

The Policy Paradox: Persistent Manual Scavenging Despite Reform Efforts

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Abstract

Manual scavenging remains a persistent issue in India despite the state claiming zero instances of the practice in recent years. This degrading occupation, deeply entrenched in the caste system, is driven by societal segregation and caste-based discrimination, affecting marginalised communities, particularly Dalits. The article analyses legislative frameworks and the key schemes launched in the past two decades, including the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE). The content analysis method is used to examine the various laws, schemes, and policies enacted to eradicate manual scavenging. The analysis reveals policy gaps, including lack of enforcement, inadequate financial support, lack of political will, and failure to dismantle caste-based discrimination. The article emphasises the need for a holistic approach to end manual scavenging, emphasising that effective reform requires policy promises and actionable, systemic change. By understanding these intersecting problems, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on policy revision and social equity.

Keywords

Policy, Manual Scavenging, Dalits, Caste System, Social Equity

Introduction

In the heart of modern India, a country that takes pride in rapid technological and economic progress, lies a contradiction. Despite projecting itself as a thriving ‘Vishv Guru’ (global leader, global power), India continues to be marred by dehumanising practices, especially the persistence of manual scavenging, which starkly contradicts

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its developmental narrative. The country's rise presents a troubling paradox: the nation achieving new heights in technological fields such as artificial intelligence, space exploration, and digital infrastructure, while workers continue to lose their lives while cleaning sewers. At the time of writing this article, more than 43 manual scavengers have died from February 2024 to July 2024, and more than 339 deaths have been reported between 2018 and 2023—figures likely underreported due to deliberate state¹ suppression of data (Telegraph, 2024; Staff, 2023).

After 77 years of independence, the persistence of manual scavenging—where workers are forced to clean human excreta from dry latrines or enter toxic sewers despite the ban, and work without protective gear—stands in stark contrast to constitutional ideals of equality, dignity, and justice. This occupation remains deeply embedded in the Indian caste system, with 95 per cent of scavengers being from Dalit communities, and among them, 99 per cent are Dalit women (Permutt, 2012). Over thirty years have passed since the enactment of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, followed by the more comprehensive Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013 (PEMSR). Yet, the practice persists, exposing workers not only to life-threatening conditions but also to a denial of their dignity. The state's apathy is further evident in its acknowledgement of the magnitude of the issue, as evidenced by the denial of any recent deaths and the exclusion of discussion on manual scavengers in Budget 2024, reflecting a lack of political commitment to addressing this ongoing crisis (Wire, 2024).

This paradox becomes even more glaring in light of the coexistence of policy interventions aimed at eradicating this practice. Despite the legal and policy intervention introduced, via the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) the ground reality remains grim as over 1.2 million people are engaged in manual scavenging and more than 5 million Safai *karamchari* (sanitation workers) come in direct/ indirect of human excreta (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021, p. 68). With around 26 lakh dry latrines still requiring manual scavenging, despite the SBA's assertion of toilet constructions (Paul, 2025). Furthermore, Wilson claims that state agencies conceal or underreport these figures to avoid accountability (Staff, 2023).

Despite the implementation of various legal and policy frameworks aimed at eradicating manual scavenging, incidents continue to happen every day. This article will explore the policy paradox of why manual scavenging remains a reality in modern India despite these measures. It critically examines the key state interventions—Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE). While some policies have been introduced with enthusiasm,

¹Article 12 of the constitution of India defines the state, which includes the government and parliament of India, the government and the legislature of each of the states, and all local or other authorities within the territory of India or under the control of the government of India.

they have failed to achieve their objectives. Inaccuracies in data on manual scavengers remain a contentious issue, with activists and civil society organisations criticising the state for hiding accurate information. Addressing these data discrepancies is vital, as policy-making depends on accurate data. The article also highlights the issue of the state manipulating, hiding, and suppressing information. Lastly, it explores the challenges policies face in resolving this paradox.

