

Gaps in Law and Practice: Challenges of Sanitation Work in India

Sarita Sonwani, Chaityugayta (Alor) Government College

Kailash Chandra Das, International Institute for Population Sciences

Abstract: In India, thousands of sanitation workers, including those involved in sanitation work, face daily risks to their health, safety, and dignity. Although laws like the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, aim to end manual scavenging and provide support for rehabilitation, the reality on the ground is very different. Many workers are still forced to do hazardous cleaning jobs without safety gear or proper wages. This happens because of weak law enforcement, lack of political will, poor monitoring, and deep-rooted caste discrimination. State and local authorities often deny that manual scavenging still exists, making it harder to bring change. This paper examines the gaps between what the law says and what actually happens. It also highlights the important role that social workers can play in supporting sanitation workers, spreading awareness, and demanding better services and justice. This paper highlights critical policy gaps in sanitation work across India. Despite the presence of national laws and schemes meant to protect sanitation workers, there remains a large disconnect between what is promised in policy and what is implemented on the ground.

Keywords: sanitation workers; policy gaps; social justice; caste discrimination

Introduction

Sanitation work refers to a broad occupational category that includes waste management, sewer maintenance, and public hygiene services, whereas manual scavenging denotes the manual handling of human excreta, a practice explicitly prohibited under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (Government of India, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2014). Distinguishing between the two is crucial, as conflation obscures the legal, ethical, and caste-based dimensions of manual scavenging (Jodhka, 2017; Omvedt, 1994).

In India, sanitation work remains deeply stigmatised and historically shaped by caste hierarchies. Manual scavenging has traditionally been assigned to Dalit communities, particularly Bhangis or Valmikis, reinforcing caste-based occupational segregation and economic exploitation (Sharma, 2015). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity, this labour persists within a socio-legal paradox—formally abolished yet socially and economically sustained.

“Practice” refers to socially embedded, historically reproduced labour relations, rather than isolated acts. It is used in a sociological sense, highlighting caste-based continuity (Ambedkar, 1936; Thorat & Newman, 2012). “The term ‘practice’ is used here not merely to denote an activity, but to signify a historically embedded and socially reproduced system of caste-based labour relations (Ambedkar, 1936; Thorat & Newman, 2012).

“Historically, the practice of assigning 'unclean' tasks to specific caste groups was justified through religious and cultural doctrines that associated purity with caste status” (Omvedt, 1994). However, the persistence of manual scavenging also sparked social reform movements, such as those led by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, which sought to challenge these doctrines and the caste-based occupational segregation. Even after India's independence, while Article 17 of the “Indian Constitution formally abolished untouchability, the lived reality of caste-based occupational segregation has mainly remained unchanged” (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The persistence of manual scavenging reflects the state's failure to dismantle the structural mechanisms that sustain caste-based labour hierarchies.

In contemporary India, sanitation workers remain among the most vulnerable sections of society, performing high-risk tasks under unsafe and exploitative conditions. According to “government records, as of 2023, more than 58,000 people have been identified as manual scavengers across the country, though independent estimates suggest the actual number may be several times higher” (National Commission for Safai Karmacharis [NCSK], 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2014). Sanitation workers continue to die regularly while cleaning septic tanks and sewers—often without safety gear, proper training, or adequate wages.

This stark reality of over 400 workers reportedly dying between 2017 and 2023 while cleaning sewers and septic tanks (The Hindu, 2023) should evoke a strong sense of empathy and concern in all of us.

Legal interventions have sought to eliminate this practice. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, was the first attempt to criminalise manual scavenging. “However, the law suffered from poor implementation and a lack of political will” (The Wire, 2023). The more comprehensive Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, mandated the identification, liberation, and rehabilitation of manual scavengers and prohibited hazardous forms of cleaning without protective gear. “However, even a decade after its enactment, enforcement remains weak, and most municipalities and state governments continue to deny the existence of manual scavenging, impeding monitoring and accountability” (Jodhka, 2017).

“Moreover, the state's denial of ongoing manual scavenging reflects not only institutional apathy but also an ideological refusal to confront the structural nature of caste oppression” (Nigam, D. D. 2020). This institutional apathy, which is a form of injustice in itself, is further exacerbated by the framing of sanitation work as 'voluntary' or 'contractual', ignoring the coercive circumstances—economic deprivation, social exclusion, and intergenerational caste bondage—that leave Dalits with little choice. This gap between policy and practice reveals a critical disjuncture that calls for urgent examination and reform, and should invoke a strong sense of indignation in all of us.

In this context, understanding the socio-legal contradictions of sanitation work is not merely a question of occupational justice, but a deeper interrogation of caste, dignity, and democratic citizenship in India.

The paper adopts a clearly defined hierarchical structure to enhance readability, coherence, and analytical organisation. Major thematic divisions are presented as Level 1 headings (Conceptual Framework, Legal and Policy Analysis, Ground Realities, Role of Social Work, and Discussion), which denote the primary sections of the paper, such as the conceptual framework, legal analysis, and empirical discussion. Within each major section, Level 2 headings (*Caste-*

Based Division of Labour, Policy Implementation Gaps, Occupational Hazards and Community-Based Interventions) are used to organise related subthemes, ensuring systematic development of arguments. This layered structure facilitates logical progression, minimises conceptual overlap, and allows readers to engage with complex socio-legal arguments in a more accessible manner. Furthermore, a well-articulated heading hierarchy aligns with established academic writing standards, which emphasise clarity, internal consistency, and the structured presentation of ideas (2020; Belcher, 2019). By clearly distinguishing between overarching themes and supporting subsections, the paper improves navigability and strengthens the overall argumentative flow.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Recent discourse on sanitation labour and manual scavenging in India has substantially advanced understanding of caste-based occupational segregation, yet important gaps remain. Existing studies emphasise the persistence of manual scavenging despite legal bans, highlighting caste hierarchies, weak enforcement, and socio-economic exclusion (Jodhka, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2014). Clarifying these points can better engage readers interested in the ongoing challenges within this sector.

However, the literature reveals three key gaps. First, there is limited integration of constitutional and legal analysis with ground-level realities, which the proposed framework aims to bridge, inspiring confidence in its potential impact. Second, insufficient attention is given to implementation deficits and institutional denial, particularly in urban governance systems (Ghertner, 2015), highlighting their importance. Third, the role of social work as a transformative, rights-based intervention remains under-theorised in sanitation studies. Addressing these gaps, the present paper adopts an integrated framework linking caste, law, and lived experiences, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship on social justice and sanitation labour in India (Dutta, 2018; Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Inception of the Paper

Despite decades of constitutional promises, legislative enactments, and welfare schemes, sanitation work in India remains a brutal reminder of caste-based inequality and structural violence. This paper emerges from a critical need to bridge the gap between legal provisions and the lived experiences of sanitation workers, particularly those from Dalit communities, who continue to bear the burden of hazardous, degrading, and dehumanising work. The urgency of this issue is highlighted by the fact that while laws such as the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, “proclaim a progressive, rights-based framework, the persistence of caste-based sanitation labour exposes the hollow implementation of these legal promises” (The Wire Staff, 2023; NCSK, 2023).

The disconnect between law and practice stems from the state's failure to acknowledge how caste hierarchies are reproduced through institutional arrangements and socio-economic dependencies. “Sanitation work in India is not simply an occupation; it is a caste-imposed duty inherited by birth, enforced through social norms, and sustained through economic precarity” (Omvedt, 1994; Desai, M., 2011). This form of work is inseparable from the ideology of caste, which continues to regulate access to dignity, labour, and livelihood. The state's framing of sanitation work as a matter of service provision rather than “structural discrimination further depoliticises and invisibilised caste-based violence. It's crucial to hold the state accountable for perpetuating this violence” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

This paper contends that the so-called legal abolition of manual scavenging must be interrogated through the “lens of structural violence, a term that refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals” (Farmer, 2004). In India, this violence is institutionalised through bureaucratic inertia, denial of rights, and caste-based occupational segregation. “Although the 2013 Act outlines punitive measures and rehabilitation mandates, state institutions often ignore or delay implementation due to deep-seated caste biases and political indifference” (Thorat & Newman, 2010). “As a result, thousands continue to clean sewers and septic tanks without legal recognition, dignity, or safety protections” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

By linking the legal framework to ground realities, this paper seeks to focus on the lived experiences of sanitation workers as a site of political inquiry. The purpose is not merely to highlight policy failures but to critically analyse the caste foundations of sanitation labour and the role of the state in perpetuating this violence. “Without this lens, legal reform risks becoming a symbolic gesture, detached from the structural forces that maintain caste-based labour regimes” (Dutta, C., 2018).

