

**MANUAL SCAVENGING:
A PERSISTENT VIOLATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Manual scavenging, despite being legally abolished in India, continues to persist as one of the most degrading forms of labor; deeply rooted in caste-based occupational structures and socio-economic marginalization. This sociological study examines manual scavenging as a persistent violation of human dignity, exploring how structural inequalities, social stigma, and institutional neglect perpetuate the practice. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives of caste, structural violence, and human rights, the study analyzes the lived experiences of manual scavengers, particularly women, who face multiple layers of discrimination and health hazards. The research highlights the limitations of existing legal frameworks, such as the 1993 and 2013 Acts, whose poor implementation and weak rehabilitation mechanisms have failed to eradicate the practice. Findings reveal that manual scavenging survives due to caste hierarchy, lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, municipal dependence on cheap labor, and societal indifference. The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive policy enforcement, technological interventions, dignity-based rehabilitation, and transformation of social attitudes to ensure the complete elimination of manual scavenging and the restoration of human dignity.

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Introduction

Manual scavenging remains one of the most inhuman and degrading forms of labor in India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and the abolition of untouchability. Defined as the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing, or handling human excreta from dry latrines, sewers, or septic tanks, it reflects a deep-rooted intersection of caste hierarchy, structural inequality, and socio-economic deprivation. Although the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, and the stronger Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, formally outlaw the practice, the reality on the ground shows that manual scavenging persists across many Indian states.

The practice continues largely among Dalit sub-castes-particularly women-who are compelled by hereditary occupation, caste-based discrimination, poverty, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities. A sociological perspective helps understand manual scavenging not merely as a 'job' or 'sanitation issue,' but as a structural violence embedded in caste, patriarchy, state neglect, and social stigma. It exposes how social institutions-family, labor markets, state policies, and community norms-collectively reproduce this dehumanizing occupation. Most significantly, it highlights the lived experiences of manual scavengers, their struggles, aspirations, and continuous battles for dignity.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the socio-economic background of manual scavengers.
- To analyze the caste and gender dimensions of the occupation.
- To study the factors responsible for the continuation of manual scavenging.
- To understand the health hazards and social stigma faced by manual scavengers.

- To evaluate state policies and rehabilitation measures.
- To suggest recommendations for eradication and dignity-based rehabilitation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite legal abolition, manual scavenging continues due to:

- entrenched caste-based occupational norms,
- lack of enforcement of laws,
- inadequate technological alternatives,
- social stigma preventing rehabilitation, and
- municipal dependence on cheap and invisible labor.

This study explores the socio-economic conditions, structural inequalities, and forms of inequality that keep manual scavenging alive.

Recent Developments (2024–2025)

Supreme Court (Feb 2025) has directed complete eradication by 31 December 2026 and constituted a National Task Force.

Introduction of NAMASTE scheme (National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem) merging earlier schemes; promises robotic cleaning, but rollout extremely slow.

Some success stories: Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh have procured more bandicoot robots and jetting-cum-suction machines than northern states.

Growing assertion by liberated communities: formation of cooperatives (e.g., Valmiki-Malik Samuday in Uttar Pradesh running mechanised cleaning services).

Review of Literature

According to Kumar's (2014) study, an examination of the workers' circumstances showed that they were classified as "untouchables," which led to their being restricted to jobs that involved sweeping and scavenging. Their professional identity and social classification prevented them from exploring other opportunities. These caste-based and occupational restrictions resulted in their marginalization in a variety of fields. This marginalization included restricted access to economic prospects, decent housing, education, and meaningful political participation.

According to Kumar's (2017) analysis, these factors also contribute to the societal stigma that they face. The goal of the study was to develop a thorough grasp of the financial, political, social, occupational, and health aspects of the life of sanitary workers. Expanding on the findings from this dataset, this article will examine their heightened vulnerability to COVID-19 infection. Additionally, it will look into their increased vulnerability to COVID-19-related severe acute illness and the possibility of the virus spreading throughout the community.

According to Manvita (2020), these workers have a disproportionately high risk of contracting COVID-19. Their frequent contact with different waste materials and surfaces increases their vulnerability because the virus may survive on a variety of surfaces. Because of their living conditions, occupation, social background, education, and state of health, they are more likely to become seriously ill, which increases the risk of death and promotes community transmission. For this reason, it is essential to act proactively.

