

# Politicising the Public Space: On Dalit Women Sanitation Workers in India

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## Abstract

Caste determines the life worlds of people in India in particular and South Asia in general. Historically, it is observed that caste has conditioned the nature of public spaces. Upper castes can appropriate the public spaces legitimized by caste ideology and practice. However, colonial and post-colonial India witnessed changes in the caste system due to its (modern) legal interventions. Paradoxically, caste persists in its crude and subtle forms. It has also acquired new forms in post-independent public spaces. Caste determines certain bodily dispositions within the so-called public spaces. The ambiguous nature of modernity and the weight of tradition have drastically transformed the public space. A socially regulated economy and public institutions are determining the people, space, and mobility of the castes, too. This article investigates the nature of the stigmatized labour of Dalit women sanitation workers (who come under the manual scavenging community) within diverse public urban spaces. It analyses the various questions related to the Dalit women sanitation workers who work in select public universities, urban housing colonies, and slums in Delhi, India. It probes the Dalit women sanitation workers' day-to-day life in caste-ridden spaces of urban- "public" spaces. One of the central questions that needs to be addressed is whether the socioeconomic space of these Dalit women workers has changed in contemporary India. Why do Dalit women have to do stigmatized work in public spaces? How are purity and pollution reinforced in elusive ways? Thus, it initiates a critique of the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces. This article acts as a way to engage with the epistemic priority of women sanitation workers to problematize Brahmanic feminism in India. Can there be any social-political engagement with the public space in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers? At the level of theory, this article critiques the dominant-Habermasian idea of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's counter-public to reflect on conceptual practice grounded in the Dalit women sanitation workers and public space.

## Keywords

Caste, Gender, Dalit, Sanitation, Work, Public Space

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“Their Orthodox pity is no taller than a Falkland Road pimp  
 It’s true, they haven’t raised any ceremonial tenet for us in the sky  
 After all, they are the feudal lords; they’ve locked all light in their vault  
 In this lowered life imposed on us, not even a pavement belongs to us  
 They’ve made us so helpless; being humans become nauseating to us  
 We can’t find even dust to fill up our scorched bowels  
 The rising day of justice, like a bribed person, favours only them  
 While we are being slaughtered, not even a sigh for us escapes their generous  
 hands”

—“*Their Orthodox Pity*”, Namdeo Dhasal

## Introduction

Sanitation workers are extolled by the state and several government institutions in contemporary India. During and after COVID-19, the “scavenging community” is highlighted in the “public” spaces and given a certain kind of recognition by showering of rose petals, flowers and garlanding. Suddenly, a new vocabulary for them has emerged in the so-called “public” spaces. They became the “protectors,” “warriors” and “viragana,” in the language of the public spaces. These tropes had acquired different forms during the first phase of COVID-19. Social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram abounded with hate trolls against the Dalits (ex-untouchables), saying that lower castes should die with COVID-19. The manner in which the word *Bangi* is used in popular and social media discourses reveals the caste-bias towards sanitation workers (Katulkar, 2023, p. 10). As per casteist trolls, it was further written that they deserve death because they are the beneficiaries of reservation policies. Simultaneously, notions of purity and pollution from colonial to post-colonial times polarised the social equations during the pandemic (Patil, 2021). The construction of the hygiene of the nationhood is also contested (Irshad, 2021, pp. 23–40). The sanitation women workers in particular and overall manual scavenging community therefore, have a different trajectory of work, labour, and stigma in caste-based-neoliberal India. This article investigates the nature of stigmatized labour of Dalit women sanitation workers (who come under the manual scavenging community) within diverse public urban spaces. It analyses the various questions related to the Dalit women sanitation workers who work in select public universities, urban housing colonies, and urban slums in Delhi, India. It probes the Dalit women sanitation workers’ day-to-day life in caste-ridden spaces of (urban) ‘public’ spaces. A central question to be addressed is whether the socio-economic space of these Dalit women workers has changed in current India or not. Why do Dalit women have to indulge in stigmatized work in public spaces, which is based

on caste? Or does their caste location force this type of work upon them? How are purity and pollution reinforced on them in elusive ways? What circumstances forced them to do this form of work? How do they look at their life in the context of their work? How do they see the larger societal approach to them and their work? How does this form of work affect their health? Are they aware about the laws, technological developments and their rights? Thus, the article also offers a critique of the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces and acts as a way to engage with the epistemic priority of women sanitation workers to problematize Brahmanic feminism in India. Can there be any social-political engagement with the public space in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers? At the level of theory, this article attempts to offer critiques to the dominant-Habermasian idea of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's counter-public to reflect on conceptual practice grounded in the lives of Dalit women sanitation workers and the public space. Before delving into the intricacies of their life circumstances grounded in caste-class-stigmatized occupations, one has to return to the core debates around the working classes and labour across the globe.

