case of the women sanitation workers in Prayagraj. Caste and gender discrimination do not occur as distinct phenomena for a Dalit woman working in sanitation. Rather, she experiences complicated and unique ways of being shaped by the interactions between such forms of oppression. Her fight for dignity at work includes fighting against gender-based depreciation and, frequently, economic exploitation in addition to casteist exclusion. Ignoring either dimension could make her invisible in the advocacy of political movements (Guru, 1995).

CONCLUSION

The present study looked at the extensive and complex marginalization that women sanitation workers in Prayagraj face. These women, who are mostly from Dalit groups, continue to experience institutional neglect, symbolic invisibility, and structural discrimination despite their vital role in maintaining urban sanitation. Their stories show how class, gender, and caste interact to shape their daily lives and working situations, resulting in a "double burden" of exploitative amnesia.

Through empirical accounts, it is clear that although these women carry out one of the most important duties, they are not granted basic rights like health insurance, protective gear, stable income, or access to safe housing and hygienic surroundings. The paradox of cleaning the city while residing in abandoned slum settlements with exposed drains and uncontrolled trash is a clear illustration of urban untouchability (Ambedkar, 1936) and spatial injustice (Soja, 2010). These geographical disparities are not just physical; they are also highly symbolic, perpetuating social hierarchies and caste-based segregation even in contemporary local government.

Furthermore, the internalization of centuries of caste-based oppression is highlighted by the women's acceptance of their misfortune as fate. This study demonstrates that structural silencing of the voices, aspirations, and demands is the cause of the quiet around their suffering rather than a lack of resistance. Their exclusion from public discussion, labour laws, and planning procedures emphasizes how urgently an intersectional, justice-focused approach to urban development is needed. We also saw the presence of not just vertical marginalization, but also of the horizontal intra-community marginalization within the same slum, which indicates the depth and level of exclusion within such individuals. It was also observed in the paper how political mobilisation and spatial justice are intricately related in understanding the positionality of the women sanitation workers in the Indian context. To conclude, it would be apt to say that changing policies or implementing welfare programs alone won't solve the marginalization of women sanitation workers. It demands a radical rethinking of urban citizenship that appreciates and acknowledges the rights, work, and dignity of marginalized people.

References:

- Ambedkar, B. R.** (1936/2014). *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. Navayana.
- Anand, S.** (2019). *Sanitation, caste, and the city: The politics of waste in urban India*. *Urban Studies*, 56(13), 2683–2699. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018775089>.
- Ansari, A. A., & Singh, A. K.** (2022). Unveiling Urban Development Deprivation: A Ward-Level Study in Municipal Corporations of Uttar Pradesh, India, *Indian Geographical Journal* 97(2), 83-98.

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books.

Bhan, G. (2009). "This is no longer the city I once knew": Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi. *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(1), 127–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809103009>.

Bose, R. (2023, August 14). *A Dalit woman fighting caste and class within India's feminist movement*. Outlook India. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/a-dalit-woman-fighting-caste-and-class-within-india-s-feminist-movement-magazine-309576>.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.

Chakrabarti, A. (2020). Caste and the colonial city: Sweepers in colonial North India. *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 57(3), 347–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464620937385>.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine*. University of Chicago Legal Forum.

Doshi, S. (2013). The politics of the evicted: Redevelopment, subjectivity, and difference in Mumbai's slum frontier. *Antipode*, 45(4), 844–865. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01023.x>.

Economic Times. (2024, August 3). *Nazul land bill: Why this controversial legislation is causing a political stir in UP with BJP, NDA allies and opposition in conflict*. *The Economic Times*. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nazul-land-bill-why-this-controversial-legislation-is-causing-a-political-stir-in-up-with-bjp-nda-allies-and-opposition-in-conflict/articleshow/112241900.cms>.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Herder & Herder.

Ghosh, A. (2016). Sanitation Workers and Urban Policy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(23), 41–47.

Ghosh, A. (2020). *Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and Their Saviors*. Penguin.

Government of Uttar Pradesh.(n.d.). *List of Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh*. Department of Social Welfare. Retrieved July 12, 2025, from <https://socialwelfareup.upsdc.gov.in>.

Guru, G. (1995, October 14–21). Dalit women talk differently. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(41/42), 2548–2550.