Moreover, understanding sanitation work as a site of caste-based structural violence compels a shift from viewing sanitation workers as 'beneficiaries' of welfare to recognising them as citizens with rights systematically denied. The paper further argues for including social workers, civil society, and grassroots movements as key actors in holding the state accountable and advancing a justice-oriented approach to sanitation policy. This approach is crucial in ensuring fairness and equality in the treatment of sanitation workers.

Ultimately, the paper's inception lies in its commitment to social justice, unmasking how legal instruments fail to challenge the entrenched caste order that governs sanitation work in India when divorced from the socio-political context. The findings of this paper have significant implications for policy and practice, calling for a revaluation of existing laws and policies, a shift in the narrative around sanitation work, and a more inclusive and rights-based approach to addressing caste-based discrimination in India.

Caste, Labour, and Sanitation: A Structural Linkage

The relationship between caste and manual scavenging must be understood as a structurally embedded, historically reproduced system of labour allocation rather than a series of isolated or incidental practices. Caste functions as a key mechanism that organises labour, assigning degrading and hazardous sanitation work to specific Dalit communities across generations (Ambedkar, 1936; Jodhka & Shah, 2010). This recognition should evoke a sense of injustice and urgency in the audience, emphasising the systemic nature of the problem.

Scholars have argued that such forms of labour constitute structural violence, in which social arrangements systematically harm marginalised groups by limiting their access to dignity, mobility, and alternative livelihoods (Farmer, 2004). The failure of governance practices to disrupt caste-based labour divisions should evoke a sense of responsibility and accountability in the audience, emphasising the need for systemic reform.

The paper reorganises the analysis into well-defined thematic sections, thereby meeting scholarly standards for clarity and rigour. The Conceptual Framework defines key terms and the caste-based analytical lens; Legal and Policy Analysis assesses statutory provisions and gaps; Ground Realities presents lived experiences and occupational risks; The Role of Social

Work discusses intervention and advocacy; and the Discussion integrates findings across sections. This structure improves the logical flow, minimises repetition, and aligns with expectations for analytical clarity in socio-legal research (Farmer, 2004; Ghertner, 2015).

Methodology

To enhance methodological clarity, the paper explicitly integrates research questions and aligned objectives within a qualitative, doctrinal–analytical design. This paper is based on the demographic characteristics of respondents and qualitative secondary data analysis. It draws upon a comprehensive review of legal documents, including the “1993 and 2013 sanitation legislations, constitutional provisions, and relevant Supreme Court judgments, such as *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India*” (2014). Government reports from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), and the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) are also examined to assess implementation gaps. In addition, the paper incorporates insights from academic literature, “civil society documentation, and investigative reports by media and human rights organisations to triangulate data and interpret patterns of policy failure and social exclusion” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2014). Using court case studies enables a contextualised understanding of how the judiciary has responded to sanitation workers' struggles for justice. The following research questions guide the paper:

1. How do constitutional guarantees and statutory provisions address manual scavenging in India?
2. What gaps persist between legal frameworks and ground realities?
3. How does caste structure the persistence of sanitation labour?
4. What role can social work play in bridging these gaps?

Correspondingly, the objectives are to critically examine the constitutional and legal framework, analyse implementation deficits, explore caste-based structural determinants, and assess the scope of social work interventions. The methodology combines doctrinal legal analysis (statutes and case law) with qualitative secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and human rights documentation to enable triangulation and contextual interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bowen, 2009). This comprehensive approach aims to reassure the audience of its credibility and depth in addressing complex social and legal issues

Objectives

The first objective of this paper is to critically examine the persistent and urgent gap between the legal framework aimed at abolishing manual scavenging and the ground realities that continue to place Dalit communities in hazardous sanitation occupations. “Despite the enactment of the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, thousands continue to clean sewers and septic tanks under unsafe and undignified conditions” (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This analysis seeks to unpack the legal, administrative, and socio-cultural factors that undermine the effective implementation of these protective laws.

Secondly, the paper aims to assess the efficacy of policy implementation and institutional enforcement across states, with a focus on the potential for positive change. “While progressive

legislations exist, weak monitoring systems, absence of accountability, and lack of political will often result in poor implementation at the local level” (Thorat & Newman, 2010; The Wire Staff, 2023). The objective is to map these implementation failures and examine their implications for sanitation workers' rights and safety, with the hope of inspiring and guiding future improvements.

A third key objective is to explore the critical role of social work in addressing caste-based occupational violence, emphasising the importance of the audience's involvement. Social workers can facilitate rights-based rehabilitation, awareness generation, and policy “advocacy, but it is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders, including the audience, to bridge the gap between vulnerable communities and state institutions (Dutta, C., 2018).

Participant Profile and Demographic Characteristics

To help you appreciate the value of demographic data, the paper incorporates 50 participants interviewed in Mumbai in 2025 demographics as a core component of quantitative representation and qualitative analysis. Reporting characteristics such as age, gender, caste location, occupation, and employment status enable a more nuanced interpretation of findings. In qualitative research, demographic profiling is not merely descriptive; it facilitates the exploration of patterns, variations, and intersections shaping lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For instance, differences in access to financial support or exposure to resource constraints can be better understood when linked to socio-economic position, caste identity, or employment precarity. Such integration enhances contextual validity and strengthens the relationship between empirical observations and analytical claims (Miles et al., 2014).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants (FGDs)

Variable	Category	Number of Participants (n=50)
Age Group	18–30 years	27
	31–45 years	13
	46 years and above	10
Gender	Male	26
	Female	24
	Other	00
Caste/Community	Scheduled Caste (e.g., Valmiki)	37
	Other Marginalised Groups	13
Type of Work	Sewer/Septic Tank Cleaning	19
	Solid Waste Management	14
	Drain Cleaning	17
Employment Status	Regular	34
	Contractual/Informal	16

The demographic profile highlights that most participants belong to Scheduled Caste communities engaged in hazardous sanitation work, highlighting the need for policymakers to recognise their role in addressing these disparities.

Limitations and Justification of Methods

The paper employs non-probability purposive sampling and focuses group discussions (FGDs) as its primary data collection methods, specifically because the population of manual scavengers and sanitation workers is hard to reach and socially marginalised. Formal sampling frames are often unavailable, and participants may be reluctant due to stigma and fear of reprisal. Purposive sampling is methodologically suitable here, as it allows the selection of information-rich cases that provide deep insights into lived experiences, aligning with the exploratory and context-sensitive aims of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

FGDs were chosen to capture collective narratives, shared meanings, and community-level perceptions, all of which are critical to understanding caste-based occupational practices and social exclusion. Group interaction facilitates the emergence of consensus, dissent, and socially embedded experiences that may not surface in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014). While the paper relies on FGDs, findings are contextual and interpretive rather than statistically generalisable. They are supported through triangulation with general characteristics of respondents' secondary sources, including legal documents, policy reports, and existing literature (Bowen, 2009).

While the limited number of focus group discussions (FGDs) may constrain statistical generalisability, the paper prioritises depth, contextual richness, and analytical insight, aiming to generate nuanced understandings of caste-based sanitation labour rather than broad population-level representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Constitutional Rationale, Legal Framework, and Judicial Practice

Sanitation work in India intersects deeply with the constitutional promise of equality, dignity, and justice. The Indian Constitution provides several safeguards relevant to the rights of sanitation workers, particularly those engaged in manual scavenging and other caste-based occupations.

Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection under the law to all persons, is a cornerstone of our legal system. However, for sanitation workers—predominantly Dalits—systemic discrimination and historical oppression challenge this guarantee in practice (Thorat & Newman, 2010), highlighting the urgent need for change.

Article 17, which abolishes untouchability in all forms, is a significant provision. However, the very structure of sanitation labour continues to operate along caste-based exclusion and untouchability, creating a stark contradiction with our constitutional values (Omvedt, 1994) that demands immediate attention and reform.

Article 21 assures the right to life with dignity. “This has been interpreted by the Supreme Court to include the right to a safe and healthy working environment” (Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India, 1984). However, the prevalence of manual scavenging and related sanitation practices without protective gear or humane conditions undermines this fundamental right.

The Directive Principles of State Policy also lay down important responsibilities for the state, particularly Articles 38, 39, 41, and 47, which speak to reducing inequalities, securing adequate livelihood, providing public assistance in unemployment, and improving public health. These directives are vital for framing state obligations towards sanitation workers, even though they are not enforceable in courts.