## **Ideas and Departures**

Conditions of working classes are changing throughout the world. The nature and meaning of work and labour categorizes the people. It further leads to various ideologies of the status quo and its linkages to forms of power. Occupations, thus, are being read in the more extensive views around the category of labour. One question that still looms large is whether the idea of work has to be romanticized or the work itself has to be dismantled. Debates on abolishing the work have unleashed new conceptual tools to look at the challenges of the workers. It is noted that Anarchists and the exponents of the New Left have constructed robust critiques of the category of work (Jager, 2018). Dominant understandings of labour often tend to ignore the interlinked social dimensions. It is embedded in the social spaces and the construction of knowledge. Thus, the geopolitics of the ideas (Mignolo, 2011) of labour demands diverse and context-specific readings. Marxist feminist accounts on workplaces, households, and social reproduction are limited due to their understanding of the nation-state as the macro-realm for social reproduction than exploring global social transformations (Ferguson & David, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, Marxist questions around labour were later questioned by the Afro-American thought. Catherine Lu argues that the oppressed social locations and states complicate the lives of vulnerable sections belonging to certain races, genders, and classes (Lu, 2014). Questions of race, labour, and Postbellum capitalism are probed in the works of W. E.B. Du Bois (Major, 2022). Consequently, post-racial society witnessed several critiques and debates around the category of 'labour' through diverse lens of class, race, gender, ideology and praxis. The political writings of black leftist-feminist women have articulated the connections between race and work (Burden-Stelly & Jodi Dean, 2022). It can be observed that Indian conditions of caste, gender and labour have a different trajectory from the aforementioned geopolitics of ideas around class, race and gender. In order to unearth

the peculiar social and political dimensions in an Indian context, it is essential to probe the concept of the public in India. It is connected to the vicissitudes of modern democracy. In the milieu of democracy, rights are granted to the citizens, which create new possibilities for people across various social stratifications. Critiques of democracy through the perspectives of contradictions between the social and the political help us to explore the situatedness of Dalits. Ambedkar analyzed how caste operates as the notion of the mind (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 68). The existence of caste at the psychological level becomes the dominant “public”. In other words, the public operates within the dominant ideological space of the caste. The multiple dimensions of caste, gender and work thus have to be deciphered via rigorous methodological approaches.

## **Research Methodology**

This article is based on a qualitative research method that focusses on different narratives of Dalit women sanitation workers. It captures their lived experiences through interviews of 15 women sanitation workers. The names of the respondents are changed to maintain respondent confidentiality. The age group of the respondents is 20–57 years and snowball sampling method is used. Interviews were conducted in the city of Delhi. Their lives revolve around the universities, urban housing colonies and slums. Thus, the interviews can map the various layers of their social locations, home and work places. Interviews of two faculty members from the manual scavenging community were also carried out to explicate the changing contours of caste, occupations and development. The author of this article conducted the interviews in Hindi and later translated them into English. As a Dalit, the author previously knew some of the respondents. It helped to gain their trust during the interview sessions. Still, most of them denied providing interviews at the premises of their work place, fearing that they will lose their job if they were reported to their immediate heads, like the contractor, administration, or the supervisor. Therefore, interviews were conducted at their homes. The questions were the following: Why Dalit women have to do stigmatized work in public spaces which is based on the caste system? What circumstances forced them to do this form of work? How do they look at their life in the context of their work? How do they see the larger society’s approach towards them and their work? How does this form of work affect their health? Are they aware about the laws, technological developments and their rights? The idea of the public operates as a larger theoretical background to these questions. It is important to go through some of the rudimentary and nuanced dimensions of the category of the public.

## **Analysing the Public**

While analysing the debates on public sphere, the critiques have created different momentum globally. In order to engage with the debates on ‘public’ in Habermasian perspectives, one needs to go back to the genealogy of that debate. Habermas argued