Manual Scavenging: Meaning and Context

By definition, “manual scavenging is the removal of excreta (night soil) manually from dry toilets, i.e., the toilets without a modern flush system.” (Singh, 2009). Section 2(j) of the 1993 Act defines manual scavengers as “a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta, and the expression manual scavenging shall be construed accordingly.”² The scope of this definition was widened under the new act; Section 2(1)(g) of the PEMSR Act 2013 defines “Manual Scavenger as a person engaged or employed by an individual, local authority, or a public or private agency for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine, open drain, or pit into which the excreta from insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or other spaces as notified by the Central or State Government, before the excreta fully decomposes in a manner prescribed, and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be understood accordingly.”³ These definitions show a progressive expansion of the understanding of manual scavenging from a narrow focus on carrying human excreta to a broader recognition of its complex nature. Nevertheless, the continued existence of loopholes and weak enforcement emphasises the need for a more thorough examination of the legal and policy effectiveness in eliminating this dehumanising practice.

The context of manual scavenging cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of India’s caste system, which is rooted in the varna system. The caste system is a strict and hierarchical social framework that has long been a defining characteristic of Indian society. The caste system not only determines social status but also assigns specific occupational roles, consigning particular communities—primarily Dalits, once referred to as “Untouchables”—to the most degrading and perilous forms of labour. The caste system allocates and fixes occupations, thereby placing constraints on an individual’s ability to move across castes for occupational opportunities, especially for Dalits, where their status rests upon the notion of purity and pollution. Manual scavenging is an inherited occupation determined based on caste, where Dalits are forced into such menial, inhuman occupations. Ambedkar (1979) argued that laws forcing manual scavengers into perpetual subordination highlighted the brutality of the Hindu social hierarchy, where the Hindu society is like

²See Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, Section 2(j)

³See the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013, Section 2(1)(g)

a tower which has several storeys without a ladder or an entrance; thus, caste is not just a division of labourers, but a division of labourers (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021).

Scholars like Srinivas and Singh suggested that modernisation and urbanisation would erode the traditional structures based on ascribed status, leading society to determine individuals' life chances based on achieved status (Srinivas, 1966; Yogendra Singh, 1973). This shift was expected to help people from lower castes escape traditional occupations, with industrialisation aiding in shedding the stigmatised identities linked to low caste structures. However, despite significant growth, modernisation, and urbanisation in various sectors, caste systems continue to endure in modern India. As a result, Dalits are still engaged in traditional occupations such as leatherwork, dealing with animal carcasses, and manual scavenging. Even when they attempt to move away from these caste-based occupations, they often face social and physical abuse from dominant caste groups (Singh, 2014). This discriminatory treatment of Dalits leads to violations of fundamental human rights, including the rights to education, housing, healthcare, work, and the freedom to choose one's occupation (Newman & Thorat, 2007).

Manual scavenging remains one of the most humiliating and degrading forms of sanitation, predominantly carried out by Dalit groups, despite government claims of completely eradicating the practice. Although various technologies and alternatives are available, manual scavenging persists as a tradition, often regarded as a hereditary profession that involves forced labour rather than merely a job. Legislative measures implemented in 1993 and 2013 aimed to eliminate manual scavenging; yet, in 2018 alone, over 20,000 workers were still identified as manual scavengers (Raghavendra & Kumar, 2022, p. 5). The persistence of manual scavenging in the twenty-first century highlights not only the limitations of existing legal frameworks and policy measures but also the deeply ingrained caste mentality in Indian society. It prompts a revaluation of current strategies to address these entrenched social practices.

Legislative Efforts: Manual Scavenging Policies-Bold Action or Broken Promises?

The British introduced several legislative acts, including the Municipalities Act of 1891, the Punjab Municipalities Act of 1911, and the United Provinces Municipalities Act of 1916, which outlined the statutory duties of scavengers (Mandal, 2008). As a result, the practice of manual scavenging became institutionalised during colonial rule, particularly with the establishment of public toilets in municipalities. Dalits were employed to clean human excreta. In the post-independence era, the discourse surrounding manual scavenging in India was greatly influenced by the Constitution of India.

The framers of the Indian Constitution collectively and determinedly recognised the vital need for legislation addressing the issue of untouchability. The Indian Constitution includes several specific clauses that aim to protect the rights of Dalits across the country. Some of these provisions can be found in Articles 14 (ensuring

equal protection under the law), Article 16(2) (preventing discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence, or any of them), Article 19(1)(a) (guaranteeing the right to freedom of speech and expression), Article 21 (protection of life and personal liberty), Article 23 (prohibition of trafficking in human beings and forced labour), Article 41 (assuring the right to work, education, and public assistance in certain situations such as unemployment, old age, sickness, and disability), and so on. In addition to constitutional provisions, the government initiated various policies and schemes and established multiple committees to address issues related to sanitation and manual scavenging.

