

Health Hazards Faced by Manual Scavengers: A Silent Epidemic

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ABSTRACT:

Manual scavenging is a derogatory and dehumanizing practice that involves the manual cleaning, carrying, disposing, or otherwise handling of human excreta from dry latrines and sewers. It is a practice that has been practiced since ancient times, and it is a violation of the basic human rights of those who are forced to engage in it. The Constitution of India guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, including the right to equality before the law, the right to freedom from discrimination, and the right to a life with dignity. Manual scavenging is a violation of all these rights. People engaged in this work face serious health problems, be it mentally or bodily they undergo serious health issues, as they are exposed to this easily. This paper attempts to illuminate the perilous repercussions confronted by individuals engaged in manual scavenging, shedding light on the profound and adverse impacts on their health. Through a comprehensive examination, it delves into the intricate web of health-related challenges posed by this deplorable practice. To contextualize and substantiate these assertions, this paper conducts a meticulous analysis of real-life instances spanning various regions across the country. By examining firsthand accounts and testimonies of individuals grappling with the harrowing realities of manual scavenging, this analysis seeks to underscore the pervasive and profound nature of the health crises precipitated by this abhorrent practice.

INTRODUCTION:

There are imposed labour practices based on caste, such as manual scavenging, in many regions of India. It involves manually cleaning human and animal waste using brooms and little tin plates, then transporting it in baskets to a special location that is remote from the living quarters. An essential part of the Indian social structure that dates back many centuries

is the caste system. When labour is divided according to caste, it is founded on human inequity. Caste affects a person's social, economic, and political relationships.¹

India, as a democratic nation, consistently prioritizes the protection of the rights of its residents. The nation places a paramount emphasis on the respect and dignity of its citizens, valuing these principles even above individual lives. The caste system in India is structured around the hierarchy determined by birth of a person and the occupation that they had as their livelihood generation to generation. It is more of a social practice which has been incurred in Hindu religion of caste system. The caste system in India is predominantly divided into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Manual Scavengers are generally the members of the lowest caste system, the Shudras or Dalits, who engage in a variety of hazardous acts to assist society, such as clearing blocked gutters, sewage pipes, handing human excreta, and removing dead animals from streets, towns, and cities.

Manual scavenging represents a socio-economic dilemma deeply ingrained in the framework of liberal societies. It goes beyond being a mere violation of human rights, it's a clear mark of wrongdoing and a stain on how people should treat each other. Those engaged in manual scavenging confront intense prejudice, rejection, and a profound sense of helplessness. Systematically segregated, they are relegated to areas distant from most of the local population. Centuries of oppression have subjected them to slavery, closing off avenues for economic, cultural, social, educational, and political advancement based on religion and casteism. Consequently, they are marginalized as socially untouchables.

According to Asian human right commission "Manual scavenging in India is officially defined as 'Lifting and removal of human excreta manually', at private homes and toilets maintained by municipal authorities. The practice consists of gathering human excreta from individual or community dry latrines with bare hands, broom or metal scrappers into woven basket or buckets. These scavengers carry on their heads, shoulder or against their hips, (and in wheels barrows if they can afford it) into dumping sites or water bodies. Apart from this many scavengers are similarly employed to collect, carry and dispose excreta from sewers, septic tanks, drains and railway tracks."²

¹ Manual Scavenging in India: Literature review {[https://barti.in/upload/pdf/Manual Scavenging report.pdf](https://barti.in/upload/pdf/Manual%20Scavenging%20report.pdf)}.
² "Manual Scavenging in India: Definition and Practices." AHRC,

www.humanrights.asia/resources/definition/manual-scavenging.