that cultural and social differences should be explicated to differentiate from abstract political practices to ensure equality. Consequentially, autonomy in private lives via individual rights can be interpreted if the concerned people are able to foreground it in the public dialogues (Habermas, 1998, pp. 210–225). Paradoxically, the equal rights to coexistence and cultural forms of life may be problematic for the caste-bound patriarchal space of sanitation women workers. The question of the public changed in the discourse on the public in the later perspectives. This article does not engage with all those perspectives. The select perspectives are deliberately chosen because that helps to deepen the core theoretical concerns of this article. Debates around the creolization have raised major challenges to contemporary theories and political struggles of the marginalised sections. In the case of the social and political theories' deep meditations on the creolisation of the political, it is argued that "Our approach would be to consider the historical development of modern western societies as entangled in the complex construction of three expressive spheres: the public, the private and the subaltern" and further suggested that "...the civility of [a] pronounced public sphere and a secluded private sphere despite their apparent gendered opposition, owed its Western hegemonic meaning to regulatory civilization, resourced by and defined against a subaltern sphere-the slaves, the colonised, the natives and the racially segregated others" (Hesse, 2011, pp. 58–59). As a result, the vital question to be raised is whether Dalit women sanitation workers act as a counter public in the Nancy Fraserian sense? Fraser argued that "the subaltern counter publics are...parallel discursive areas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Therefore, Dalit women labourers questions have to initiate the theoretical departure from the feminist nuances in Fraser's subaltern counter publics. The social nature of the public space, especially in the context of the Dalits, has to be analysed with that of their predicaments about the social/public space. One has to also investigate the relationships between experience and workplaces and how Dalits experience those work places. In the backdrop of critical readings, how can work locations be understood as a factor that constitutes the vicious work environment? For example, numerous respondents analyzed the persistence of caste-based hate against sanitation workers as central to the workplace. Hence, hexis (Bourdieu, 1977) of Dalit sanitation women workers reverberate within the social hierarchy. Social spaces thus condition their bodies and existential predicaments. It is vital to ponder theoretical shifts that emanated around the changing nature of the bodily dispositions and caste.

Gopal Guru argued that, "First, in India, the discourse on untouchability is built up around the idea of touch. Unlike other societies, socially dominant groups within India have developed a distinct understanding of touch. The idea is embedded in their minds with enormous power to fragment, discipline, segregate, and quarantine large chunks of humanity. What is so distinct about touch is its moral 'economy,' which achieves this fragmentation with no investment of power; that is to say, it is withdrawal from, rather than engagement with, bodies that creates the other - the untouchable. Thus,

touch is powerful because it privileges some bodies through insulation rather than assimilation” (Guru, 2006).

Modern law has transformed the conflictual-social corollary. However, power and consequential inequality operate in peculiar ways. In the Henri Lefebvrian sense, social space is a product of the (caste-linked) society (Lefebvre, 1991). As a result, the relational facets of space in the case of Dalits have to be analyzed with the authentic social, psychological, and economic conditions of Dalits. The social nature of labour thus debunks the panegyrics on a homogenized understanding of labour and labourers. Caste in its various forms determines the social and political milieu in India. It is core to the social profile of South Asia. The social regulations impact the political system in India (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 222). It determines the nature of the “public” space as well. Though the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces has been influenced by the intersections of feminism, Marxism, and postmodern understandings, the debates on the public and private spheres in India have been peripheral to the social and political interlinkages. The ideas of private and public have to be revisited against the social backdrop of the changing forms of caste. There were new possibilities offered by the reform movements and freedom struggle (Aloysius, 2005). Nevertheless, those debates on social reform movements and freedom movements need to be more adequate in examining the various levels of the public and private in the case of Dalits. In order to map the specific nature of an understanding of the public, one has to rethink the public against the backdrop of anti-caste assertions. It can be argued that the critiques within social and political engagements from the marginalized sections add reflexive dimensions to existing democratic articulations. The complicated boundaries between the public and private categories can be understood through the voices of Dalit women sanitation workers.

## **Groove of the Wretchedness**

A Dalit labourer who does not have property is forced to return to menial caste-based occupations. They become cynical about the caste-driven occupational world. Most of them are not able to access public education due to poverty and lack of cultural capital. Landed dominant and middle castes cum political class regulate the economy in peculiar ways. The Indian political order that oscillates between caste and neoliberal economic flagellations also reorient the caste-based labour-subjectivities in a dubious manner. One also needs to be cautious about the Dalit interpretations of feudal- semi-feudal Indian conditions and the dominant perspectives, especially the left-oriented accounts on feudal and semi feudal conditions. Feudal and capitalist phases of patriarchy are based on the control of the labour of the women and the distribution of its surplus (Holter, 1984, pp. 178–179). Caste-based feudal and semi-feudal conditions enslave the Dalit women sanitation workers to socially regulated -neoliberal Indian patriarchy. Many respondents mentioned that they had to face sexual harassment from the contractor. The precarious and informal nature of their occupation thus pushed them into forms of patriarchy. One of the crucial questions that have to be answered