The first five-year plan mentioned sanitation and public health, but no concrete interventions were undertaken until 1981 (Shekhar, 2023, p. 134). The national census of 1981 reported that rural sanitation in the country was only one per cent (Kumar, 2022, p. 85). As a result, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) was launched. Although sanitation facilities increased slightly, the policy failed to meet the demand. Kanoon (2021) argues that the efforts after independence were primarily concerned with the working and living conditions of manual scavengers rather than eliminating the practice. In 1999, Total Sanitation Coverage (TSC) was introduced as a reformulation of an existing policy, aiming to be more community-led and demand-driven. However, TSC also struggled to keep pace with the growing demand. Recognising the shortcomings of TSC, the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan was launched in 2013. This programme was renamed and relaunched as Swachh Bharat Mission Abhiyan (SBA) after the change in government in 2014. The government also launched the NAMASTE scheme in 2022, replacing it with SRMS.

The government has established committees such as the Barve Committee (1952), Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1955), Malkani Committee (1966), and Pandya Committee (1969) to address the issue of manual scavenging and provide recommendations for ending the practice. These committees have highlighted the plight of manual scavengers in India. They have found that it has become customary for Dalits, particularly those from the Valmiki and Bhangi communities, to inherit this work as part of their tradition. The working conditions of manual scavengers are dehumanising and lack human dignity, which goes against constitutional values and morality. However, the major flaw in the committees was that they focused on the scavengers working in the local bodies, while the private scavengers were ignored and left to function under customary rules and practices (Kanoon, 2021). The main recommendations of the committees emphasise the need for the Central Government to enact comprehensive legislation, such as the 1993 Act and the PEMSAR Act 2013, to effectively regulate the working, service, and living conditions of these workers. These efforts, along with other policy measures aimed at eliminating manual scavenging, have been ongoing for many years; however, their effectiveness remains uncertain. Are these policy actions genuine steps towards eradicating this inhumane practice, or are they unfulfilled promises that fail to address the root causes?

Legislative efforts have been ongoing since independence, starting with the enactment of the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955, which aimed to abolish

untouchability and social disabilities faced by the SC community. However, these acts have achieved limited success, as they have not completely eradicated the practice of untouchability. To address this issue, new legislation was introduced in the form of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, to provide greater protection and enforce their fundamental rights.

The term “manual scavenging” is not explicitly mentioned in the statute, despite the act’s objective to prevent atrocities against the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Another flaw of this law is that it excludes workers employed primarily in government institutions, such as municipal corporations, as well as private workers involved in manual scavenging. The limitations of the definition arise from the link between manual scavenging and the evidentiary requirement of “on the grounds of untouchability.” Even if an individual is compelled to engage in scavenging, it is not considered within the scope of the act unless the coercion is based on the enforcement of untouchability. This demonstrates a narrow perspective from the state, failing to recognise the violence inherent in manual scavenging. The practice has been viewed merely as labour rather than as a manifestation of caste-based violence perpetrated by the state (Kanoon, 2021, p. 7). Consequently, this legislation and the associated committees have been ineffective in eliminating the practice.

The first significant legislative effort primarily addressing manual scavenging was the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, which aimed to prohibit the employment of manual scavengers and the construction of dry latrines. However, the act faces criticism from civil societies for its poor implementation and lack of effectiveness. A major flaw of this act was its narrow scope; it only targeted dry latrines and did not cover the other forms of manual scavenging, such as sewer workers and septic tank cleaners. Furthermore, this act failed to provide any comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the scavenger workers to leave this inhuman practice. The legislation failed to achieve its desired objective primarily due to poor enforcement and a lack of strict implementation at the local level. The lack of political will to enforce this law also contributed to its lack of enforcement. Consequently, this act fell short of its goal, and manual scavenging persists despite its official prohibition.