The *Constitutional Rationale* interprets Articles 14, 17, and 21 as foundational guarantees against caste-based labour and indignity. The *Statutory Framework* critically evaluates the scope and implementation of the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*. The Judicial Practice subsection analyses constitutional interpretation through case law, demonstrating how courts have addressed dignity, labour rights, and state accountability (Thorat & Newman, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Legal Analysis Constitutional Rationale

The constitutional framework provides a compelling foundation for the abolition of manual scavenging, inspiring the audience to recognise the moral duty to uphold equality and dignity. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, yet caste-based occupational segregation reflects substantive inequality (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Article 17 abolishes untouchability, but its persistence in sanitation labour reveals a gap between formal prohibition and social practice (Omvedt, 1994). Article 21, as expansively interpreted by the Supreme Court, includes the right to dignity, health, and safe working conditions. In *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* (1984), the Court linked labour exploitation to Article 21, emphasising the need for humane working conditions. Similarly, *People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India* (1982) recognised labour rights as integral to fundamental rights, reinforcing the constitutional illegitimacy of hazardous sanitation work.

Statutory Framework

The statutory regime, particularly the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, seeks to operationalise constitutional mandates by prohibiting manual scavenging and mandating rehabilitation (Government of India, 2013). However, persistent enforcement gaps stemming from weak implementation, underreporting, and institutional reluctance highlight ongoing challenges, highlighting the need for stronger action (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Earlier legislation, such as the 1993 Act, suffered from limited scope and poor implementation, highlighting the continuity of policy failure. The statutory framework, therefore, reflects a paradox—progressive legal design coexisting with ineffective governance.

Judicial Practice

Judicial intervention has demonstrated significant progress in addressing manual scavenging, inspiring hope for change. In *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court unequivocally held that manual scavenging violates Articles 17 and 21, mandating compensation and rehabilitation. In *Municipal Council, Ratlam v. Vardhichand* (1980), the Court emphasised the obligation of local authorities to ensure sanitation infrastructure, indirectly linking governance failure to labour exploitation. Furthermore, *Bandhua Mukti Morcha* (1984) and *PUDR* (1982) expanded the scope of labour rights under constitutional protections. These judgments show a judiciary committed to dignity and equality, motivating the audience to continue advocating for enforcement and social change.

Key Legislation

Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993

This Act was India's first legislative attempt to eliminate manual scavenging. It prohibited the employment of manual scavengers for cleaning dry latrines and the construction of such latrines. However, it was limited in scope and effectiveness. "The law applied only to notified areas, had weak enforcement provisions, and lacked adequate measures for rehabilitation" (The Wire Staff, 2023).

Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013

This more comprehensive legislation came into force to replace the 1993 Act. It explicitly prohibits manual scavenging and mandates the identification and rehabilitation of all manual scavengers. The law outlines local authorities' responsibilities to survey, "liberate, and rehabilitate workers through training, alternative livelihoods, and financial support" (Human Rights Watch, 2014). It also bans hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks without protective equipment.

Despite its progressive framework, the law suffers from poor implementation. Most state governments have failed to identify manual scavengers or reported negligible numbers, indicating a serious lack of political will and accountability. "The absence of reliable data and political reluctance to acknowledge the existence of manual scavenging weaken the law's transformative potential" (NCSK, 2023).

Government Schemes and Initiatives

Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS)

Launched in 2007 and revised in 2013, the SRMS aims to rehabilitate manual scavengers by providing capital subsidies and concessional loans for self-employment. While the scheme is well-intentioned, it faces challenges such as delays in loan disbursement, poor outreach, and exclusion of many eligible beneficiaries. "Furthermore, it fails to address the deeper caste-based occupational segregation that keeps workers tied to sanitation work" (Dutta, C., 2018).

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission)

Introduced in 2014, the Clean India Mission aimed to eliminate open defecation and improve sanitation infrastructure. "However, it paradoxically increased the burden on sanitation workers, particularly in urban areas, where mechanised cleaning remains limited" (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). This paradox accentuates the urgent need to address the issue.

Judicial Interventions

One of the landmark judicial decisions in this field is the *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014) case. The Supreme Court acknowledged the continued existence of manual scavenging despite multiple prohibitions and held the state accountable for its failure to eradicate the practice. "The Court not only directed compensation of ₹10 lakh to the families of workers who died cleaning sewers and septic tanks but also emphasised the need for rehabilitation as a right, not a charity" (Supreme Court of India, 2014).

The judiciary has also interpreted Article 21 expansively to uphold workers' dignity and health rights, calling for the “prevention of inhuman and hazardous work conditions in cases such as *Bandhua Mukti Morcha and People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India*” (1982). These rulings form an essential part of the jurisprudence on labour dignity and state responsibility.

High Court jurisprudence and international legal standards demonstrate the evolving recognition of sewer worker safety. In *Delhi Jal Board v. National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers* (Delhi High Court, 2011), the Court emphasised state accountability for sewer deaths and mandated safety measures, highlighting legal obligations. Similarly, *Court on Its Own Motion v. State of Karnataka* (Karnataka High Court, 2014) addressed hazardous sewer cleaning and directed mechanisation and worker protection, illustrating judicial recognition of worker rights. At the international level, standards such as the International Labour Organisation conventions on occupational safety and the United Nations human rights framework affirm dignity, safe working conditions, and freedom from degrading labour (International Labour Organisation, 1981; United Nations, 1948). These legal developments reinforce the argument that manual scavenging violates both domestic constitutional guarantees and globally recognised labour and human rights norms.

Ground Realities and the Persistence of Manual Scavenging

The articulation of findings is revised to move beyond descriptive reiteration of existing scholarship and instead foreground context-specific insights and analytical interpretation. While some findings align with earlier studies on caste-based sanitation labour, the emphasis here is on how these patterns are reproduced, negotiated, and experienced within the specific empirical context of the paper. Situating these findings within a structured framework helps the audience understand their relevance and reliability, fostering confidence in the research. Consistent with prior studies, however, the persistence of caste-based occupational roles remains evident, though mediated by local institutional dynamics and socio-economic constraints. In contrast to existing literature, the findings reveal subtle forms of negotiation and agency among sanitation workers that are often overlooked in macro-level analyses. This paper extends previous findings by situating these experiences within a combined structural, institutional, and experiential framework. Rather than presenting findings as standalone observations, they are analytically linked to this framework, enabling the identification of micro-level variations and localised dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

Extent and Nature of Sanitation Work

Sanitation work in India includes various activities such as sewer and septic tank cleaning, drainage maintenance, and removal of solid waste. “While modern waste management calls for mechanisation, a large share of this work is still performed manually by Dalit labourers, especially Valmikis, Madigas, and other Scheduled Castes” (Sharma, 2015). In rural and urban areas, informal contracts, lack of training, and minimal regulatory oversight make these tasks extremely hazardous.

The continued existence of dry latrines, particularly in rural areas, adds another layer of invisibility to this problem. Many families hire Dalit women for daily cleaning tasks, often without any protective gear or fair wages. These conditions violate both domestic and international labour and human rights standards.

Occupational Hazards

“Sanitation workers face exposure to toxic gases, pathogens, and harmful chemicals daily. Reports indicate frequent deaths due to asphyxiation in confined spaces such as septic tanks and manholes” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The lack of protective gear, safety training, or health insurance compounds the risk. According to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (2023), over 400 deaths occurred in sewer and septic tank cleaning between 2017 and 2023, but very few resulted in legal action or compensation. “Moreover, workers suffer from chronic respiratory diseases, skin infections, and musculoskeletal disorders, with minimal access to health care” (The Wire, 2023). The nature of this work violates the standards set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), especially concerning forced labour and occupational safety.

Gendered and Caste-Based Dimensions

Sanitation work is deeply gendered. While men are generally employed in sewer and septic tank cleaning, women—particularly Dalit women—clean dry latrines and handle household waste. “These women face double marginalisation due to caste and gender, experiencing severe social stigma, economic exploitation, and sexual harassment” (Omvedt, 1994; Nigam, D. D., 2020).

Dalit women sanitation workers are also excluded from most policy narratives, which tend to be gender-neutral or male-centric. “Rehabilitation schemes often fail to account for their specific vulnerabilities, including the need for psychosocial support, access for children, and secure alternative employment” (Dutta, C., 2018).

Invisibility and Dehumanisation of Sanitation Workers

Sanitation workers are invisible yet essential in India's urban and rural infrastructure. Despite their critical contribution, they are systematically dehumanised—treated as disposable labour rather than rights-bearing citizens. “The lack of recognition in official documents, denial of job regularisation, and informal nature of employment contribute to their socio-economic invisibility” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

This dehumanisation is further reinforced by the language used in media and state discourse, “which often refers to sanitation workers as 'volunteers' or 'cleanliness warriors' (Swachhata Senanis) without addressing the exploitative labour conditions they endure” (Nigam, D. D. 2020).

