

# The Diversified Form of Manual Scavenging and How it Perpetuates the Caste System

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores the changing definition of manual scavenging in India, offering a glimpse into their harsh lifestyle, which is forced upon them mainly due to the caste they happen to be born into. In the past, people born into the Dalit caste, which is lowest according to the Hindu caste hierarchy in India, engaged in cleaning dry latrines, where they picked up human waste using their bare hands. Today, the occupation is passed on to subsequent generations, albeit in different and diversified forms, but in ways that perpetuate casteism and social stigma. This diversified occupation has also become far more hazardous, at times even fatal. Those employed, for instance, have been ‘promoted’ from cleaning dry latrines, to cleaning sewer lines, which are filled with toxic gases. This has led to the death of many, mainly due to asphyxiation. Several government policies have been formulated over the years to eliminate this horrific occupation, which could prevent deaths and also remove stereotypes surrounding caste-based occupations. However, the policies have benefited only a few, leaving many in the warp of poverty, danger and societal stigma of caste.

## Life of a Manual Scavenger

Before discussing the caste system in India, and the way it has affected people engaged in manual scavenging, it is essential to understand how the occupation is disturbing and dehumanising, and yet highly prevalent in India. As a newspaper reporter for over four years in the Southern state of Telangana in India, I had the opportunity to interact with several individuals who were engaged in the profession. Among other things, I learned

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that those who are currently employed as ‘sewer line cleaners’ or as cleaners of public toilets and railway tracks, do so because these jobs were passed down to them from their parents; it was in many ways the only choice they had to earn a livelihood. Members of the former generations of these individuals were similarly employed to clean dry latrines. The ones of the current generation have more diversified jobs, mainly because dry latrines have been replaced across the country with flushable toilets linked to a central sewer system in every major city, town and also many villages. For this reason I use ‘manual scavenger’ as synonymous with ‘sewerage worker’ in this article.

In any major city in India, a sewerage worker employed with the local municipality, comprising the water board and sanitation departments, is called on to clean septic tanks in households, companies and apartment complexes. Septic tanks are generally built in the basement or the cellar of an apartment and is the place where all the toilet waste is sent and collected. Apart from this, his job is to clean sewer lines that get clogged on a regular basis. On several occasions, individuals who have entered these toxic sewer lines have died due to asphyxiation across major cities in the country. A report by the National Commission for *Safai Karamcharis* (roughly translated from Hindi to sweepers, cleaners, manual scavengers and sewer line cleaners), a government organisation to aid and support those employed in the sanitation department, shows that 576 people have died between 1993 and 2018 due to asphyxiation. Non-governmental organisations working for these people put these deaths at more than 1200 (Subramaniam, 2018).

When a sewerage worker is called in to unclog a drain, it is generally a three-member team that reaches the location. The materials that clog a drain, as revealed by these workers, usually include cloth, plastic, sanitary napkins and similar materials which cannot pass through the drains or the sewer lines. There are no machines that can identify these materials, and they can be removed only by a human hand – to spot, touch, sense it and then pull it out.

Hence, one of the three members is suspended into the manholes with a rope tied around his waist. Another person mans the hole and is in charge of the pulling out the one dangling below when the job is done. These individuals have no prior knowledge of what might be clogging the line, and they tell that every experience is new and different. If it is sanitary napkins in one sewer line, it is lump of hair in another. They always have to go in and remove it by hand. While unclogging these drains, they are not protected by any gears like nose masks or hand gloves, which could at least partially ease their discomfort. It is in the absence of gears that several people have died inside these sewers. This is because they are exposed to toxic gases like hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, methane, esters, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. It must be

emphasised here that these individuals are risking their lives to prevent a drain from overflowing and in doing so they ease the discomfort caused by overflowing drains in metro cities – traffic blockades, stench on the main roads or to live up to the image of a smart and clean city. A little bit of stench when passing through a trash can in an Indian city forces us to wrinkle our nose, hold our breath or cover it, but for these individuals, that is how the air smells, at all times. During my interactions with these individuals, it was revealed that the discrimination they face from people and society is multi-pronged. First, their caste leaves them with very few choices in occupation which are limited to sanitation and cleaning. The nature of the job is also inhuman. They are vulnerable to all kinds of diseases and health hazards. In order to sustain in the stench and to breathe through it, these men consume alcohol, not infrequently leading them to become dependable on it. This, in several cases, has also led to other problems like domestic abuse in their households.