The enforcement of the law faced challenges due to inadequate implementation and the lack of strict regulations at the local level. The judiciary, including the High Courts and the Supreme Court of India, consistently raised concerns about the issue of manual scavengers on numerous occasions. The 1993 Act was enacted in 1993 and received Presidential approval in 1997. Initially, only five state governments supported the law, with other states showing little interest until 2005. Some state governments were reluctant even after the Supreme Court’s direction to enforce the law. For example, Delhi officially recognised the 1993 Act in 2010, following orders from the Supreme Court of India to all states. Even after the Supreme Court’s directives, several states remained hesitant. The privileged caste culture of the political executive may have contributed to the lack of political will to enforce the act, resulting in its failure to achieve its objectives. In 2012, the Parliamentary Standing Committee acknowledged

these shortcomings. Pressure from civil society, especially a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) from SKA in the Supreme Court, led to a judicial declaration recognising the violation of the fundamental rights of manual scavengers.

Because of the limited scope of the 1993 Act, the government introduced the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (PEMSR Act) to address the shortcomings of previous laws. The act aimed to amend the 1993 Act by broadening the definition of manual scavenging outlined in the legislation, with a commitment to eliminate dry latrines, rehabilitate manual scavengers, and impose stricter penalties, including imprisonment and fines for violations (Wankhede, 2021, p. 5). However, despite reports of manual scavenging cases—where a sanitation worker dies every five days while entering a manhole—the state and its citizens strangely choose to ignore the issue, resulting in little accountability for those involved, who are neither fined nor imprisoned (Dhawan, 2021).

The major flaw of this act lies in its definition of “manual scavenger” as outlined under section 2(g), as the definition discussed above. The section explicitly excludes workers who clean excreta using protective gear. This provision prohibits the employment of manual scavengers without protection but fails to recognise or regulate the practice when these gears are utilised. Wankhede (2021) argues that the 2013 Act lacks the tools to achieve its central objective, which is the prohibition of employment as manual scavengers, and the rehabilitation of manual scavengers and their families, as the act prohibits hazardous cleaning and the employment of manual scavenging only when protective gear is not provided. The provision creates a paradox where, on one hand, the legislation prohibits manual scavenging, but on the other, it allows it to continue with the use of protective gear and equipment. Thus, the state’s intention is not to eradicate the practice by fully prohibiting it but to perpetuate manual scavenging by providing safety mechanisms to ensure the practice continues (Wankhede, 2021, p. 45).

The 2013 Act lists 44 types of protective gear that must be provided to manual scavenging workers; however, it does not specify what constitutes adequate gear. As a result, workers are often given the standard gear or no gear at all, while employers claim to comply with the law. Kumar (2025) found that sewage workers in Delhi are rarely provided with any protective gear; the maximum they receive are gloves that are often too large to be useful during cleaning, or ‘khpacha’ (a wooden stick used to clear sewer clogs) and a bucket. Nor are they given adequate training. Ingole (2016) also observed a similar situation in Pune, where sewage workers receive neither training nor proper protective equipment.

This provides the hint as to why hundreds of sanitation workers die every year working in sewage (Prasad & Ray, 2019). Numerous reports have documented workers’ deaths during sewer and septic tank cleaning, and the state or contractors often use this loophole to avoid responsibility in accidents. The families of the deceased or injured workers are left without assistance or compensation. The act was also criticised for insufficient funding for rehabilitation, and the lack of a mechanism to entirely ban manual scavenging in sewers or septic tanks.

Over the past twenty years, three major government policies have been introduced to eliminate manual scavenging. The government launched these initiatives as the foundation of efforts aimed at completely eradicating this inhumane practice. Therefore, it is vital to analyse these initiatives to understand the paradox of the policies that allow this practice to persist despite reform efforts.

SRMS: A Missed Opportunity?

The Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) was launched to provide alternative livelihoods for manual scavengers, with the aim of eradicating this inhumane practice and offering rehabilitation to those involved. However, the scheme has faced criticism regarding its structure, execution, and effectiveness in achieving its objectives. One of the main flaws of this policy is that it focuses solely on providing alternative employment without addressing the underlying systemic issues that lead to the need for such employment. Without addressing these fundamental aspects, the scheme fails to offer a sustainable solution for completely eradicating the practice of manual scavenging.

Year	Budget Estimates (In Crores)	Revised Estimates (In Crores)
2013-14	570	70
2014-15	448	50
2015-16	470.19	10
2016-17	10	1
2017-18	5	5
2018-19	20	NA

Source: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Annual Report, 2020–21

Additionally, the implementation of the policy has been hindered by red tape, corruption, and a lack of coordination between the involved agencies. There have been numerous complaints about inadequate investigations into the scheme, as well as delays in the disbursement of funds. The process for identifying beneficiaries was inconsistent and flawed, resulting in many eligible individuals being excluded from the scheme. Furthermore, there was a lack of awareness among beneficiaries regarding the available support, which undermined the credibility and effectiveness of the policy.