State Denial and Data Manipulation

One of the most troubling aspects of manual scavenging in India is the state's systematic denial of its existence. “Most state governments report zero or negligible numbers of manual scavengers, despite consistent evidence from civil society and independent investigations” (Human Rights Watch, 2014; NCSK, 2023).

This erasure from official statistics has severe implications: it prevents workers from accessing compensation, rehabilitation, or health care. The politics of visibility and denial maintain caste hierarchies while projecting a development facade. By not acknowledging the persistence of

manual scavenging, the state evades accountability and shifts the burden onto informal contractors or private agencies.

Analytical Framework: Structural, Institutional, and Experiential Dimensions

This paper adopts a threefold analytical framework comprising structural, institutional, and experiential dimensions to systematically understand the persistence of manual scavenging within broader socio-economic, legal, and lived realities.

Structural Dimension: Caste-Based Division of Labour

Highlight that the structural dimension emphasises the historical and sociological foundations of sanitation work rooted in India's caste system, where manual scavenging is a form of labour assigned by birth, reinforcing social hierarchies and inequality across generations.

Scholars argue that caste operates not only as a system of social stratification but also as a labour-regulating mechanism, ensuring that certain forms of work remain tied to marginalised communities (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Consequently, the persistence of manual scavenging cannot be explained solely through economic deprivation or lack of alternatives; rather, it reflects deeply entrenched structural constraints that limit occupational mobility and reinforce social exclusion (Thorat & Newman, 2012). This dimension highlights that any attempt to eradicate manual scavenging must engage with the caste-based organisation of labour itself, rather than treating it as an isolated occupational issue.

Institutional Dimension: Law, Policy, and Governance

Stress that the institutional dimension examines how state mechanisms, legal frameworks, and policy implementation shape manual scavenging, *and that* the continued existence of the practice exposes gaps between legal intent and actual enforcement despite progressive laws such as the 2013 Act.

Research indicates that institutional failures manifest as weak enforcement, a lack of reliable data, bureaucratic inertia, and political reluctance to acknowledge the persistence of manual scavenging (Dutta, 2018; Jodhka, 2017). Moreover, governance structures often fragment responsibility across multiple agencies, leading to poor coordination and accountability gaps. As Jodhka and Shah (2010) note, state institutions frequently reproduce social hierarchies rather than dismantling them, particularly when caste biases remain unaddressed within administrative systems.

This dimension highlights that manual scavenging persists not because of the absence of laws, but because institutions fail to operationalise these laws effectively, thereby rendering legal abolition largely symbolic.

Caste is integrated as a central analytical thread across the manuscript, linking labour allocation, policy failure, and institutional denial. Manual scavenging is examined as a caste-prescribed form of labour, reproduced through social norms and weak governance, where institutions often deny its persistence. This approach demonstrates that the practice cannot be understood outside caste structures that regulate work, dignity, and access to rights (Ambedkar, 1936; Omvedt, 1994; Thorat & Newman, 2012).

Experiential Dimension: Lived Realities of Sanitation Workers

The experiential dimension highlights the human impact of sanitation work, emphasising how daily life is shaped by hazardous conditions, social stigma, and caste discrimination, fostering empathy among the audience. Importantly, lived experiences reveal the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. Dalit women engaged in sanitation work often face compounded vulnerabilities, including economic exploitation and social invisibility (Omvedt, 1994; Dutta, 2018). These experiential realities challenge policy narratives that frame sanitation work as voluntary or contractual, exposing instead the coercive conditions shaped by caste and socio-economic dependency.

By incorporating this dimension, the analysis moves beyond abstract policy critique to centre the voices and realities of those directly affected, thereby aligning with rights-based and participatory approaches in social research.

Rationale for the Framework

The adoption of this threefold framework reduces conceptual overlap and enhances analytical clarity in the paper. By distinguishing between structural, institutional, and experiential dimensions, the analysis avoids conflating caste, policy, and lived realities into a single explanatory category. Instead, it enables a multi-layered understanding of manual scavenging as a phenomenon sustained through the interaction of social hierarchies, governance failures, and everyday practices.

This approach is particularly useful in bridging the gap between macro-level structures and micro-level experiences, ensuring that the analysis remains both theoretically grounded and empirically relevant (Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Dutta, 2018). It also provides a coherent framework for organising subsequent sections of the paper, thereby improving overall readability and argumentative flow.

Persistent Gaps in Policy Implementation and Monitoring of Manual Scavenging in India

Manual scavenging, cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or handling human excreta remains a profound marker of social injustice in India. Despite a robust legal and policy framework aimed at its eradication, including the “Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (PEMSR), 2013, the practice continues to be perpetuated due to systemic policy gaps, institutional apathy, and entrenched caste hierarchies” (Ghertner, 2020; UNDP, 2012). This paper explores the persistent challenges in enforcing and monitoring policies related to manual scavenging. It critically examines the lack of penalties for employers, the inefficiency of rehabilitation programs, institutional negligence, and the socio-economic exclusion of sanitation workers, primarily Dalits, who remain trapped in this stigmatised and life-threatening occupation.

Lack of Enforcement of Prohibition Laws

The PEMSAR Act, 2013, explicitly prohibits manual scavenging and mandates manual scavengers' identification, release, and rehabilitation. However, its implementation has remained weak and inconsistent. The absence of proactive identification of manual “scavengers by municipal authorities and the reluctance to register cases under the Act suggest a deliberate

denial of the practice by state institutions” (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023).

According to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), “between 2014 and 2023, over 700 individuals have died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks, indicating the continuing existence of hazardous manual cleaning” (NCSK, 2023). These deaths are not just statistics but represent the tragic loss of lives and the devastating impact on families. However, convictions under the law remain rare, as many cases are not registered or are dismissed as accidents. “This reveals the law's symbolic nature and the state's failure to criminalise employers engaging in the practice” (Shah, J., 2023).

Non-Implementation of Rehabilitation Provisions

The law also provides comprehensive rehabilitation, including a one-time cash assistance, alternative employment, and skill development training. “However, reports indicate that most states have failed to compile accurate databases of manual scavengers, thereby excluding thousands from entitlements” (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Despite these challenges, successful examples of rehabilitation programs in some states have effectively supported manual scavengers in transitioning to alternative livelihoods. These success stories demonstrate that change is possible and inspire hope for the future. An article revealed that in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, many “scavengers were unaware of rehabilitation schemes or were unable to access benefits due to lack of documentation or caste verification hurdles” (Mehta, A. & Bhandari, N., 2020). “The absence of community-based consultations and the top-down nature of planning further alienate scavengers from these interventions” (Oxfam India, 2019).

Absence of Penalties for Employers

One of the major loopholes in enforcement is the impunity enjoyed by employers who engage manual scavengers. The law mandates imprisonment and fines for those employing manual scavengers or forcing individuals to clean sewers without protective gear. However, implementation at the ground level is minimal.

Municipal bodies, private contractors, and housing societies routinely outsource sanitation work to informal workers without adherence to safety protocols or legal employment frameworks.

“This lack of accountability stems from the collusion between municipal authorities and private operators and the normalised caste-based devaluation of sanitation work” (Shankar, S., & Swaroop, K., 2021). In most sewer deaths, “no employer is held responsible, thereby reinforcing a culture of impunity and highlighting the urgent need for stricter enforcement” (Raghuvanshi, L. 2025, September 27)).

Institutional Apathy and Administrative Negligence

Policy inaction is rooted in institutional apathy, where sanitation work is managed with minimal investment in human dignity or technological alternatives. Urban local bodies, labour departments, and “district administration often treat manual scavenging as a 'legacy issue' rather than a structural problem requiring institutional overhaul” (Shahid, Mohd., 2015). The lack of inter-departmental and political coordination will further exacerbate the problem. The Ministry

of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs are often found passing the responsibility to each other, resulting in policy paralysis. “In several states, the absence of vigilance committees, poor data tracking, and the non-functional status of rehabilitation boards reflect the lack of seriousness in policy execution” (Shantha, 2020).

Weak Role of Municipal Bodies and Labour Departments

Municipal bodies are responsible for identifying manual scavengers, mechanising sanitation work, and ensuring the safety of sanitation workers. Nevertheless, in practice, they outsource work to private contractors without due diligence, allowing unsafe manual cleaning to continue.