is whether Dalits engage and recover themselves in this sort of labour or not. Are they able to confront the larger challenges related to labour? The socially regulated Indian economy determines the social mobility of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. What are the methodological problems engendered in analysing similar conditions of Dalits and Dalit women? It is important to enter in to the debates on labour in the Indian feminist accounts and caste-gender-labour in the Dalit accounts. As part of the Dalit women sanitation workers larger issues, it is essential to ruminate on the dimensions of migration and labour. Research on migrant labour highlights the complexities related to Dalits. It is observed that, "Social group profiles of migrants do not match with the overall high level of work participation among SCs. Lower social and caste status propels/compels greater involvement of women in paid work. However, in the context of urban women migrants such pattern is not visible. This clearly means that more diversified and less stigmatised service occupations in urban areas, have obviously opened up more opportunities for upper caste women than for traditional female workers, who are drawn more from SC and ST" (Neetha, 2017-2018, p. 18). Employment of women therefore is gauged through the category of the labouring poor (Neetha, 2013). The labouring poor are fragmented on the basis of caste, gender and labour. Dalit labourers' alienation is to be rearticulated in the context of private property and labour. Does their estranged labour have anything to do with their property or not? Dalit workers are co-opted into a system of caste that further alienates them. Freedom in a Marxian sense is inadequate to probe the case of Dalit labour. Caste, labour and alienation of Dalit women thus arrest their freedom in deleterious fashion. Time also has to be counted in relation to the labour of the sanitation women workers. The continuity of labour has to be understood in the context of caste. There are synchronic and diachronic dimensions to the category of labour. It becomes a recurrent category throughout their life. The questions of skilled and unskilled workers and its separation from knowledge formation have been central to academic and activist circles. Does capitalism erase the differences between the skilled and unskilled labour? Work and workers have to be read within the Brahminic political economy of capital. Dalit labour processes within Brahmanic capitalism have to be understood in relation to the pre-capitalistic Dalit labour process. Such an endeavour will help us to analyse the shifting contours of specific labour process. Dalit labourers from colonialism to that of neoliberal globalisation have a different trajectory altogether. A key aspect in the case of the sanitation women workers is the exploitative nature of work. Economic and caste-based conditions push Dalit women and men to this form of work. The cardinal question is if this form (sanitation work) of wage can be justified or not. Is there any mode of production through which Dalit women's labour question can be addressed? Dickenson described how women without paid jobs are not related to capitalist means of production. They produce commodities without use value (Dickenson, 1997, p. 131). Caste and labour and its extension to the neoliberal phase of capitalism ramify the various issues related to Dalit women sanitation workers. A large number of respondents said that, "We are forced to work even without wage, respect and dignity therefore is a distant dream." What are the

current conditions of the questions of labour across the globe? The issues of labour are linked to the ascendancy of neo-fascism in the context of the divided and fragile leftist political formations. It is further noted that the left has a conflicted approach on neoliberal globalization. However, it is against the dominance of finance against globalization. These political changes lead to the end of trade unions (Prabhat Patnaik & Utsa Patnaik, 2023). Henry Bernstein observed that classes of labour, gender and caste lead to the active and passive reserve army of labour (Bernstein, 2023, p. 61). The question related to division of labour can be seen as complicated in the case of Dalit women labourers. Caste and un/free labour in India expose the crude and direct forms of bondages and oppressions. Economy operates within the complex social order (Neetha, 2013).

### **The Unheard Voices**

Dalit articulations in different Indian states have their modes and ideological resonances. Some have tried to or have been engaging in internal social reform in the Hindu religion. During the interview, the women sanitation workers responded that the Arya Samaj movement impacted Hindu religion and their socialization. They further added that Mahatma Gandhi influenced their families, and they introduced themselves as Harijan. One of them said, “Gandhiji said that they (sanitation workers) are the children of God, Harijan, and therefore, they have to purify themselves; they should do the work of cleaning toilets.” A radical breakthrough by Babasaheb Ambedkar’s ideas and history of political practices brought changes in the lives of those who know his struggle to uplift Dalits via constitutional rights. Ambedkar’s engagements with Buddhism paved the way for the political awakening of some of these women. Thus, the quest for reform within Hinduism and the radical critique of Hinduism also reappear in the context of the idea of the public. The adjective, public, therefore, in the space of Dalits has to be reformulated according to the epistemological moorings of Dalits. In parallel cases, the “Public “as a category and practice becomes a space of contradictions. Most Dalit women sanitation workers mentioned how caste and their occupation impact their quotidian life. Some mentioned their existence as caught in the dangerous zone of caste and labour, adding that they cannot escape from this sort of vicious social formation. Domestic violence is a common phenomenon among the sanitation women workers’ homes; therefore, it needs to be seen as the response of the oppressed Dalit to the larger forms of caste-based humiliation in the public space. Hence, one can argue that internal patriarchy thus is created through the external caste-based patriarchy. As Gail Omvedt informs us of how social patriarchy turns out to be part of the power relations in the dominant-violent Indian society (Omvedt, 2000, p. 6).