They are further discriminated because of the stench that emanates from their bodies. They live in isolated colonies, even in urban cities, usually close to a dumping yard. Their lives are restricted to activities of cleaning and often their celebrations are also done in isolation. Skin diseases, fever, nausea and lung diseases are common among them. Health care is out of question and in any case a far-fetched thought for these individuals. Taking a day off for the sake of health care is also out of question as their pay depends on their availability for a cleaning job. Their children are affected too, not just by the situation at home. They have to adjust to low-quality education, while battling social stigma where ‘casual’ casteism – demeaning them in the name of their caste and their parents’ occupation – is routine. One common example of casual casteism in the Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, is people calling someone or verbally abusing someone with the word ‘pichakuntla’, when they behave unusually or if they seem unkempt, unclean or messy, which the name of a caste in the Telugu states whose occupation traditionally, was begging.

In the past, when dry latrines or dry toilets were still existent, it was a woman’s job to go to every household in the locality and clean up an unknown human’s waste with her bare hands. Then came the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, which called for the eradication of dry toilets and prevented their construction. It needs to be noted here that those employed to clean the dry toilets are now cleaning sewer lines. At the same time, the Indian Railways, which is the fourth largest railway network in the world, is also the largest employer of manual scavengers in India (Patankar, 2015). The toilet system in the majority of Indian trains leaves the waste on the railway tracks. As pointed out by (Baruah, 2014, p.2.),

“wastes are piled into baskets, which are then carried by the scavengers on their heads to such locations that are sometimes several kilometres away from the scavenged toilets.” Some of them now have bio-toilets, but these need to be cleaned by people too.

The nature of the job is undoubtedly inhuman. The life that these individuals live and the way they are stigmatised all point to the caste system and years of prejudice that perpetuates in the Indian society. There is blatant violation of human rights, at multiple levels, of these individuals engaged in this occupation. The caste system prevents them from making a choice of a different or a better life. At work, the nature of the job puts them at physical and psychological risk that is not just limited to them, but their succeeding generations.

Bezwada Wilson, founder of Safaai Karamchari Andolan, a movement aiming to eradicate the occupation completely has been vocal in pointing out that in the current time, when there is technology solving almost every problem in the world, it is shocking that India is not keen to create or find technology that can help eradicate this occupation. He stated, in an interview with me, the argument he has been making for several years now, that it is because it threatens the caste hierarchy and dominance of upper castes.

## **Caste and Manual Scavenging – Some Historical Context**

Caste and occupation in India are inter-linked, and this has been noted by many sociologists and anthropologists. Certain jobs, for several centuries, were assigned to certain sections of the Indian population, based only and entirely on the caste of one's birth.

Across the country, there is a hierarchy of occupations where every caste is assigned to a different occupation. This originates from the Hindu religious philosophy, where aspects of culture, diet, rituals, and occupations were considered either superior or inferior to the other and hence the order (Srinivas, 2013). This was institutionalised by the British who colonised India. There are individuals born into the highest caste, the Brahmin caste, who have usually been associated with occupations of preaching or orchestrating rituals and customs for others, namely priests and scholars. Individuals born into the Kshatriya caste have been warriors and kings. Individuals born into the Vaishya caste have largely been merchants, traders, money lenders. In some parts of the country, they are also land owners, employing people from lower castes to tend to their lands. Finally, individuals born into the Shudra caste have been laborers, mainly employed by the Vaishyas. Besides these, there was an additional 'out-casted' group called the Dalits or the 'untouchables' who occupied the lowest step of the social ladder

(Ambedkar, 1989[1925]; Pick and Dayaram, 2006, as cited in (Sankaran, Sekerdej, & Hecker, 2017)).

Some of these Dalits also follow the Christian faith, with their conversion, some argue, expressing a sign of protest against their marginalised position, but that does still not exempt them from carrying on with the caste-based occupation. This hierarchy also brings with it societal stigma and prejudice among people. The prejudice against “Dalits” or the “untouchables”, (Baruah, 2014), is also inherited by individuals. Caste contributes to social stigma, where even the shadow of the ‘untouchable’ is considered unclean and dirty by those of the other castes.