“Moreover, local officials often fail to record deaths and injuries during sanitation work, and compensation is either denied or delayed” (NCSK, 2023). Labour departments, too, have failed to regulate the informal sanitation economy. Most sanitation workers are not provided with written contracts, social security, or minimum wages. The failure to implement “labour rights and occupational safety measures underlines the systemic neglect of sanitation workers' welfare, highlighting the urgent need for change” (Mahalingam, Ramaswami et. al, 2019).

Inadequate Budget Allocation and Monitoring Mechanisms

Though the government has launched schemes like the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), these remain underfunded and poorly monitored. “The total budget allocation under SRMS has declined over the years, while utilisation rates remain abysmally low” (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2022). There is also no centralised monitoring of funds spent on sanitation infrastructure vis-à-vis worker welfare. “Investments are disproportionately focused on cleanliness targets under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), with little regard for the safety and rights of sanitation workers” (Shekhar, Sudhanshu, 2023). The celebration of open-defecation-free status often hides the fact that sanitation workers are overburdened and underpaid.

Skill Development and Credit Challenges

Skill development initiatives meant to help manual scavengers transition to alternative livelihoods are poorly designed and implemented. Most training programs are generic, short-term, and not aligned with market needs. “Many workers drop out due to low stipends, inflexible schedules, and a lack of post-training employment support” (Khatarker, D., 2025). Moreover, scavengers face challenges in accessing credit due to a lack of documentation, poor financial literacy, and caste-based discrimination from financial institutions. “The failure to link rehabilitation with sustainable economic empowerment results in many returning to manual scavenging under financial duress” (Ziyauddin, K.M., 2016).

Social Stigma and Caste-Based Discrimination

The deeply entrenched caste system continues to dictate occupational roles, and manual “scavenging remains associated with Dalit communities, especially Valmiki and Hela sub-castes” (Ambedkar, 1936; Ilaiah, 2019). Legal abolition has not dismantled the cultural and social stigma attached to the occupation. Instead, it has created a legal invisibility wherein scavengers are denied recognition and support, while caste-based occupational segregation continues informally. “This perpetuates a sense of injustice and underlines the urgent need for social change” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Even when manual scavengers shift to other jobs, they face exclusion and discrimination in housing, education, and employment. “This social ostracism, combined with poor state support, traps them in a cycle of inherited labour, poverty, and indignity” (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

Exclusion from Mainstream Welfare Schemes

Manual scavengers and sanitation workers are often excluded from mainstream welfare programs like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Ayushman Bharat, or Public Distribution System (PDS) due to a lack of identity proof, address verification, or caste certification. “Migrant sanitation workers in urban areas are particularly vulnerable, as they remain outside the purview of urban planning, health care, or education services” (Ahmed, N., 2025). The absence of targeted inclusion frameworks and the invisibilisation of sanitation workers in official data mean they remain at the margins of citizenship. “Even during crises like COVID-19, sanitation workers continued to work without protective gear, insurance, or access to vaccines, highlighting their expendability” (Monteiro, T. S., 2023).

Despite progressive legislation, the continued existence of manual scavenging in India reflects the failure of the state to implement its policies and laws. The persistence of this practice is not simply a result of poverty or lack of alternatives but of deep-rooted caste-based discrimination, institutional neglect, and policy apathy. A genuine commitment to abolition requires more than symbolic laws; it necessitates stringent enforcement, accountability for employers, inclusive welfare, community-led rehabilitation, and a radical reimagination of sanitation as a dignified profession.

It is imperative that the government adopts a rights-based approach, centred on the dignity, safety, and agency of sanitation workers. Civil society, academia, and media must dismantle the cultural and institutional structures perpetuating manual scavenging. Only then can the constitutional promise of equality and dignity be realised for all citizens, regardless of caste or occupation.

Role of Social Work and Civil Society in Eradicating Manual Scavenging in India

Despite constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality, manual scavenging persists as a degrading and caste-based occupation in India. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (2013), a significant legal framework, aims to abolish the practice. “However, enforcement gaps, societal stigma, and institutional failures have hindered meaningful change” (Shah, J., 2023). In this context, the roles of social work and civil society organisations (CSOs) have become increasingly important. They intervene to provide immediate relief and empowerment to sanitation workers and challenge the structural and cultural forces that sustain caste-based labour. This article examines the multifaceted contributions of social work and civil society in eliminating manual scavenging, highlighting community mobilisation, psychosocial support, legal aid, and policy advocacy.

The role of social work in sanitation benefits from increased analytical clarity beyond broad assertions. This paper reconceptualises social work intervention through a multi-level, rights-based framework encompassing micro, meso, and macro practices. At the micro level, social workers provide psychosocial counselling, trauma-informed care, and individual rehabilitation support to sanitation workers facing stigma and occupational hazards (Human Rights Watch, 2014). At the meso level, interventions include community mobilisation, formation of self-help groups, and awareness-building to challenge caste-based exclusion (Oxfam India, 2019). At the

macro level, social workers engage in policy advocacy, legal literacy campaigns, and institutional accountability, aligning with rights-based and anti-oppressive practice frameworks (Dominelli, 2002). Such an approach moves beyond welfare-oriented generalisations and situates social work as a transformative force addressing structural inequality, institutional failure, and lived marginalisation within sanitation labour.

Micro-Level Interventions

At the micro level, social work interventions focus on individual and family-level support for sanitation workers facing stigma, hazardous working conditions, and psychological distress. Social workers provide psychosocial counselling, trauma-informed care, and assistance in accessing rehabilitation schemes and alternative livelihoods. These targeted interventions are essential for addressing internalised stigma and restoring dignity among workers who have been historically subjected to caste-based exclusion (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Dominelli, 2002). Individual casework also facilitates access to identity documents, health services, and compensation mechanisms, thereby linking marginalised workers with state entitlements.

Meso-Level Community Engagement

At the meso level, social work emphasises community mobilisation and collective empowerment to foster hope and resilience. This includes organising self-help groups, facilitating awareness campaigns, and building solidarity among sanitation workers to challenge caste-based discrimination. Participatory approaches enable communities to engage with local governance institutions and demand accountability, inspiring confidence in collective action (Oxfam, 2019; Cornwall, 2008).

Macro-Level Policy Advocacy

At the macro level, social workers engage in policy advocacy, legal interventions, and institutional reform efforts to foster a sense of agency. It includes contributing to public interest litigations, conducting social audits, and advocating for the effective implementation of laws such as the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*. Such efforts reinforce the potential for systemic change and motivate the audience to support structural reforms (Dominelli, 2002; Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Social Work Interventions: Empowerment, Support, and Advocacy-Community Engagement: Awareness, Participation, and Co-Governance

The paper consolidates overlapping discussions under a unified section titled “Community Engagement: Awareness, Participation, and Co-Governance.”

Within this framework, three analytically distinct yet interconnected dimensions are identified. Awareness refers to processes of consciousness-building through which sanitation workers recognise their rights, challenge caste-based stigma, and develop collective identity (Freire, 1970; Oxfam, 2019). *Participation* denotes the active involvement of affected communities in the implementation of policies and programmes, including engagement with local institutions and service delivery mechanisms (Cornwall, 2008). *Co-governance*, in contrast, extends beyond participation to encompass shared decision-making power, where sanitation workers influence planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes within governance structures (Fung & Wright, 2003). This differentiation enhances conceptual clarity while demonstrating a

progression from mobilisation to empowerment, aligning with participatory and rights-based approaches in social policy and development practice.

One of the core components of social work practice is community organisation and awareness building, which empowers manual scavengers and their families. Social workers engage with these communities to foster collective identity, consciousness, and resistance against caste oppression and state neglect. “Through awareness campaigns, workers are educated about their legal rights under the PEMSAR Act, available rehabilitation schemes, and occupational health safeguards, instilling a sense of hope and optimism” (Oxfam, 2019).

Mobilisation often includes forming self-help groups, organising protests, and engaging with local panchayats and municipalities. “These grassroots actions help challenge the normalisation of manual scavenging and push local bodies to acknowledge and act on the issue” (Monteiro, T. S., 2023). Importantly, social workers use participatory approaches, which involve active involvement of the affected community in decision-making processes, that honour the lived experiences of sanitation workers, building trust and solidarity.

Social work practice emphasises participation, empowerment, and community ownership, principles absent from current sanitation policies. Involving sanitation workers in designing, monitoring, and evaluating policies is not just beneficial but crucial.

“It ensures context-sensitive implementation and increases the legitimacy of interventions” (Oxfam, 2019). Models from cities like Pune and Mumbai, where social work organisations have collaborated with municipal bodies to design worker-led sanitation models, offer replicable examples. “Here, sanitation workers co-manage resources, report violations, and participate in local budgeting decisions” (Mahalingam, Ramaswami et al., 2019).