The majority of women said that even if they wish to come out of unhealthy, caste-stigmatized work, they cannot exit the public spaces related to caste labour. They are branded as “garbage” since they are marginalized or ghettoized into a particular area. Most of them are conscious of the manual on caste-based residential



segregation of sanitation workers. They further said that the dominant space of the public thus looks at them as someone who carries the stigma and filth from generation to generations. Most respondents, irrespective of their religious orientations and ideological inclinations, articulated that the dominant society reproduces their caste bias in everyday life and looks at them from the perspective of highly toxic untouchability. It has to be annihilated in order to debunk the relations of caste, gender, and labour, conflictual realms that decide society and the public. Caste is analyzed as an ideological, social realm that divides the labourers and the labourers (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 47). Women are also conceptualized as the gateway to the caste system (Ambedkar, 2004). For instance, it operates through the Hindu religious-social order. Gender is also conceptualized as an abstract labour (Holter, 1984). Relations of caste, gender, and labour structure the social cum public space of the Dalit women labourers. Nevertheless, a position like that cannot ignore the fundamental intersections of caste and gender in India. In the context of Dalit women, the nature of education and economic-demographic complexities are unexplored (Neetha, 2013), and it raises pertinent questions of gender and lower caste-working class. Shubham Kumar and Priyanka Preet noted that 95 per cent to 98 per cent of 1.2 million manual scavengers are women. A gender-based approach is needed, as the caste-based approach. These women are pushed into abhorrent practices of dumping the placenta post-deliveries, clearing sewage, carrying filth in cane baskets, cleaning dry latrines, and so on. They face social exclusion and sexual harassment in their day-to-day work. They are forced to do menial work for meagre wages of Rs. 10/- to Rs. 20/-, with meals for cleaning dry latrines during festive occasions. Some are forced to work without any payment. Their children face discrimination in educational institutions (Kumar & Preet, 2020).

Moreover, while doing this research, some respondents emphasized the ways in which they are kept apart at their workplaces, which one can call 'public spaces' like universities and hostels. Many women working in the universities said, "These women, who teach in these universities hardly look at us or talk to us. We are not allowed to sit in the corridor or corner of any corridor or public spaces to eat food on the university campus by many female faculty members. If by mistake, any of us happens to sit in public spaces, especially when they are unwell, female faculty members used to shout at them." Other respondents mentioned that female students in hostels and universities do not allow them to touch drinking water. Some offer water (in old plastic bottles) in order to avoid bad fortune. This type of inhuman approach stems from the rituals and superstitions related to caste and Hindu religion. Some are conscious of the differences based on caste and gender among women. They mentioned the stark differences based on the social locations of lower and upper-caste women. Dalit feminists have critiqued Brahmanic authorship and intellectual subordination of the Dalit women. Sisterarchy grounded in epistemic hierarchy undermines the egalitarian claims of the hegemonic feminist movements in India (Patil, 2013). Dalit feminist existential and political predicaments related to gender and property must be addressed differently. There are hegemonic, Brahmanic constructions of Dalit women. Brahmanic feminist and women's/gender studies in India have ideological and epistemological limitations

in theorizing the peculiar social and political worlds of Dalit women (Patil, 2023). Globally, the geopolitics of hegemonic feminism thus is limited because it is informed by Brahmanic feminist accounts related to India. Dickenson discusses the neo-colonial trap in the essentialisation of third-world women (Dickenson, 1977, p. 122). Work inside and outside the home, therefore, requires critical readings. It acquires different implications in the case of the Dalit women sanitation workers.

Housework outside the home has to be differentiated (Dickenson, 1977, p. 122). Is it possible to differentiate work in the context of Dalit women in general and Dalit women sanitation workers in particular? Dalit women sanitation workers from the lower economic spectrum have different natures of work inside and outside their home. At the level of caste, sanitation women workers do not have to face caste discrimination within their homes and their more extensive caste networks. At the same time, the world outside is casteist in nature. They are alienated from domestic work, forced to do external sanitation work, and manual scavenging. A large of number of respondents pointed out the burden of carrying this occupation from their ancestors to contemporary times. Scholars have also discussed that the unnatural conditions of sexual division of labour have to be seen in relation to property and labour (Dickenson, 1977, p. 126). Dalit women's ownership of their labour is imposed and determined through caste, and they are deprived of all forms of social, cultural and political capital. Some sanitation workers said that those who got jobs at university are lucky due to their access to education. They further mentioned that a lack of education denies their survival and dignity, saying that they had to enter into these occupations at a very early stage of life due to poverty and the demise of their family members. They are forced to continue it even in their old age. Approximately eleven of them mentioned that their relatives continue to clean open drains, septic tanks or pits, sewer railway tracks, open defecation, etc. Remarks like, "Our women (Dalit women) mostly do this form of work" are heard. Like other respondents, they reiterated that the stigma of being a 'scavenger' constantly haunts them. They stated that some tried to come out of this "dirty work." However, people do not accept them, even their presence in their homes, or as domestic help or cook. An upper caste faculty member from the university remarked to another faculty member (who is from the community of manual scavengers) that, "You are from the caste of (manual scavengers), whatever you may achieve or bring any change in yourself, you will remain as lower caste". Talking about how she had to hear caste abuse from an upper caste university teacher, she was told by a particular university teacher and her senior and junior teachers/faculty members "not to come in front of them." Another Dalit lady-faculty member recollected that an upper caste lady faculty member/colleague told her that she is from the caste of manual scavengers. Contractual jobs, thus, do not provide any form of social security to these sanitation women workers. The social location of Dalit women sanitation workers is caught in the caste-determined property, gender, and labour.