The International Labour Organization has documented three types of manual scavenging in India which include collecting human waste from public streets and pit latrines that do not have water seals, cleaning sewers and gutters and cleaning septic tanks.³ Removal of waste from railway lines and train toilets is another type of activity that occurs.⁴

Throughout the history of human civilization, this hazardous work has been a means of livelihood for many. However, it represents one of the most degrading and inhumane tasks imaginable. Tragically, this labour has historically been relegated to the lower caste members in India, who were compelled to perform it due to the rigid social hierarchy of the Varna caste system. It's been handed down from generation to generation.⁵

The preamble of the Indian Constitution, adopted on November 26, 1949, emphasizes the equality of status and opportunity, as well as the liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship.⁶ Over the past seventy-six years, India has made significant improvements in democracy, technology, culture, and its diverse heritage. However, it has failed to eradicate the contemporary system of manual scavenging and achieve the "equality of status" envisaged in the preamble.

Manual scavengers, who are frequently from underprivileged backgrounds, are responsible for physically clearing human waste from open drains, septic tanks, and sewers. Direct contact with hazardous trash at work can cause a variety of health problems. Exposure to dangerous chemicals, bacteria, and toxic gasses can result in respiratory issues, skin illnesses, and gastrointestinal infections. Moreover, the dangers are increased by inadequate hygiene and protective equipment. Due to social stigma, prejudice, and traumatic experiences connected to their employment, manual scavengers also frequently struggle with mental health issues like anxiety, sadness, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In this paper we will discuss some of the health issues and problems faced by manual scavengers while physically engaging in the hazardous cleaning activities.

HAZARDOUS EXPOSURE AND RELATED PROBLEMS

³ Punjab and Haryana High Court, India

⁴ Manual scavenging and the right to health in India – social and medicolegal perspectives Article in Medicine, Science, and the Law · September 2022

⁵ "Pallavi Gupta, "Manual Scavenging in India- A Need of Good Governance for Social Justice", International Journal of Political Activism and Engagement, January 2021.

⁶ THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA [As on May, 2022]

[<https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s380537a945c7aaa788ccfcd1b99b5d8f/uploads/2023/05/2023050195.pdf>]

The task of manual scavenging and the close contact with garbage, waste, excreta, etc., exposes the manual scavengers to hazardous substances and several dangerous or infectious bacteria and thus makes them contact with several health problems. Health is a basic right which is considered as fundamental one which must be exercised to execute other rights. Everyone has the right to the best possible health that allows them to live with decency.⁷

Numerous laws have been enacted to address this dehumanizing practice, yet most of them prove ineffective due to inadequate enforcement. Despite enduring appalling experiences, those involved face an array of risks and dangers. They are frequently exposed to hazardous gases such as hydrogen sulphide and methane, which can cause heart problems, muscular disorders such as osteoarthritis, and intervertebral disc herniation. Infections such as hepatitis, leptospirosis, and helicobacter, as well as different skin and respiratory disorders and changed respiratory functions parameters, cause them.⁸

Manual scavengers are susceptible to a range of diseases due to their exposure to hazardous materials and unsanitary conditions. Unprotected contact of human waste Causes Repository and skin infections, as well as anaemia, jaundice, trachoma, and carbon monoxide poisoning.⁹

Respiratory Infections:

Manual scavengers often inhale toxic fumes and gases present in sewage systems, leading to respiratory ailments such as bronchitis and asthma. Research has shown that manual scavengers are highly susceptible to respiratory infections due to their exposure to hazardous gases and fumes in sewage systems. Manual scavengers have elevated rates of bronchitis and asthma compared to the general population. These respiratory ailments can significantly impair lung function and quality of life, leading to chronic health issues if left untreated. Additionally, the lack of proper protective gear exacerbates the risk of respiratory illnesses among manual scavengers.

Skin Infections:

Direct contact with human waste exposes manual scavengers to a plethora of pathogens that can cause skin infections. Scientific research, such as that outlined in studies by organizations

⁷ S.K.Bhatnagar, V. K. Ahuja, Supra Note p.861

⁸ Swetha Maria John Issue and Akhil Sasidharan, Microbes of our society: Story of Mannal Scavengers", The Rights, Vol 1, issue No.11,(10" December 2015)., p.4.