One of the main reasons for the scheme's limitations, apart from the lack of political will, is the insufficient funds utilised by the state agencies, leading to poor expenditure and a lack of urgency towards the vital issue of rehabilitation. Wilson criticised the schemes for the state's failure to provide adequate funding and for not addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by scavengers, where he argued that essential elements such as education, healthcare, and socio-psychological support were neglected despite a significant number of workers suffering from health problems caused by prolonged exposure to harsh working conditions. (Wilson & Singh, 2016)

Moreover, there is no substantial effort to socially rehabilitate manual scavengers, leaving them marginalised even after they exit the occupation. The overall impact of the scheme was limited, as a significant number of manual scavengers are compelled to continue this degrading work due to a lack of viable alternatives. The top-down approach of the policy fails to recognise the ground realities of the diverse socio-economic contexts of scavengers. Thus, while the steps were aimed at progressing in the right direction, they represented a missed opportunity to address the multiple issues faced by manual scavengers in India.

‘Swachhta’ in Swachh Bharat Abhiyan

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, launched in 2014, aimed to eliminate open defecation and improve sanitation facilities nationwide. While the initiative to build toilets in both rural and urban areas was commendable, it overlooked the plight of sanitation workers who are forced to manually clean human waste due to inadequate waste disposal systems and a lack of proper sewer networks. The absence of proper infrastructure for safe disposal of faecal matter means that manual scavenging remains a necessary, albeit illegal, activity in many parts of the country. The main flaw of the scheme lies in its approach and effectiveness in addressing the issue of manual scavengers. The policy appears disconnected from India’s social context and adopts an objectified and detached stance, focusing solely on “cleaning India” (Shekhar, 2023, p. 139).

The implementation strategy of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has faced criticism. According to reports, the program’s achievements are sometimes exaggerated, and many areas still lack adequate sanitation facilities. There have been claims of displaying falsified data; the websites of SBM-Urban and SBM-Gramin have shown around 30 per cent of fabricated information, such as claims of tile constructions that do not actually exist (Akhilesh & Gudavarthy, 2022). Even the beneficiaries often have no knowledge of the records under which their names and houses are recorded as recipients of SBA. Besides these fabrications, data concerning open defecation have been criticised for being exaggerated or fake, as many districts declared open defecation-free continue to engage in the practice. The programme has also been criticised for its top-down approach, which overlooks local needs and cultural contexts.

The main issue with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is that it primarily focuses on building toilets without sufficient infrastructure for sewage and water disposal. As a result, the newly built toilets have created many septic tanks that require manual scavengers to clean. SBA lacks the capacity to foster attitudinal change and raise awareness among rural populations, as villages still prefer open defecation and have even started using these toilets as storage rooms (Katiyar, 2022). It does not address the needs of sanitation workers, as access to water in these toilets remains a concern. Most of the constructed toilets lack proper sewage connections and water facilities, resulting in the manual cleaning of human waste. The technologies used for constructing toilets under SBM will eventually need manual cleaning of pits and sludge. Even septic tanks, primarily built in urban areas, require regular cleaning, which is performed by manual scavengers.

The emphasis on constructing toilets without providing water supply or waste disposal infrastructure has resulted in underutilisation or abandonment of facilities. The focus on figures often overshadows the need for behavioural change. The assumption that building toilets alone would resolve sanitation issues ignores the importance of education and community engagement. Roy (2017) criticised the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, stating that it is more of a superficial effort used for political propaganda rather than a genuine attempt to address sanitation problems. Roy argues that the campaign's flashy launches often conceal the harsh realities on the ground, where many newly built toilets are unusable due to factors such as a lack of water supply and poor construction quality. Additionally, she highlights that the campaign tends to blame unsanitary practices on impoverished communities without addressing deeper issues like poverty and lack of education. Similarly, Wilson notes that the notion of involving everyone in the mission to clean India is a superficial concept. It focused more on events, celebrity endorsements, and romanticising the broom rather than addressing the significant issue of how sanitation is truly handled in India's urban areas and vast rural communities (Chishti, 2024).