The word Dalit means oppressed or broken. This prejudice can be related to the nature of the work they were allocated, as per the caste system. This can also be witnessed across the country on an everyday basis. At the village level, the ‘lower caste’ families often live on the outskirts of the village. There is visible prevalence of casteism even today. As part of an internship, where I was studying about certain weaving and shepherding communities in villages of Central Telangana in 2013, I observed that these individuals are served food in separate utensils or are asked to bring their own. On one occasion, a Dalit woman was invited by a woman from the shepherding caste, Kuruma. It was an act of courtesy extended by the Kuruma woman in the presence of us, the interns, and the members of the organisation we were working for. The Dalit woman had her meal outside the house, in her own plate and water, from her own glass. In the Telugu States too, there has been caste discrimination where Dalits are often dominated and discriminated against by the upper caste land owners. There were at least three cases between 1985 and 2012 where several Dalits in these states were massacred by people from the upper castes. Several villages in the Northern part of India also practice segregation till this day. In public occasions like weddings or funerals, people belonging to different castes have their meals separately, Dalits often far away from the rest. In urban spaces caste is equally blatant in educational institutions, government organisations and households. The most common pointer regarding the prevalence of casteism in educational institutions is the number of suicides by those students belonging to Scheduled Castes, the Shudra category. In 2014, the suicide of a Hyderabad University student, Rohit Vemula, who reportedly ended his life as he could not face discrimination in the name of caste brought to light the deep-rooted caste bias in educational institutions. In this reputed university, at least 8 Dalit students killed themselves, unable to face discrimination over a decade, until 2016. More recently, a second year medical student also committed suicide unable to face the discrimination she was subjected to by fellow students. The 26-year-old doctor, Payal Tadvi belonged to

a community that is categorised as a scheduled tribe. Tadvi was studying at one of the top medical colleges in Mumbai – Topiwala National Medical College. The suicide of Tadvi is a clear indication that those from the lower castes aspiring to choose a different profession and succeeding at it does not necessarily mitigate the stigma attached to the deep-rooted casteism in India.

This discrimination by the upper caste individuals stems from the tradition that every caste is designated to a specific occupation only. The occupations of Dalits, even today, are mostly those which no other individual would ‘choose’ to do. These include preparing bodies to be cremated, as per the Hindu religious custom, skinning of animal carcasses, which are considered unholy and dirty according to the Hindu philosophy, and then used to make leather goods. Besides this, killing of rats and pests, and ensuring cleaning all kinds of dirt and waste – human, animal feces, household waste or any other kind. Upper caste individuals believe that those engaging in these occupations, namely the Dalits are interacting constantly with polluted environments, leading to the stereotype that they are “polluted individuals”, who, if touched or interacted with can pollute others too.

To eliminate this stereotype and the stigma attached to caste, there have been several movements by Indian leaders, like MK Gandhi and also a series of policies by Indian policy makers, starting with Dr. BR Ambedkar, who pioneered the social movement against Dalits. Born in the Dalit caste himself, Ambedkar fought against the deep-rooted social and economic discrimination against Dalits. His public movements were aimed to break the stigma against Dalits in the country and aimed at political reforms. However, small yet notable practices of untouchability still exist, where upper caste people serve food and water in separate utensils, which are always set aside. On the other hand, Gandhi eliminated the word 'untouchables', replacing it with 'Harijans', which translates to 'children of God'. He also held a fast for six days, protesting against the British to eliminate untouchability, which was instrumental to an extent.

The policies which, on paper, seek to stop the employment of people for this job, thereby aiming to eradicate the caste system, have only failed. The number of people who are employed in jobs, diversified from manual scavenging is still high.

At the same time, the number of people who are losing their lives while on the job is also not negligible.

## The Case of Manual Scavenging Deaths in Telangana State

In August 2016, a total of three men who entered a sewer line, which was 20 feet deep, in Hyderabad lost their lives. The person who was suspended into the sewer line drowned in the water, and died due to asphyxiation. Meanwhile, the person who suspended him and the driver of the vehicle, in the process of saving each other, were also killed. This incident was one of the many, though one of the few, where three people died in a single instance, and occurred after the 2013 Act came into force. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, not only penalises people who employ individuals to clean sewer lines, toilets or septic tanks, but also orders the state governments to provide a monetary compensation to families who have lost people in these sewer lines. As per the Act, a sum total of Rs.10 lakh is to be given to the families who lost individuals while on this dehumanising job, starting from 1993, as compensation. In this case, the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation and the water board were the ones that needed to be penalised, but there was little action taken. When questioned, the authorities argued that they do not employ these individuals directly, but through middlemen, who should be penalised instead. This is only one of the many cases which were reported in the media. There is no collective data documenting the deaths of people engaging in this profession. However, in a question to the Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment during a session in February 2019 on the floor of the Lok Sabha, it was stated that there are no deaths of manual scavengers reported. It needs to be noted here that the term manual scavenging does not exist in its original context, as dry latrines have been replaced with flushable ones. Since no individuals are engaged in this particular nature of work, the report says, 'no deaths' reported.