A rigorous understanding of the Dalit labourer may unpack the mystified construction of the Dalit labourer. Indian feminism has a distinct take on the contradictions related to the property of women. Gender and land rights-related

research have not addressed the intricacies of caste, gender, and property (Agarwal, 2023). Those accounts could not deal with the relations of property and Dalit women. However, a distinct approach to studying the caste and labour relations in the context of Dalits has to be taken, especially to reflect on Dalit women sanitation workers. The means and modes of production in the case of Dalits have to be mapped in its entirety. Sanitation women workers' question of work and labour is distinct in nature. They have to survive by selling their caste-based, stigmatized labour. The real questions that must be raised are who forced them into this occupation. Why are they ambivalent about the entire mechanism of caste, work, and labour? Anti-caste cum labour movements' constant struggles to eradicate obnoxious forms of labour have to be remembered in the context. Those movements and assertions emphasized the nature of the social in the context of the mind and the body. There were attempts to liberate them from the psychological and social burdens associated with stigmatised forms of labour. Dalit movements critique the rest of the non-Dalit, upper caste dominated/Brahmanical ideology-driven political organizations in their approach to decent work and struggle against the caste of labour.

While analyzing women's social space, it is necessary to revisit the debates on structure and agency. Social mobility in a patriarchal society needs to be measured through the intersections of race, caste, and ethnicity. Structure and agency can be stigmatized due to diverse social locations and the geopolitics of hegemonic-feminist knowledge. Eurocentric and partial dominant feminist understandings must be differentiated based on their epistemic undercurrents. In other words, it suffers from certain epistemological limitations in engaging with non-European feminist epistemological investigations. Thus, the question of the public and its conflict with various social spaces leads to big questions related to social complexities within the nation-state. The gendered deployment of the public, therefore, has to imbibe politics of citizenship and belonging (Phadke, 2012). The structure and work in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers are debilitating their self-dignity and social mobility. Brahmanic feminist accounts that essentialized the agency of the Dalit women have to be challenged by unfolding the nuances of caste, gender, and labour.

### **Radical Transformation through Law?**

It is observed that, "Even after 73 years of independence, manual scavenging is a blot on our collective conscience that refuses to disappear, despite the landmark legislation in the form of Prohibition of Employment as manual scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013...and a Supreme Court judgment in the *Safai Karamchari Andolan and Ors V Union of India and Orscase (2011)*" (Kumar & Preet, 2020). Why does manual scavenging persist even after the ban? Questions of law in the case of manual scavengers raise concerns related to destigmatize labour and questions of livelihood. What is the role of National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE)? As a technology, it has been able to create the impression that it is can lessen the stigma related to manual scavenging. Is there any kind of organization? Do

the left-based political organisations address the question of manual scavengers? If so, what are their ideological prerogatives? Are they informalized and contractual workers or not? The existence of manual scavengers reminds us of the perpetual link of labour to caste. Activists and workers link this form of work as a form of slavery. Therefore, whether our modern legal system through its reforms can annihilate the stigma remains a quandary. It is noted that, “On September 6, 2013, the Indian Parliament passed The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (2013 Act), committing itself yet again to ending manual scavenging. Seven months later, on March 27, 2014, the Indian Supreme Court held that India’s constitution requires state intervention to end manual scavenging and “rehabilitate” all people engaged in the practice. This meant not only ending the practice but also ending the abuses faced by communities engaged in manual scavenging.” (HRW, 2014). Educated Dalit youth are forced to return to caste-based occupations. Upper castes exert physical violence over those Dalits who resist various forms of caste-based labour. It is observed that “India’s Constitution bans the practice of untouchability, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, prohibits compelling anyone to practice manual scavenging. Aimed specifically at ending manual scavenging, the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 (1993 Act), declared the employment of manual scavengers and construction of dry toilets to be punishable with fines and imprisonment. Superseding the 1993 Act, the 2013 Act goes beyond prohibitions on dry latrines, and outlaws all manual excrement cleaning of insanitary latrines, open drains, or pits. And, importantly, it recognizes a constitutional obligation to correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by manual scavenging communities by providing alternate livelihoods and other assistance” (HRW, 2014).