⁹ Subhojt Goswami, "Manual Scavenging: A stinking legacy of suffocation and stigma", available at <https://www.downtoearth.org. In/news/waste/>

like the International Labour Organization (ILO), highlights the prevalence of dermatitis and other skin conditions among manual scavengers.¹⁰ These infections often result from prolonged exposure to irritants and toxins present in sewage, emphasizing the urgent need for improved safety measures and hygiene practices in their work environments.

Gastrointestinal Disorders:

Handling waste contaminated with pathogens increases the risk of contracting gastrointestinal infections like vomiting and diarrhoea. Poor sanitation facilities and inadequate access to clean water further compound these health issues, underscoring the urgent need for improved sanitation infrastructure and occupational safety standards for manual scavengers.

Infectious Diseases:

Scientific research conducted by organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified manual scavengers as a high-risk group for infectious diseases like typhoid, cholera, and hepatitis.¹¹ Close contact with contaminated materials significantly increases the likelihood of contracting these infections. Comprehensive public health interventions, including vaccination programs and improved sanitation practices, are essential to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases among manual scavengers and their communities.

Parasitic Infections:

Studies by organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have highlighted the prevalence of parasitic infections among manual scavengers, particularly hookworm and roundworm infestations. Exposure to human waste serves as a breeding ground for parasites, leading to chronic health issues and nutritional deficiencies. Effective public health measures, including deworming campaigns and access to proper sanitation facilities, are crucial to reducing the burden of parasitic infections among manual scavengers.

Tuberculosis:

Tuberculosis (TB) is a significant concern among manual scavengers due to the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in which they work. Scientific research, including studies

¹⁰ Studies by organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) have documented the prevalence of dermatitis and other skin conditions among manual scavengers.

¹¹ https://barti.in/upload/pdf/Manual_Scavenging_report.pdf

published in medical journals like The Lancet, has documented high rates of TB infection and transmission among manual scavengers. The airborne nature of the TB bacterium makes manual scavengers particularly vulnerable to respiratory transmission in confined spaces. Improved ventilation, regular health screenings, and access to TB treatment are essential components of efforts to control TB among manual scavengers and prevent its spread to the wider community.

Psychological Toll:

Although less observable than physical ailments, the psychological impact of manual scavenging is just as profound. Studies carried out by mental health experts, as evidenced by research published in journals such as Psychiatry Research, underscore the high rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions among manual scavengers. The pervasive societal stigma and discrimination linked to this occupation exacerbate feelings of isolation, shame, and despair. Meeting the mental health requirements of manual scavengers demands holistic psychosocial assistance, community engagement initiatives, and endeavors to foster social acceptance and dignity for every individual, irrespective of their profession or societal standing.

Leading to Death:

Instances of manual scavengers facing death are unfortunately not uncommon. These individuals, engaged in the hazardous task of manually handling waste, often encounter life-threatening risks. Tragically, fatalities occur due to exposure to toxic gases, pathogens, and other dangers inherent in waste sewage. Despite efforts to address this issue, including legislative measures and awareness campaigns, the persistence of manual scavenging continues to pose grave risks to the lives of those engaged in it. A total of 233 people died due to accidents while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks from 2019 to 2022.¹²

THE STATUS OF MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN INDIA

Manual scavenging is a profession wherein the workers, generally belonging to the Scheduled Caste communities are engaged in the practice of “the manual cleaning, carrying,

¹²<https://iasbaba.com/2023/03/manual-scavenging-in-india/#:~:text=Many%20manual%20scavengers%20suffer%20from,tanks%20from%202019%20to%202022> .

disposing of, or handling of human excreta in an insanitary latrine or an open drain or pit.¹³ According to the survey reports, of about 1.2 million people are forced to engage into the profession.¹⁴ Adding to that of about 5 million Safai Karmacharis (sanitation workers) who maintain public spaces come into direct contact with human excreta succumbing them to health ailments.¹⁵