Gatade (2015) criticised the government's flagship programme for disconnecting caste from sanitation. He argues that Hindu ideas of purity and pollution continue to assign manual scavenging, sewer cleaning, and unclogging manholes to certain castes. Additionally, he points out that the availability of cheap Dalit labour has contributed to the neglect of modern sewage systems and sanitation technologies. Teltumbde (2014) describes Indian culture as a caste-based system, where sanitation duties are assigned to specific castes. This perpetuates the stigma that labourers engaged in sanitation are unclean and impure. Therefore, India will not become truly 'Swachh' unless the caste-based ethos is eliminated.

NAMASTE: Innovative Fix or Fundamental Flaw?

The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme, launched in 2022 by the Government of India, aims to eliminate manual scavenging by promoting mechanised cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and ensuring the rehabilitation and safety of sanitation workers. The scheme was introduced as a replacement for the existing scheme, the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS). The scheme emphasises mechanisation, the use of protective gear, and safe working conditions to prevent health hazards associated with manual cleaning. It also includes skill development, financial inclusion, and alternative livelihood programmes for sanitation workers to help them transition to safer and more dignified employment. Despite its well-meaning objectives, the NAMASTE scheme has faced criticism for multiple reasons.

The schemes present a stark paradox: it confidently claims to be the mechanism and safety for workers on one hand, and scavengers continue to die while cleaning the sewers, revealing the grim reality which persists, underscoring the significant gap between the scheme's objectives and its impact on the ground. There is also a

lack of strong monitoring mechanisms to assess the scheme's implementation and effectiveness. As a result, the absence of accountability leads to neglect, overlooked actions, corruption, and insufficient efforts to eliminate the practice. Most sanitation workers are unaware of their entitlements under state schemes and laws designed to protect their safety and dignity. This lack of awareness weakens pressure on authorities to respect their rights to dignified work. A fundamental flaw of this scheme is that it does not address the deep-seated caste-based discrimination that underpins manual scavenging.

Another issue is that the state views these problems as infrastructural and often fails to recognise them as social issues, such as caste, which underpins this occupation. As a result, the schemes lack adjustments needed to effectively challenge the social and economic norms that sustain these discriminatory practices. Additionally, the schemes face financial constraints because the allocated funds are insufficient to meet the programme's needs. The irony is that even the small budget allocated was significantly decreased; for example, in the 2023-24 budget, NAMASTE was allotted Rs 97.41 crore, but this was further cut to Rs 30.06 crore in the Revised Estimates (Wire, 2024). The scheme's coverage is limited to urban areas, perpetuating the marginalisation of sewage workers. The lack of direct cash transfers, unlike previous programs such as SRMS, further weakens their capacity to offer significant economic relief, leaving persistent discriminatory practices unaddressed and the workers' struggles unresolved.

Data Disguised: Tactics of Manipulation, Hiding, and Information Suppression

The data on manual scavengers in the country is discrepant, with independent organisations like SKA and many activists accusing the government of manipulating, hiding, and suppressing information related to manual scavenging. Even the government data provided by different agencies is contradictory in nature, as some agencies report different data on manual scavengers. Both central and state governmental bodies have frequently been accused of engaging in practices that obscure the true scale of manual scavenging, effectively disregarding the experiences of the marginalised communities involved.

The government agencies are accused of manipulating, concealing, and suppressing data to hide the actual number of manual scavengers in India. Various organisations and activists have accused the state of reflecting the cultural ideology of the dominant ruling class and of lacking the political will to address the issue seriously. Wilson claims that government agencies intentionally underreport the actual number of labourers involved in this inhumane practice. He criticises the state agencies for using a narrow interpretation of the act to define manual scavengers and other criteria that exclude many people who should be included in the category of manual scavenging.

In addition to data manipulation, state agencies are also accused of concealing information and suppressing data related to manual scavenging records. There has been an incident where the death of manual scavengers is suppressed, and the records

of the number of manual scavengers are also concealed. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in the policies of manual scavenging and deliberate concealment of information about the effectiveness of schemes. There is often little to no public disclosure on the progress and effectiveness of these schemes, making it difficult to assess whether those who have left manual scavenging have truly been rehabilitated into safer, more dignified employment. This manipulation of data serves to downplay the magnitude of the problem, thus reducing the pressure on the government to implement effective interventions.