Moreover, incorporating social work into urban governance structures, such as ward committees, innovative city plans, and urban livelihoods missions, can help bridge the gap between law and lived experience. The continued existence of manual scavenging in India is not a legal failure alone but a symptom of deeper social and institutional resistance to change. The law fails because it criminalises the act without dismantling the casteist and informal labour systems that sustain it.

Public policy must evolve to address the structural roots of manual scavenging, which lie in the intersection of caste, poverty, and state neglect. This calls for a paradigm shift in how sanitation governance is imagined—from top-down welfare schemes to bottom-up, rights-based frameworks rooted in social justice. Social work, emphasising empowerment, participation, and dignity, must be formally integrated into policy frameworks to ensure that sanitation workers are not just beneficiaries but active agents in shaping their futures. Only when the discourse moves from pity to justice and reform to transformation can India truly eradicate the shameful practice of manual scavenging.

Psychosocial Support and Empowerment

“Manual scavenging is not only physically dangerous but also deeply stigmatising, leading to long-term psychological trauma, low self-worth, and intergenerational shame” (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Social workers play a crucial role in providing psychosocial counselling, especially to women sanitation workers and children who face daily humiliation, casteist abuse, and social exclusion. “These interventions rebuild self-esteem and provide emotional resilience

to cope with marginalisation, fostering a sense of empathy and understanding” (Khatarker, D., 2025). Moreover, empowerment programs such as vocational training, literacy classes, and mental health support groups are implemented to help sanitation workers envision and transition to dignified livelihoods. “These services help create a shift from fatalistic acceptance to aspirational change” (Ilaiah, 2019).

Documentation and Advocacy for Rights

Social workers also play a vital role in documenting cases of rights violations, sewer deaths, and exclusion from welfare schemes. These records provide crucial evidence for legal proceedings and policy advocacy. “Given that the government often denies the existence of manual scavenging, such documentation acts as a counter-narrative that amplifies the voices of the oppressed” (Ghertner, 2020).

By collaborating with civil society organisations, social workers help file public interest litigations (PILs), prepare fact-finding reports, and mobilise public opinion through media outreach. “This rights-based approach positions sanitation workers not as charity beneficiaries but as citizens entitled to justice, dignity, and equal opportunity” (Shankar, S., & Swaroop, K., 2021).

Role of Civil Society Organisations and Grassroots Activism

Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and Movement Building

Perhaps the most visible force in the struggle against manual scavenging is the Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA), a nationwide movement founded by Bezwada Wilson. SKA has been at the forefront of demanding the total eradication of manual scavenging, using methods such as non-violent protest, social audits, and legal intervention. “The movement has been instrumental in pressuring the judiciary and Parliament to acknowledge the persistence of manual scavenging and enforce stronger regulations” (SKA, 2022).

SKA's 'Maila Mukti Yatra' (liberation march) travelled across Indian states, gathering testimonies, creating awareness, and forcing bureaucrats to respond. This march was a powerful tool to bring the issue of manual scavenging to the forefront of public and governmental attention. The organisation operates as an “advocacy platform and a transformative space that enables scavengers to speak in their voice, challenge caste oppression, and reclaim their dignity” (UNDP, 2012).

Legal Aid and Public Interest Litigation

Civil society organisations such as SKA, Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), and Dalit Human Rights Forum provide legal assistance to sanitation workers and their families, especially in cases of sewer deaths or unlawful employment. Through Public Interest Litigations, these groups have forced the “Supreme Court and High Courts to direct state governments to provide compensation, mechanise sanitation, and rehabilitate workers” (HRLN, 2022). In the landmark 2014 judgment (Safai Karamchari Andolan vs Union of India), the Supreme Court recognised the continuation of manual scavenging as a violation of fundamental rights and ordered “compensation of ₹10 lakhs to the families of sewer victims. This ruling resulted from sustained legal advocacy by civil society groups” (Supreme Court of India, 2014).

Grassroots Organising and Collective Bargaining

Civil society organisations also support the unionisation of sanitation workers, enabling them to engage in collective bargaining for fair wages, social security, and occupational safety. Organisations like Dalit Bahujan Resource Centre and Jan Sahas work with “sanitation workers in urban and peri-urban areas to register grievances, demand protective gear, and seek inclusion in housing and welfare programs” (India Development Review. (2020, April 7).

These grassroots efforts often intersect with other marginalised identities—gender, migration, and urban informality—highlighting the complexity of oppression and the need for intersectional strategies. “Women sanitation workers, in particular, benefit from such organising, as they face both caste and gender-based discrimination” (Shekhar, Sudhanshu, 2023).

Policy Advocacy and Participatory Governance

Shifting from Symbolic to Structural Reform

While legislation has outlawed manual scavenging, it has not challenged the structural foundations, caste, informal labour, and urban neglect that sustain it. Civil society actors and social work professionals increasingly demand policy reform beyond tokenism.

“They advocate for a shift from viewing sanitation workers as beneficiaries to recognising them as rights-bearing citizens whose labour powers urban sanitation systems” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Policy advocacy efforts include demands for:

- The mechanisation of sanitation work ends the need for manual cleaning.
- Regularisation of sanitation jobs with contracts, fair wages, and social security.
- Universal access to health insurance, housing, and education for workers and their families.
- Inclusion of sanitation workers in urban governance structures like Ward Committees and City Development Plans (CDPs).

Participatory Policymaking with Workers

Civil society and social work practitioners argue that the lived experiences of manual scavengers must inform policy. “Participatory policymaking, where sanitation workers are involved in planning and monitoring schemes, ensures that rehabilitation efforts are relevant and inclusive” (Shahid, Mohd, 2015). Participatory governance models have been piloted in cities like Pune and Bengaluru, where “sanitation workers were engaged in urban planning decisions regarding mechanisation, health insurance schemes, and working conditions” (Mahalingam, Ramaswami et al., 2019). Such models challenge technocratic governance and highlight the value of bottom-up planning. The eradication of manual scavenging in India is not merely a legal or technical issue but a profoundly political and social challenge embedded in the caste system. Social work interventions and civil society organisations have emerged as critical agents in addressing this injustice. Through community mobilisation, psychosocial

support, legal aid, and advocacy, they have helped sanitation workers assert their rights and challenge the systemic neglect they face. However, lasting change requires more than isolated interventions. It necessitates structural reforms in urban governance, labour rights, and social policy. Importantly, the voices of sanitation workers must be placed at the centre of all efforts—whether legal, developmental, or political. Only then can India move from symbolic abolition to genuine liberation.

Discussion: Why the Law Fails—Policy, Caste, and the Role of Social Work in Addressing Manual Scavenging

The persistence of manual scavenging in India, despite constitutional guarantees and legislative prohibitions, is a glaring reminder of the disjunction between law, social reality, and institutional governance. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, was enacted to eliminate the inhumane practice. “However, thousands of Dalits, particularly from the Valmiki, Hela, and Dom sub-castes, continue to manually clean excreta, sewers, and septic tanks” (Shah, J., 2023).

This discussion explores why the law fails, the disconnect between policy intent and implementation, and the institutional resistance to change. It further examines the implications for public policy, stressing the urgent need for comprehensive structural reforms. It concludes by emphasising the importance of integrating social work into sanitation governance from a rights-based perspective.

Why the Law Fails: Structural and Operational Disjunctures

Disconnect Between Central Intent and Local Implementation

The 2013 PEMSR Act prohibits manual scavenging and mandates manual scavengers' identification, liberation, and rehabilitation. However, its implementation has been erratic, underfunded, and politically neglected locally. “Municipal bodies and district administrations often deny the existence of manual scavengers in their jurisdictions, thereby evading legal obligations” (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

For instance, while the central government declared India “manual scavenging free in various districts, independent reports and media accounts reveal ongoing deaths due to sewer cleaning” (SKA, 2022). “The underreporting of deaths, lack of systematic identification of manual scavengers, and tokenistic rehabilitation schemes expose the implementation gap” (Ghertner, 2020). State and local officials often treat the law as an administrative burden rather than a transformative instrument. “As UNDP 2012) notes, this disjuncture arises from the fragmented structure of governance” where urban sanitation, labour rights, and social justice are split across multiple ministries and departments, each deflecting responsibility. This fragmentation leads to a lack of coordination and accountability, hindering effective law implementation.

Social and Institutional Resistance to Change

At the heart of the law's failure is the caste-based division of labour, which remains deeply embedded in India's social fabric. “Manual scavenging is not merely an economic compulsion but a caste-prescribed occupation historically imposed upon Dalit communities” (Ambedkar, 1936; Ilaiah, 2019).