In 2021 the National Human Rights Commission stated that claims that there are no manual scavengers in particular states in India are simply untrue.¹⁶ There are lot of incidents which have gone unnoticed due to political dilution or say it political game. It's been noted that Deaths have occurred in states/UTs due to hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and non-observance of safety precautions as prescribed under Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 and manual scavengers Rules 2013, infect it had been noted that 339 people have lost their lives while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in India, between 2018 to 2023 the reports are as follow nine deaths were recorded in 2023, 66 in 2022, 58 in 2021, 22 in 2020, 117 in 2019, and 67 deaths in 2018.¹⁷ It's likely that there are also numerous unrecorded incidents of death alongside those that have been recorded. The deaths of manual scavengers in India are being treated as mere accidents instead of systemic murders.

Recent Incidents:

Gujarat (2021 to 2023)

- From March 22 to April 26, 2023, as many as eight people have died while cleaning sewers in various parts of Gujarat, raising concerns about the continuing deaths of manual scavengers even though the practice has been declared illegal across the country. Seven sanitation workers lost their lives while cleaning sewers between

¹³ The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 2(j) (1993).

¹⁴ Home | Safai Karmachari Andolan. (n.d.). <https://www.safaikarmachariandolan.org/>

¹⁵ Bose, R. (2019, December 18). For Women Safai Karmacharis, "Liberation" is Manual Scavenging with a Makeover. News18. <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/for-womensafai-karmacharis-liberation-is-manual-scavenging-with-a-makeover-2400809.html>

¹⁶ <https://nhrc.nic.in/media/press-release/nhrc-holds-zero-manual-scavenging-claims-many-states-far-truth-recommends-action>

¹⁷ 339 Lives Lost to Manual Scavenging in the Last Five Years, Govt Data Reveals. { <https://thewire.in/rights/339-lives-lost-to-manual-scavenging-in-the-last-five-years-govt-data-reveals> }

February 1, 2021, and January 31, 2022, while four sanitation workers lost their lives between February 1, 2022, and January 31, 2023.¹⁸

Tamil Nadu (2017 to 2022)

- In recent years, Tamil Nadu has earned ill repute for consistently failing to prevent manual scavenging deaths. Between 2017 and 2022, Tamil Nadu accounted for the second-highest number of deaths (56) after Uttar Pradesh (61). Yet, the state government has failed to curb the outlawed, inhumane practice.¹⁹

Maharashtra (2017 to 2022)

- Between 2017 and November 2022, the Safai Karamchari Andolan documented 70 fatalities of manual scavengers in both rural and urban areas of Maharashtra. Mumbai city alone accounted for 19 of these deaths, which represents more than a quarter of the overall total. The fatalities occurred as follows: six in 2017, four in 2018, six in 2019, and three more in March 2022, just three months prior to Scroll.in submitting its RTI inquiries to the municipal corporation.²⁰

These incidents occur in most states across India. The states mentioned in this article are just a few examples readily available, but numerous incidents related to manual scavenging are reported across the country. The above report highlights a distressing reality in India, despite the nationwide prohibition on manual scavenging, deaths among sanitation workers persist. Indicating systemic failures in enforcement and worker safety. These tragedies underscore the urgent need for stricter implementation of laws, improved safety measures, and comprehensive efforts to eradicate manual scavenging nationwide.

¹⁸ Despite ban, Gujarat continues to witness deaths of manual scavengers [April 30, 2023 08:15 pm | Updated May 01, 2023 11:06 am IST - AHMEDABAD] {<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gujarat-continues-to-witness-deaths-of-manual-scavengers/article66796987.ece>}

¹⁹ TN saw five manual scavenging deaths in 18 days. All deterrents only on paper {<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/tn-saw-five-manual-scavenging-deaths-18-days-all-deterrents-only-paper-177544>}

²⁰ Scroll.in [feb,20,2023 3:35pm] { <https://scroll.in/article/1041036/manual-scavenging-killed-19-people-in-mumbai-in-past-five-years-but-bmc-records-show-zero-deaths#:~:text=From%202017%20up%20to%20November,are%20from%20Mumbai%20city%20alone.>

Immediate actions should be taken to protect the dignity and lives of sanitation workers across the country.