On the other hand, a list by the Ministry stated that only two families were paid the full compensation of Rs.10 lakh until March 27, 2014 in Telangana. However, in an independent investigation done in the year 2017 it was found that that there were a total of 22 families who lost their family members who entered sewer lines to clean them since 1993. Out of this, only three families, (excluding the two listed by the Minister) have been provided with the Rs.10 lakh monetary compensation. The highest number of families who have been paid a compensation hail from the state of Tamil Nadu at 155.

The Act also seeks to rehabilitate these individuals into other occupations which are financially stable and less taxing – socially and also physically stable and more human occupations. However, in several instances, there is strong prejudice that comes in the

way of society accepting their services in any other occupation. Hence, this comes in the way of these people's choice to opt for a different livelihood. In her book, *Unseen: The truth about India's manual scavengers*, (Singh, 2014), talks about instances where those who dared to make a choice and choose a different occupation were ridiculed and looked down upon. The author stresses on how the rigidity of the Indian caste system does not allow people to look beyond certain aspects.

The rehabilitation scheme states that those employed as manual scavengers are entitled to a one-time cash benefit of Rs.40,000, which could enable them to look for an alternative livelihood. Under this, over 45,000 people were identified to be eligible, however, only 37 % of them have received this benefit. (Mitra, 2019) In the state of Telangana, under this scheme, the government launched a rehabilitation plan in 2017, which might seem like a breath of fresh air. The State purchased mini sewer-jetting machines, a technology that in majority of the cases does not require men to enter in the dangerous sewer lines, but helps suck out materials clogging the drains. How many of these jetting machines will change the life of these sewer line workers, break the stigma surrounding their caste, remains to be seen.

One appreciative move, which is likely, to help destigmatise caste in the coming years, needs to be mentioned here. A former officer in the Indian Police Service in Telangana, Mr Praveen Kumar was instrumental in initiating a movement called SWAEROES – Social Welfare Aeroes. Aeroes means the sky in Greek. The idea behind this was to tell the children born into families categorised as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, that sky is their limit. It aims to break the caste stereotypes that are normally forced upon them.

Mr Praveen Kumar, believes that education is one way to curb the stigma surrounding caste. He and his family were all victims of casteism and he believes education can help break that. In an interview with *The Economic Times*, Kumar (2016), he mentioned:

My parents are living examples of the transformative power of education. But for education, they would have ended up as bonded labourers like my grandparents. My parents used to share their dreams with me and my siblings and we worked hard to make their dreams true. Today I am an IPS officer, my brother is an associate professor and my sister is a doctor. While caste has been working against me, I ignored the pain it inflicted, because I had a formidable goal. I am absolutely comfortable with my identity today.



He is the secretary for the Telangana Residential Educational Society, which runs residential schools, providing free education, while also focusing on the overall development of the children.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, despite policies to provide monetary compensation to rehabilitate those engaged in the occupations of cleaning sewer lines or manual scavenging, there has been little or no change in their lives. It is clear that the occupation which has branched out into several others has only proven to be dangerous, where some of them have been killed while others have to live with the unpleasantness of the occupation on a daily basis. This is a continuing reality and cannot be looked at independently, but has to be observed from the perspective of the caste system that has been deeply rooted in India. Unless the ways to address the stigma attached to caste are identified, these occupations will be passed on to the subsequent generations, thereby perpetuating casteist mentality.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Besides this, trained as a journalist, writing an academic article was quite a difficult task for me. My first draft was a reportage of facts and nowhere close to an academic piece. However, my reviewer was kind and patient to point out all that was needed to be improved, which helped me a great deal to understand how academic writing is done. It is not just the way the argument is presented, but how everything needs to be interpreted. This was clearly communicated to me by my reviewer, which was a great learning experience for me. Hence, I would like to thank my reviewer for contributing to my learning process, for the time that was spent on my work and the help that was provided to me, with lot of care and scrutiny. I would also like to thank Dr. Jelle JP Wouters for constantly encouraging me and helping me with all the necessary help and advice. I view this as a great learning opportunity and appreciate his patient and careful guidance.

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