Jamal, S., & Upadhyay, A. (2023). Crossing the Seven Seas: Covid-19 Induced Migrant Crisis with Reference to Uttar Pradesh. *SAFER*, 5(3), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.7770/safer-V12N1-art2440>.

Jaffrelot, C. (2003). *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. Columbia University Press.

Kanaujiya, A., & Tiwari, V. (2025). A comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted significance of the KumbhMela in India: An emerging epicenter of global Hindu religious tourism. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 25(02), 561–569. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.25.2.0399>.

Lefevre, C. (2020). Heritage politics and policies in Hindu Rashtra. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 24/25, 44–47. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6728>.

Live Hindustan. (2024, September 7). [Hela community members in Prayagraj protest outsourcing workers' dismissals without notice]. *Live Hindustan*. <https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/prayagraj/story-outsourcing-workers-in-prayagraj-demand-justice-hela-community-protests-201725687429520.html>.

Nair, A., & Singh, R. (2023). Nazul and the Indian Constitution: A legal perspective in relation to the state of Punjab. *International Journal of Civil Law and Legal Research*, 3(1), 30–34. <https://doi.org/10.22271/civillaw.2023.v3.i1a.42>.

- Nagpal, A., Hassan, M., Siddiqui, M. A., Tajdar, A., & Hashim, M.** (2021). Missing basics: A study on sanitation and women's health in urban slums in Lucknow, India. *GeoJournal*, 86(2), 649-661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-019-10088-0>.
- Nidhi, K.** (2021). Smart City and the Quest for Inclusion: Study of ArdhKumbh 2019 at Prayagraj City. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 6(6), 2145-2153.
- Omvedt, G.** (1994). *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications.
- Pai, S.** (2002). *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*. Sage Publications.
- Patil, S. M.** (2024). Politicising the Public Space: On Dalit Women Sanitation Workers and Urban Exclusion. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 59(10), 32-38.
- Prajapati, P. K.** (2024). A Socio-Demographic Study of Beggars at the MaghMela in Prayagraj: Awareness, Perceptions, and Challenges. *International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary*, 4(2), 343-347. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15298131>.
- Rege, S.** (2013). *Writing caste, writing gender: Reading Dalit women's testimonios*. Zubaan books.
- Salaria, S.** (2024, August 4). What is Uttar Pradesh's Nazul Property Bill and why BJP lawmakers are opposing it? ThePrint. Retrieved July 8, 2025, from <https://theprint.in/politics/what-is-uttar-pradeshs-nazul-property-bill-and-why-bjp-lawmakers-are-opposing-it/2207044/>.
- Shah, G.** (2006). *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*. Permanent Black.
- Shah, G., Mander, H., Thorat, S., Deshpande, S., & Baviskar, A.** (2006). *Untouchability in Rural India*. Sage Publications.
- Sarif, M. O.** (2024). Predicting Prayagraj's urbanization trajectory using cellular automata and GIS modeling: Insights into historical and contemporary growth. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 234, 104867. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2024.104867>.
- Shetty, P.** (2018). *Invisible Workers: The plight of women sanitation workers in India*. IndiaSpend.
- Soja, E. W.** (2010). *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Spivak, G. C.** (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois press.
- Thapa, R., Van Teijlingen, E. R., Regmi, P. R., & Heaslip, V.** (2021). Caste exclusion and health discrimination in South Asia: A systematic review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 33(8), 828-838. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10105395211014648>.
- The Hindu Business Line.** (2024, June 25). *Nazul properties bill: A tale of disputed lands from Uttar Pradesh*. The Hindu Business Line. Retrieved July 15, 2025, from The Hindu BusinessLine website.
- VerKuilen, A., Sprouse, L., Beardsley, R., Lebu, S., Salzberg, A., & Manga, M.** (2023). Effectiveness of Swachh Bharat Mission and barriers to ending open defecation in India: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 11. 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1141825>.

Author's Address:

Deepshikha Upadhyay, Research Scholar
Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad
New FCI Building, University Road, Old Katra, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh- 211002
+91 8840103962
upadhyaydeepshika36@gmail.com

Author's Address:

Dr. Prashant Khattri, Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad
New FCI Building, University Road, Old Katra, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh- 211002
+91 9455692280
prashant_khattri@allduniv.ac.in

Author's Address:

Dr. Keyoor Pathak, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, University of Allahabad
New FCI Building, University Road, Old Katra, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh- 211002
+91 9471601415
keyoor@allduniv.ac.in