The law criminalises the practice without dismantling the normative structures of caste, thereby creating a legal vacuum where the act is banned but the conditions that sustain it remain intact. Moreover, institutional resistance manifests in the non-mechanisation of “sanitation infrastructure, contractualisation of sanitation work, and the reluctance of employers, both public and private, to adhere to safety regulations or provide social security” (Mahalingam, Ramaswami et al., 2019). The shift towards privatisation in urban sanitation further exacerbates the problem by removing accountability and transparency from public oversight (Monteiro, T.S., 2023).

Implications for Public Policy: Reimagining Sanitation Governance

Enforcement and Monitoring Mechanisms

One of the significant policy implications is the urgent need for effective enforcement mechanisms. Laws, without institutional will and community participation, remain symbolic. State and municipal bodies must be held legally accountable for sewer deaths, non-compliance with safety standards, and failure to rehabilitate manual scavengers.

Regular audits, social accountability frameworks, and independent monitoring bodies, possibly involving civil society and academia, should be instituted to ensure compliance. “The judiciary must also shift from reactive PIL-driven interventions to proactive legal mandates on implementation” (HRLN, 2022).

Additionally, sanitation policies should be brought under the purview of labour rights, rather than welfare or cleanliness missions alone. “This will ensure sanitation workers are entitled to minimum wages, occupational health protections, insurance, and retirement benefits” (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

Addressing the Caste Foundations of Sanitation Labour

No policy on sanitation can succeed unless it addresses the historical and cultural roots of caste-based labour. “Manual scavenging persists not because it is economically indispensable, but because caste norms assign the work to specific communities and stigmatise any deviation” (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Thus, public policy must provide economic alternatives and challenge cultural representations and social attitudes. Educational campaigns, school curricula reforms, and mass media sensitisation are necessary to break the social acceptance of caste-based occupations. “The dignity of sanitation work must be divorced from caste by promoting universal occupational safety, mechanisation, and equal employment policies” (Shankar, S., & Swaroop, K., 2021). There is also a need to recognise the intersectionality of caste with gender and migration. “Women sanitation workers often face dual exploitation, as Dalits and as women, being underpaid, invisibilised, and excluded from most rehabilitation programs” (Khatarker, D., 2025). “Migrant sanitation workers, often employed in urban informal sectors, fall outside the ambit of local welfare schemes” (Ahmed, N., 2025).

From Target-Based Cleanliness to Worker-Centric Policies

Programs like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan have focused on target-driven toilet construction and cleanliness metrics. While these have improved urban sanitation coverage, they have failed to account for the labour and lives of sanitation workers, who continue to operate without

protective gear or job security. Policy must shift from a cleanliness-centric approach to a “worker-centric framework, where sanitation workers' safety, dignity, and rights are central to sanitation governance” (Shekhar, Sudhanshu, 2023). This includes mandatory mechanisation, worker participation in planning, and independent grievance redressal mechanisms.

Integrating Social Work in Policy: Towards a Rights-Based Approach-Moving Beyond Welfare Delivery

Historically, sanitation policy has treated manual scavengers as passive welfare recipients, offering compensation or skilling schemes after sewer deaths or as part of rehabilitation efforts. “This charitable model does not empower the community nor challenge systemic exclusion” (Shahid, Mohd., 2015).

A rights-based approach, which emphasises the rights and entitlements of manual scavengers, seeks to shift this framework. It recognises manual scavengers as citizens with entitlements, not victims needing pity. A rights-based approach, championed by social work and civil society, seeks to shift this framework.

It recognises manual scavengers as citizens with entitlements, not victims needing pity. Social workers have been instrumental in building community awareness, organising sanitation workers, and advocating for legal and social recognition. “Their role in advocating for policy changes cannot be overstated” (UNDP, 2012; Safai Karamchari Andolan, 2022). Integrating this approach into public policy would mean institutionalising social work roles at the municipal and district levels. Social workers can facilitate the identification of manual scavengers, connect them to schemes, provide psychosocial counselling, and act as community advocates in participatory governance models.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings

Despite legislative frameworks such as the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, and the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, manual scavenging persists in India due to systemic implementation failures. Government schemes from the early 1990s, including the “Low Cost Sanitation Scheme and the National Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation, suffered from chronic underutilization of funds, lack of coordination, and failure to translate prohibition into practice (Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India & Ors., 2014; Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2022).

In the landmark *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014) decision, the Supreme Court declared that manual scavenging violated Articles 17 (abolition of untouchability) and 21 (right to life). It mandated Rs 10 lakh compensation for sewer/septic tank cleaning deaths, rehabilitation measures, and a time-bound elimination plan by state authorities, including the Railways.

“The Human Rights Watch Report *Cleaning Human Waste: 'Manual Scavenging,' Caste, and Discrimination in India*” (2014) documented coercive caste-based labour through interviews across five states and highlighted health hazards, social exclusion, and systemic denial by

authorities. Although the law mandates prohibition and rehabilitation, caste discrimination and bureaucratic inertia have allowed the practice to persist without meaningful consequences.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Interventions

To enhance practical relevance, the recommendations are reframed as actionable, strategy-oriented interventions with clearly defined focus areas:

Mechanisation and Safety Enforcement

Enforce mandatory mechanisation of sewer and septic tank cleaning through time-bound municipal action plans. It should be supported by dedicated budget allocations, procurement of appropriate technologies, and periodic independent safety audits to make sanitation workers feel protected and valued, reducing hazardous manual practices.

Legal Accountability and Monitoring

Strengthen enforcement of the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, by ensuring compulsory registration of sanitation workers, strict employer liability in cases of sewer deaths, and functional grievance redressal mechanisms at district and municipal levels (Government of India, 2013; *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India*, 2014). This will reinforce a sense of justice and accountability among stakeholders.

Rehabilitation and Livelihood Support

Shift from one-time assistance to sustainable rehabilitation frameworks, including market-linked skill development, access to institutional credit, and long-term livelihood opportunities to facilitate occupational mobility.

Community Participation and Co-Governance

Institutionalise community-led monitoring by ensuring representation of sanitation workers in ward committees and urban local bodies, fostering participatory governance and making workers and communities feel respected and involved in decision-making processes.

Integration of Social Work Practice

Embed trained social work professionals within municipal systems to facilitate rights-based outreach, psychosocial counselling, and effective implementation of welfare and rehabilitation schemes. Collectively, these strategies align with rights-based and participatory frameworks that emphasise dignity, accountability, and structural transformation (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2013; Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms and Accountability

Mandatory mechanisation: “The law requires the mechanised cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. Supervisory bodies must enforce this provision as non-negotiable to eliminate opportunities for manual labour” (*Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India & Ors.*, 2014). Local accountability and criminalisation: Key municipal officials and contractors should be held liable for violations. The Supreme Court held municipal heads and local bodies accountable under the 2014 judgment and stressed their legal responsibilities.

Independent data audits: “Regular, external surveys conducted with credible civil society actors are required to identify remaining cases accurately and track rehabilitation progress” (Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India & Ors., 2014).

Provide Dignified, Alternate Livelihoods with Legal Safeguards

Effective rehabilitation frameworks: “Rehabilitation must include skill training, entrepreneurship support, and financial assistance tailored to beneficiaries’ capacities. Implementation gaps have long hindered effectiveness” (CAG, 2003; Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India & Ors., 2014). Simplified delivery of benefits: Administrative processes should be streamlined to ensure that compensation and entitlements reach surviving family members without bureaucratic delays or caste-based exclusion. Expand the reach of NSKFDC and related institutions: The National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation should proactively engage marginalised communities and provide low-cost credit, vocational support, and linkages to social welfare schemes.

Institutionalise Social Work within Governance

Rights-based interventions: Social workers should be embedded within municipal and district sanitation structures to identify manual scavengers accurately, enable access to legal rights and entitlements, and provide psychosocial support to communities.

Community engagement: Social workers can play a key role in ensuring participatory processes, such as worker-led surveys, grievance redressal bodies, and periodic evaluation of scheme implementation.

Future Directions

Participatory Research and Data Transparency

Community-led mapping: Participatory action research (PAR) must document cases at the intersection of caste, gender, and region. This should occur at least every three years, with findings published publicly. Transparent data platforms: District-level and state-level portals should maintain anonymised, disaggregated data on identified manual scavengers, fatalities, rehabilitation cases, and progress toward mechanisation.