In July 2024, the government stated that there was no proof of manual scavenging in the last five years in the country. This statement has faced criticism from various civil societies and is contradictory to the findings of the state's own agencies such as NITI Ayog. Interestingly, in a response to a parliamentary inquiry dated December 2021, it was reported that 58,098 manual scavengers had been identified according to the criteria outlined in the 2013 act. Out of these, 43,797 manual scavengers had available caste-related data, with 97.25 per cent belonging to the Scheduled Castes. The explicit denial by the state regarding the existence of manual scavengers reflects their lack of political will to address the issue (M, 2022).

The government recently announced in Parliament that there are no current reports of individuals engaged in manual scavenging in the country. However, the most recent annual report (2019-20) from the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) emphasised that this practice still persists in both rural and urban areas. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) declared in January 2021 that the claims made by several states of having zero manual scavengers and zero insanitary latrines are not accurate (NHRC, 2021).

According to the SECC-2011, rural areas had 182,505 manual scavengers, and the Census 2011 indicated more than 26 lakh insanitary latrines in the country. The government claims that most of these have been converted into sanitary facilities under the Swachh Bharat Mission. However, the Safai Karmachari Andolan believes that the official reports underestimate the actual number of manual scavengers in the country. They state that around 7.7 lakh individuals work as sewer cleaners, and there have been 1760 reported deaths of sewer cleaners since 2000. Additionally, there are 36,176 railway sewer cleaners. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) stopped publishing data on cases under the 2013 act from the year 2017. This means that it is not possible to ascertain how many cases are being filed under the 2013 act based on the NCRB reports.

Confronting the Barriers: Policy Challenges in Ending Manual Scavenging

The persistence of manual scavenging in India highlights the complex interplay between policy uncertainties and deeply rooted social attitudes that perpetuate this inhumane practice. The trajectory of these legislative and policy frameworks provides ample proof to illustrate the indifference, insensitivity and denial by the state to

eradicate this practice altogether. The 2013 Act, considered the major legislative reform aimed at eradicating this degrading act, has certain ambiguities that contradict its intention to prohibit the act. Khanna (2019) argues that the act has watered down “the unambiguous illegality of the practice of manual scavenging with exemptions, exceptions and provisions” (Koonan, 2021, p. 9).

Beyond the legislative flaws, the policy implementation remains fragmented and mostly on paper, creating significant gaps between policy outcomes and ground realities. Local governing bodies often lack the capacity and accountability to ensure compliance with the legal and policy framework, leaving scavenging communities trapped in exploitative labour practices. The contractualization of labour within neoliberal policies has further worsened the conditions for scavengers in various ways, especially in urban areas where municipalities and other state agencies outsource work to private contractors to evade direct responsibility for workers. Contractors often exploit these workers through low wages, working in hazardous conditions and denying social benefits. This system has led to further exploitation, with workers categorised as informal or temporary, and in case of any tragedy, denied compensation or rehabilitation, as these policies aim to prevent. The insensitivity and indifference of state agencies form the foundation of an exploitative culture that shields the state from accountability.

The technological lag in sewage infrastructure highlights the ongoing failure to invest in mechanisation solutions, such as sewage cleaning machines, which still heavily depend on human labour. Even policies like NAMASTE, designed to encourage mechanisation, have fallen short in bridging this technological gap due to weak enforcement and limited funding. Although technologies like the Super Sucker truck have been introduced for sewage cleaning, they are still operated by Dalits, reinforcing caste-based occupational stigma. These oversights sharply contrast with the state’s priorities, where it could develop advanced technologies such as a rover capable of landing on Mars, yet still lacks the measures needed to fully automate sewage cleaning and resolve this inhumane issue. This may reflect the pervasive caste bias within the entire system (Kanoon, 2021). The cultural normalisation of manual scavenging as acceptable when Dalits, primarily Valmiki, perform these tasks underscores the longstanding association of caste with occupation. This societal attitude fosters indifference among policymakers and implementing agencies, who are often guided by privileged caste values that tend to ignore the problematic division of labour based on caste. Narula (2008) asserts that “the rule of law lives in the shadow of the rule of caste” (p. 267). This likely explains the persistent technological gap, where, despite the potential to develop sophisticated technologies, social realities remain unchanged.