Dr. C. D. Venkatesh's 2014 book Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Scavengers, with Special Reference to Bruhath Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), Karnataka, focuses on the financial and health problems that affect women who are Safai Karmacharis. Gender discrimination and the caste system are closely related. The discrimination experienced by women from lower castes is distinct from that of other women.

Mera (2019) The purpose of this essay is to examine scavengers' educational achievement from a first-hand perspective. It aims to gain a thorough understanding of this issue by considering their simultaneous marginalization and exclusion from society. Their school desires are greatly impacted by this double marginalization, which therefore becomes a major issue for them.

Government Initiatives for the Protection of Manual Scavengers in India

Manual scavenging remains a grave human rights violation in India, disproportionately affecting Dalit communities, despite legal bans and ongoing efforts. The Indian government, primarily through the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE), has

implemented several constitutional, legislative, and programmatic measures to prohibit the practice, ensure worker safety, provide rehabilitation, and promote mechanization. These initiatives aim to uphold Articles 17 (abolition of untouchability), 21 (right to life and dignity), and 23 (prohibition of forced labor) of the Constitution. Below is an overview of key initiatives as of November 2025, drawing from recent surveys and policy updates.

Social Welfare Schemes for Manual Scavengers in India

Manual scavenging, the hazardous and dehumanizing practice of manually cleaning human excreta, remains a persistent issue in India despite legal bans. It disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Castes. The Indian government, through the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE), has introduced several schemes to rehabilitate manual scavengers, provide financial aid, health coverage, and promote mechanized sanitation. These efforts are guided by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, which bans the practice and mandates rehabilitation. Key schemes focus on self-employment, health insurance, skill development, and safety. Below is a summary of the primary ones, based on current government initiatives as of 2025. Eligibility typically includes identified manual scavengers and their dependents, verified through surveys by MoSJE.

Major Difficulties and Challenges of Manual Scavenging in India (2025)

Manual scavenging is not just “dirty work”; it is one of the most extreme forms of dehumanisation still existing in modern India. The difficulties faced by manual scavengers are physical, social, economic, psychological, and structural.

Research Methodology

It is observed in the works of *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (2000) by Vijay Prashad documents the history of the Safai Karmacharis of Delhi explores their socio-economic life, their struggle for better working conditions, for self-respect and also for their cultural heritage. Similarly, the Scavengers' Living Conditions Enquiry Committee (1948-51) established under the chairmanship of V.N. Barve by the then Bombay Government

rightly recognized the role of caste in manual scavenging. It explores the status of Safai Karmachari women throughout the history in India.

Tools of Data Collection

Therefore the study would like to conduct field work in Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation with special reference to Karnataka. For this, respondents will be selected by using purposive and simple random methods to collect information from respondents. In-depth interviews and also questionnaires will be used to collect the information on Safai Karmachari women. Statistical tools like t-test, chi-square test and t-test will be adopted to know the socio-economic conditions of Safai Karmachari women. At the same time in-depth interviews will be conducted to describe case studies. SPSS is also used in the relevant section with coding and decoding method. Goldthorpe model of socio-economic class and Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theories will be adopted to test the data deficiency of research.

Innovation/Pathbreaking Aspect of the Research

At first glance Safai Karmachari women are always portrayed with negative comments. It is known fact that, still Government of India is hardly struggling to create innovative programs to empower women. They are considering still manual scavengers. The Constitution of India proposed special dispensation for manual scavengers for rehabilitation. Under Article 32 Government of India has provided special reference to Safai Karmacharis. They need social security as well as economic independence. They are also one of the contributors of the economy and social sweeper of society. The study intends to recognize Safai Karmachari women who counts half of the population. If the Government of India provides empowering policies and programs especially for Safai Karmachari women, they can also live with honor as others. Considering the issue there is a need of more sociological research on these marginalized groups. The study uses multidisciplinary approach. It creates a developmental path.

Conclusion

Manual scavenging is not a relic of the past; it is a living shame of present-day India. In 2025, seventy-eight years after

Independence, thousands of citizens (overwhelmingly Dalit, mostly women) are still forced to descend into manholes, carry baskets of human excreta on their heads, and die silent, suffocating deaths so that the rest of society can remain “clean.” Laws exist, schemes are announced, robots are showcased, yet the practice continues because caste still decides whose life is disposable. The real obstacle is not technology or money; it is the unspoken consensus across classes and castes that some people are meant to do this work and no one else should have to pay the price (economic, political, or moral) to end it.

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