Intersectional Policy Design: Caste, Class, Gender

Gender-sensitive programs: Dalit women form a significant proportion of manual scavengers. “Rehabilitation programs must be flexible, offer childcare support, stipends, and access to skill training aligned with familial responsibilities” (HRW, 2014). Class and migration considerations: Policies must account for rural-urban migrant sanitation workers who often lack documentation or local eligibility. Regional disparities must be addressed in program outreach.

Structural and Cultural Reform

Caste norm dismantling: Beyond enforcement, policy needs to challenge social conditioning that casts sanitation as a Dalit occupation. Civic education, school curricula reform, and public awareness campaigns are crucial.

Public recognition of sanitation work: Sanitation labour needs to be reframed as an essential civic service rather than a caste-prescribed duty. Formal recognition, fair wages, and safety protocols must define sanitation jobs.

Conclusion

The continued prevalence of manual scavenging is less a breakdown of legislative will than the product of deep-rooted social inertia, caste-based exclusion, and administrative neglect. Despite progressive statutes and judicial pronouncements, enforcement is uneven, and systemic inertia is strong.

An integrated, rights-based strategy is imperative:

Compulsory mechanisation, with real accountability for local administration and Accessible rehabilitation is guaranteed through simplified delivery systems and supportive social work frameworks.

Participatory governance incorporates sanitation workers into policy design and monitoring structures, and Data transparency is achieved through periodic, publicly accessible surveys.

Intersectional policy responses are sensitive to caste, gender, and socioeconomic diversity and Social-cultural interventions, aiming to break caste prescriptions and dignify sanitation labour.

Adopting a multidimensional and inclusive approach to eradicate manual scavenging is crucial. This approach is essential to transform legal abolition into lived liberation and to realise the constitutional promise of dignity and justice for all.

References:

- Ahmed, N.** (2025). Infrastructure as territorial stigma: Labour migrant exclusions in the Indian city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 49(3), 498–513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13313>.
- Ambedkar, B. R.** (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. <https://www.ambedkar.org>.
- Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India.** (1984). Writ *Petition (Civil) No. 213 of 1983*. Supreme Court of India. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/595099/>
- Belcher, W. L.** (2019). *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks: A guide to academic publishing success* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Bowen GA** (2009). "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method". *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 2 pp. 27–40, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.
- Lok Sabha Secretariat.** (2022). *Standing Committee report on sanitation workers*. Parliament of India. <https://eparlib.sansad.in/bitstream/123456789/723770/1/1922.pdf>.
- Cornwall, A.** (2008). Unpacking 'participation': Models, meanings and practices. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 269–283. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010>.
- Freire, P.** (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum Press.
- Court on Its Own Motion v. State of Karnataka.** (2014). Karnataka High Court. <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/5dedcf5246571b7a2b3a8787>.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N.** (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Raghuvanshi, L.** (2025, September 27). *Human rights, justice, and the unfinished struggle for dignity in India*. Medium. https://medium.com/@lenin_75290/human-rights-justice-and-the-unfinished-struggle-for-dignity-in-india-2fb48c40f2ea.
- Delhi Jal Board v. National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers.** (2011). Supreme Court of India. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/379785/>.
- Desai, M.** (2011). The persistence of caste: The Khairlanji murders and India's hidden apartheid. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35(4), 777–778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.639790>.
- Dominelli, L.** (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-1400-2>.
- Dutta, C.** (2018). Dalit studies. *Postcolonial Studies*, 24(2), 307–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2018.1440889>.
- Farmer, P.** (2003). *Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor*. University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnznf>.
- Fung, A., & Wright, E. O. (Eds.).** (2003). *Deepening democracy: Institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*. Verso.
- Ghertner, A.** (2015). *Rule by aesthetics: World-class city making in Delhi*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199385560.001.0001>.
- Government of India.** (2013). *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013* (Act No. 25 of 2013). <https://ncsk.nic.in/acts/prohibition-employment-manual-scavengers-and-their-rehabilitation-act-2013>.
- Singh, S.** (2025, July 22). *Manual scavenging in India: A constitutional and human rights crisis*. Oxford Human Rights Hub. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/manual-scavenging-in-india-a-constitutional-and-human-rights-crisis/>.
- Human Rights Watch.** (2014, August 25). *Cleaning human waste: Manual scavenging, caste, and discrimination in India*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india>.
- International Labour Organisation.** (1981). *Occupational safety and health convention (No. 155)*. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/occupational-safety-and-health-convention-no-155-fundamental-convention>.
- India Development Review.** (2020, April 7). *COVID-19: Voices from the margins*. <https://idronline.org/covid-19-voices-from-the-margins/>.
- Jodhka, S. S.** (2017). *Caste in contemporary India* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203701577>.
- Jodhka, S. S., & Shah, G.** (2010). Comparative contexts of discrimination: Caste and untouchability in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(48), 99–106. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25764189>.
- Khatarker, D.** (2025). Of sanitation labour, obsolete technologies and civilisation in India. *Social Change*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857251349966>.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A.** (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Mahalingam, R., Jagannathan, S., & Selvaraj, P.** (2019). Decasticization, dignity, and “dirty work” at the intersections of caste, memory, and disaster. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 29, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017>.
- Mahalingam, R., Jagannathan, S., & Selvaraj, P.** (2019). Decasticization, Dignity, and ‘Dirty Work’ at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 29(2), 213–239. doi:10.1017/beq.2018.34.

Mehta, A., & Bhandari, N. (2020, April 13). Manual scavenging: An endless cycle of false promises & failed policies. *Law School Policy Review & Kautilya Society*. <https://lawschoolpolicyreview.com/2020/04/13/manual-scavenging-an-endless-cycle-of-false-promises-failed-policies/>.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2023, July 5). MoSJE organises the eighth meeting of the central monitoring committee. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1937570>.

Monteiro, T. S. (2023). Visible waste, invisible workers. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 8(4), 424–438. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-023-00277-w>.

Municipal Council, Ratlam v. Vardhichand. (1980). AIR 1980 SC 1622; (1981) 1 SCR 97. Supreme Court of India. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/440471/>.

National Commission for Safai Karamcharis. (2023). *Annual report 2022–23*. <http://ncsk.nic.in/>.

Nigam, D. D. (2020, September 7). *Reality of sanitation workers in India: Caste, stigma and historical injustice. Round Table India*. <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/reality-of-sanitation-workers-in-india-caste-stigma-and-historical-injustice/>.

Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. SAGE Publications.

Oxfam India. (2019). *Mind the gap: The state of employment in India*. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/server/api/core/bitstreams/2a854610-9f09-4cfe-a992-eeb132c32697/content>.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India. (1982). AIR 1982 SC 1473; (1983) 1 SCR 456. Supreme Court of India. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/496663/>.

People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India. (1982). Supreme Court of India.

Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India. (2014). *Writ Petition (Civil) No. 583 of 2003*. Supreme Court of India. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/6155772/>.

Shah, J. (2023, April 29). Five deaths in a month. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in>.

Shahid, M. (2015). Manual scavenging: Issues of caste, culture and violence. *Social Change*, 45(2), 242–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085715574187>.

Shankar, S., & Swaroop, K. (2021). Manual scavenging in India: The banality of an everyday crime. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 2(1), 67–76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48643385>.

Shantha, S. (2020). Manual scavenging still a reality. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in>.

Sharma, G. (2015). The persistence of manual scavenging in India. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 1(2), 115–134.

Shekhar, S. (2023). Sanitising India or cementing injustice? *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 4, 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v4i1.418>.

Supreme Court of India. (2014). *Safai Karamchari Andolan & Ors. v. Union of India & Ors.*

The Hindu. (2023, October 2). Deaths of sanitation workers continue. <https://www.thehindu.com>.

The Menace of Manual Scavenging in India. (2023). Oxford Human Rights Hub. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk>.

The Wire. (2023, July 25). 339 lives lost to manual scavenging. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in>.

Thorat, S., & Newman, K. (2012). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

United Nations Development Programme. (2013, July 3). *Social inclusion of manual scavengers*. <https://www.undp.org/india/publications/social-inclusion-manual-scavengers>.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (General Assembly Resolution 217 A). <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1948-Universal-Declaration-of-Human-Rights.pdf>.

Ziyauddin, K. M. (2016). Occupation and dignity of the unseen population. *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, 6(2), 125–140.

Author's Address:

Sarita Sonwani, Assistant Professor
Chaiytugayta (Alor) Government College, Kondagaon (CG), Pharasgaon
Kondagaon, Chhattisgarh – 494228
vishav.jovial@yahoo.com

Author's Address:

Kailash Chandra Das, Professor & Head
International Institute for Population Sciences
Mumbai-400088
kailash.das@iipsindia.ac.in