Chaplin (1999) argues that the lack of political and administrative will, combined with weak governance capacity and the absence of a significant “threat from below” since informal workers remain excluded from trade unions, can hinder their ability to voice concerns. Adding to these challenges, society has become accustomed to relying on workers’ services, believing it is expected of them. This cultural normalisation

of manual scavenging further deepens feelings of insecurity and ignorance about the plight of these workers. Policy initiatives, such as SBA and NAMSTE, which are presented as pioneers of sanitation reform, fail to grasp the fundamental nature of scavenging, which is akin to a caste system; their primary focus remains on urban cleanliness rather than eradicating manual scavenging. Critics argued that these policies are superficial in their approach, as they concentrate on upgrading infrastructure without addressing the root issues of caste or actively enforcing these policies locally. Similarly, Ramasamy (2005) argues that such initiatives are more driven by global concerns, such as the SDGs, rather than a genuine commitment to improving the lives of manual scavengers, highlighting their limited potential for meaningful change.

The state's denial of the existence of manual scavenging, along with the suppression and concealment of accurate data, complicates efforts to eradicate this issue. The claim that there have been no deaths of manual scavengers in the past five years reveals the state's true intention: to avoid acknowledging the problem and neglecting to address it. Furthermore, the removal of rehabilitation schemes in the 2024 Budget, along with their merger into policies aimed at promoting mechanisation, demonstrates a deliberate disregard for the issue and undermines policy efforts. This perpetuates the marginalisation of scavengers. The lack of reliable data and acknowledgement hampers informed policymaking and effective interventions. Chandrasekharan (1986) proposed a framework of "Dalit jurisprudence" to directly confront caste-rooted injustices, recognising that existing legal structures fail to address the underlying social reality. Without such structural changes, it is essential to understand that manual scavenging is not merely a policy issue, but a societal one tied to caste discrimination and dehumanisation.

The prevailing misconception underlying these policies is that merely shifting to mechanisation will eliminate manual scavenging. However, such a one-dimensional approach fails to recognise the deeper structural issues that sustain this practise entrenched caste hierarchies and social exclusion. Achieving genuine change requires comprehensive measures coupled with decisive government action to improve the social, educational, health, and rehabilitative conditions of the scavenging community. The policy framework must be responsive and adaptable to ground realities, prioritising workers' needs rather than relying solely on technological solutions. Eradication calls for a multidimensional and integrated strategy that is sustained over time, addressing all aspects and recognising caste as a core issue. Collaboration with all stakeholders, including civil societies, is essential, as it will help enhance state accountability and ensure that the voices of marginalised groups are heard in policy-making. Therefore, to resolve the current policy paradox and foster lasting change, a holistic approach that goes beyond mere prohibition and mechanisation is crucial. This strategy should focus on improving socio-economic conditions, promoting social justice, and safeguarding human rights. Policies should be based on the direct experiences of manual scavengers and include ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment.

Conclusion

The persistence of manual scavenging despite numerous legal frameworks and public policies underscores the deep-rooted paradox in the state's approach to real inclusion, human dignity, and social justice. The Indian state presents a contradictory situation where, on the one hand, it has enacted progressive laws and policies. On the other hand, ground realities continue to reveal systemic failure and structural barriers that allow manual scavenging to persist despite official claims of eradicating the practice entirely. This paradox exposes the critical gap between policymakers' intentions and actual policy outcomes, rendering many policies largely symbolic. The failure to eliminate manual scavenging is mainly due to the state's neglect of the problem. Existing policies are hindered by flawed implementation, lack of accountability, and poor enforcement of these measures. Despite the severity of this inhumane practice, strangely, no official has been penalised for rule violations. Consequently, weak monitoring and a lack of accountability result in legislation existing more in theory than in practice. This situation renders manual scavenger's invisible citizens who exist in reality, yet remain unacknowledged by the state.

There is an urgent need to confront and dismantle the visible and invisible chains associated with the caste system and the occupation based on it. While the path to fairness may be daunting, it can be paved with resilience, determination, and unity, ultimately leading towards a future where manual scavenging becomes history, and the chains of caste are finally broken. The dignity of every individual must be upheld. In conclusion, addressing the persistent issue of manual scavenging requires more than just making policy promises; it demands building a fair, inclusive, and just society. Eliminating manual scavenging is not only a matter of legislation but a moral obligation that calls for a complete re-evaluation of social frameworks, economic strategies, and governance systems. Only through united efforts, dedication, and a transformative approach can India aspire to resolve this enduring contradiction, ensure respect for all its inhabitants, and truly advance on the path of global power.

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