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES AND POLICIES REGARDING MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN INDIA.

Since gaining Independence, the Indian government has implemented various measures and policies to eradicate the practice of manual scavengers. In 1955, the government passed The Protection of Civil Rights Act along with the Untouchability (Offences) Act, which aimed to eliminate untouchability and caste-based social discrimination. Subsequent amendments occurred in 1977, leading to the enactment of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in 1989. Finally, in 2013, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (PEMSR) was introduced to address this issue comprehensively.²¹ This legislation prohibits the employment of individuals in manually handling human excreta, widening the definition of manual scavengers to include those involved in cleaning ditches, septic tanks, or railway tracks. Recognizing manual scavenging as a dehumanizing practice, the Act underscores the imperative to rectify the historical injustice and indignity endured by manual scavengers.²²

The organization initially known as the National Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Finance & Development Corporation (NSCSTFDC), now recognized as the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC), was founded with the aim of fostering economic advancement among Scheduled Castes. It achieves this by facilitating financial aid and enhancing opportunities for skill development through various innovative programs. Among its initiatives is the swachhtaudyami Yojajna scheme, designed to establish adequate infrastructure for the promotion of mechanized toilet and sewer cleaning.²³

Furthermore, various other initiatives have been undertaken to address the plight of manual scavengers. For instance, the Barve committee was established in 1949 to assess the living conditions of manual scavengers in Bombay. The Kaka Kalekar commission

²¹ . Bhattacharjee SS. Cleaning human waste: “manual scavenging,” Caste and discrimination in India. United States: Human Rights Watch, 2014

²² What is manual scavenging and why is it still prevalent in India?
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explainedwhat-is-manual-scavenging-and-why-is-it-still-prevalent-inindia-7815400>

²³ About NSFDC, <https://nsfdc.nic.in> about-nsfdc

conducted an evaluation of the lower castes in 1953, while the Malkani committee in 1957 was tasked with studying manual scavenging. Additionally, the Pandya committee, formed as a subcommittee by the National Labour Commission under the leadership of Bhanu Prasad Pandya in 1968–69, examined the working conditions of sweepers and scavengers.

To complement these efforts, numerous government and administrative schemes have been implemented to allocate resources for modernizing sanitation. Such national sanitation schemes include the SulabhShauchalaya Scheme (1974), the Integrated Low-Cost Sanitation Scheme (1981), the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (2009), and the more recent Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan (2014). The Integrated Low-Cost Sanitation Scheme aimed to eradicate all dry latrines and initiate the construction of new latrines for households belonging to the Economically Weaker Sections lacking such facilities.

The National Commission for Safai Karamchari Act of 1993 was enacted to assess and oversee the implementation of various schemes and provide a mechanism for grievance redressal. However, despite the enactment of the 2013 Act, manual scavenging remains prevalent in India due to inadequate enforcement, continued reliance on unskilled laborers, and persistent poverty. Economic factors also contribute, as the cost of cleaning a septic tank by the Mumbai civic body, ranging between Rs 20,000 to 30,000, is significantly higher than the daily wage of Rs 300–500 earned by a manual scavenger. The Indian Railways, for example, has historically employed manual scavengers to clear railway tracks, as excrement from many carriages directly falls onto the rails.

CONCLUSION:

In India, despite laws and court interventions, manual scavenging persists. The 2013 Prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act aims to prohibit this practice and aid in rehabilitation, particularly for marginalized groups like SC/ST communities. However, many are still coerced into this dangerous work, facing injury, illness, and even death. Enforcement gaps exist from rural panchayats to urban corporations, perpetuating this injustice. Manual scavenging poses health risks such as respiratory issues and psychological trauma. Addressing this requires abolishing the practice, ensuring worker protection and healthcare, and raising societal awareness. Collective action is crucial to uphold human dignity and create a fairer society.