However, the shift from social movements to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the legal discourse is a distinct development. The litigation around manual scavenging, as explored by Alena Kahle and Sagar Kumbhare, needs to be understood in the context of the various issues faced by Dalit NGOs. Dalit actors find themselves caught between caste rules and modern laws related to sanitation work and manual scavenging. The social control and social change in the trajectory of Dalit NGOs reflect in the potentials and limits related to the law. The political and legal opportunities for Dalit actors create challenging questions for caste-based bureaucracy. These institutional structures do not recognize the gravity of the work done by Dalit women. Instead of the political institutions and modern laws, the ideological realm of the hegemonic caste-ruling classes endorses caste-driven polluted work. The opportunity structure of the Dalit NGO is assessed through its right to information requests and manual identification of the court cases through a database. The path towards the elimination of heinous caste-driven work for Dalits is arduous in nature (Kahle & Sagar, 2023, pp. 77–96).

The persistence of manual scavenging, which is a form of sanitation work, despite legal interventions, has to be viewed as a banality of everyday crime. The complicity of larger society in legitimizing forced labour leads to a certain form of social abuse. This form of majoritarian consensus related to sanitation work arises from the continuous,

conscious imposition of caste-based occupations. There is an inherent violence in those forms of social exclusion. Drawing on Ambedkar's perspective, one becomes a sanitation worker or scavenger not because of their work, but because of their caste and birth. The violence legitimised through caste-based occupation is analysed as genocidal in nature. The intention that constructs the sanitation work or crime is caste. It designates birth and caste as central to the practice of crime/sanitation worker or manual scavenger. The citizenry that permits the reproduction of such work results in the crime of indifference. The detached attitude of the larger society thus legitimizes manual scavenging (Shankar & Kanthi, 2021).

Hence, the issues of sanitation worker or manual scavengers are completely deprived of their lack of access and entitlements. Their economic rights are affected due to their caste-driven nature of work. It impacts their civil, cultural, and political rights. It further strengthens their living mode of exclusion. In other words, they are excluded from political participation. It affects their social and economic opportunities. Manual scavengers thus are wholly sidelined from the economic, political and social terrain (Singh & Ziyauddin, 2009, pp. 521–523). Therefore, most Dalit women sanitation workers are sceptical towards the laws and debates related to rights. Some admitted their ignorance about the laws. These gaps in understanding laws and rights question the Dalit development in northern India. For example, illiteracy and not having basic facilities like proper food, shelter, and water to live a decent life creates fundamental questions regarding ongoing development. It is asserted that, "The non-condition-based complete prohibition approach based in recognition of human dignity has to be invoked in addition to 'complete rehabilitation and complete mechanization of sewage work'" (Wankhede, 2021). The valorisation of "safe sanitation" work has to be critiqued to altogether abolish manual scavenging (Wankhede & Alena, 2023). For instance, almost all respondents said that, "Indian society is like a zamindar to manual scavengers." So, their work is part of a custom based on the caste system. They also mentioned that a hooligan-like society is hardly afraid of laws. The law is constantly violated in the case of lower castes. They explained that this kind of work is also like a caste atrocity in their lives. Therefore, the gap between the existing legal developments and the continuum of caste-labour-occupation is being questioned by Dalit women sanitation workers. They questioned the superficial grounds of the shifts from customs to modern laws. According to them, nothing has changed through laws and legal interventions. Thus, one must accept that the life of sanitation women workers and the scavenging community has not changed so far.

## **Apostles of Liberation through Technology and Future?**

Irrespective of the advent of a "robot manual scavenger"/first manhole cleaning robot, "Bandicoot" in Kerala and sewer-jetting machines in Andhra Pradesh (Preet & Chaturvedi, 2019), why does manual scavenging remain in other states in India? Time-related to the labour of Dalit women workers may change according to the technological development. Does it bring any radical change in their self-dignity and identity? The replacement of Dalit labourers by machines may result in the annihilation

of caste, which is also a matter of contention. However, has labour brought any radical change, as Marx envisaged? The transformative nature of labour in the writings of Marx (Dickenson, 1997, p. 128) is antithetical to the Indian questions of caste, gender, and labour. The question of technology and the changing nature of untouchability pose severe challenges before the policy regime on labour. It is analysed that “Within the government program itself, there is no proposal to invest in mechanized cleaning via collection tanks. The lack of investment acts directly on the caste system, as it requires employing Dalit labour in manual cleaning. With this, the caste system remains a contemporary structure, based on an organization founded on the relationship between purity and impurity, with the violent line of untouchability that sustains it” (Alves, 2022). Caste itself continuously challenges the ideas of science and rationality in India. Technology is also detested by the upper castes for its effective ways of questioning social inequalities. Dominant societal and political approaches towards technology may also reveal the nature of the public debates around manual scavenging. Let us ponder upon the future of women who are part of sanitation work. Can the oppression of Dalit women sanitation workers be interpreted as structural injustice? Macro-level transformation is essential to eradicate structural injustice (Wolff, 2024). It can be observed that the societal agents who resist change are maintaining their dominance. (Haslanger, 2024). Structural inequalities are aggravated through vulnerabilities such as precarity and fragility. These vulnerabilities are linked to “the social” (Schiff, 2024). Structural inequalities can be explored beyond the binary oppositions of agency and structure. Most theorists travel this conceptual route. Is it possible to divulge and divert from that conceptual path? How far can such debates be developed? Is decolonial thinking on the hegemonic constructs of gender and caste helpful or not? There is a tendency to romanticize the past. Internal colonial caste-based conditions of Dalits (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 80) foreground different critiques on colonial and neo-colonial developments. The romanticizing of the past also leads to celebrating its oppressive continuum. Global transformation of the precariat in the oppressing, neo-liberal economic era coexists with the economic crimes of the global rich. Rights and governance have been reduced to certain forms of algocracy (Aneesh, 2006). Thus, “the features of exploitation today can only be understood by placing social reproduction and its brutal colonization by capital at the centre of value generation. If we do not embrace an inclusive theory of value, we cannot theorize capitalism and its meaning for millions of workers.” (Mezzadri, 2023, p. 69). The legal discourse will be able to engage with the questions of the “accepted customary rights” to that of crime in the current social order (Koonan, 2021) in a radical fashion. A crucial aspect is whether Dalit women sanitation workers can survive the new socio-economic realities and politicize the public.

## **End of Conscience?**

Can a society repent for its numerous caste-driven crimes and discrimination? This premise is pivotal to the premises of Dalit women sanitation workers. As one of respondents, Sita asked “Is this society not ashamed of pushing only certain sections

of that society into the degraded work?" This question has to be analyzed beyond the cynicism that taints the assertions of Dalits. Can such caste-male-based order be annihilated by modern society or not? The diverse shades of the narratives of lower caste women sanitation workers invoke the genuine spirit of democracy. It has the potential to circumvent the aspirations for democracy within the limits of crony capitalism. Dalit women, from their lessons from nauseating, sanitation/manual scavenging show the shallow structure and form of depoliticized political systems. It also probes the potentials and possibilities of social movements and civil societal formulations. Debates on the repression of various capital(s) in the context of the development of Dalit women sanitation workers also debunk the geopolitics of ideas related to caste-gender bind, and hegemonic developmental discourses. The ways to solve the caste-based work through legal developments coexist with the persistence of the policy regime's take on technology in the field of sanitation and manual scavenging workers. These policy dilemmas and political inertia on the issues of caste-based work, for Dalit women sanitation workers, unveil the pitfalls of the debates on reason, science, and technology. They (women workers) position it as a quandary linked to a polarized, social order and consequential division of labour. Death is also analyzed as an offer from an inhuman caste-inflicted societal space. Health issues of Dalit women labourers lead us to rethink debates around caste, gender, and public health. These suppressed voices also question the credentials of the feminist and women's movements. They pose a significant question around the vestiges of caste, gender, and sanitation / manual scavenging irrespective of the egalitarian claims of Brahminic women's and feminist movements in India. These sanitation women workers are able to challenge homogenous political constructions around class by deciphering the intersections of caste, gender, and occupation. It has the potential to challenge debates on Marxian perspectives and praxis around class, caste, and labour. The aforementioned social and political reflections of Dalit women re-configure the idea of the public through its rigorous interventions.

## Conclusion

Purity, pollution and caste have become recurrent practices in the changing ideological forms of caste. The plight of sanitation women workers remains the same even after 77 years of India's independence. Though in 1944, Babasaheb Ambedkar established the union of sanitation workers and exhorted sanitation workers to give up traditional caste-driven occupations (Lal, 2018, pp. 79–81), still the Dalit community have a long way to go and constantly struggles against the odds. Ambedkar's main aim was to end untouchability and annihilate the caste system. Numerous Dalit civil society organizations are tirelessly working to provide a respectful and dignified life to the sanitation workers. However, Dalit feminists in particular and the Dalit community in general should be vigilant towards the forthcoming challenges for the most deprived and marginalized community of sanitation workers. Dalit feminists have to take part in the continuous struggle against the changing forms of ideology of caste, gender

and work. They need to forge solidarity with other Dalit organizations and leaders in order to ensure the social and upward mobility of the Dalit women sanitation workers. Educated women from the community of sanitation workers have to strengthen their ideological positions and praxis through Ambedkar's perspectives and Buddhism. It may lead them to reorient their social and political struggles.

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