

Stench of Manual Scavenging: History of Pride, Politics and Practical Brahmanism

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Abstract

From the traditional or religious texts to the centuries of internalized oppression, manual scavenging is the stench of social injustice pervading the legal rights and obligations of a certain section of Indian citizens. The menial job of cleaning human excreta, sewers, and streets was imposed on the Dalits to the extent of blinding them to the injustice and considering the job as their custom, inheritance, and even pride. Today, despite the practice being legally banned, discrimination against manual scavengers continues to pervade the generations. This paper is a comparative study of the practice of manual scavenging in pre-independent India and post-independent India to show the continued existence of manual scavenging for more than 70 years. The paper asserts that the framing of anti-scavenging laws or improving sanitation alone cannot remove manual scavenging. There is also a need to render the practice as inhumane, not just illegal.

Introduction

“Every morning I would take a broom and tin plate to the homes of the upper caste thakurs to pick up their feces and later throw it in a dumping ground outside the village” (Shetty). This statement by a woman manual scavenger is a picture of the paradoxical reality of ‘developing’ India, where manual scavenging continues to be the social stench permeating both the urban and rural spaces. The human exploitation in this profession is the result of the caste discrimination that has historically oppressed the Dalits. Manual Scavenging is the most degrading and inhumane job that is still prevalent in Indian society. This practice requires cleaning human excrement from the streets, dry latrines, sewers, and septic tanks, and carrying night soil using bare hands. This dehumanizing job has been practiced for ages by Dalits, specifically, the Valmiki castes¹ and lower caste Muslims. Since this job would never be undertaken by any of the upper-castes or middle-caste people, the stench of manual scavenging continues to discriminate the Dalits from mainstream society. The essay “Odor of the Other: Olfactory symbolism and Cultural categories”, written by Constance Classen argues how olfactory symbolism plays an important role in assigning identity and difference to a class and race (Classen 133-166). While defining ‘oneness’ and ‘otherness’, she quotes George Orwell, who said, the “real secret of class discrimination” is “summed up in four frightening words, *The lower class smells*. Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, intellect, even differences of moral code can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot” (qtd in. Classen 136). Manual scavenging is an everyday dealing with human shit; the people who engage in the work cannot escape the olfactory symbolism of stench and the isolation ascribed to it. The Employment of Manual Scavenging

¹ Valmiki Castes are the descendants of Hindu sage Valmiki, the writer of Hindu epic, Ramayana. They are considered as Backward classes in north and south India.

Prohibition Act in 1993², prohibited the employment of Manual Scavengers to clean dry toilets, and in 2013, the law also included abolishment of insanitary latrines, ditches and pits and promised to provide rehabilitation to ex-manual scavengers. However, there is a break between theory and practice, as the law has not been implemented in practice till date. According to a press release by the Press Information Bureau, posted on August 6, 2024, 732 districts out of a total of 766 districts have reported to be manual-scavenging free (Ministry of Social Justice). But, even this data is not accurate because in January 2025, another data, published in *The Hindu*, was presented before the Supreme Court of India, according to which only 432 districts have stopped the practice of manual scavenging. In the hearing, the SC had ordered a complete stop on manual scavenging to the top metro cities of India (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad). In another hearing of December 2024, the Bench had pointed out that the ideas of fraternity, equality and dignity are “mere illusion if a sizeable section of society was forced to enter sewers for a living and die trapped in them even a decade after the introduction of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act 2013.” (“SC orders ban”). The ineffectiveness of the law is not just evidence of the malfunctioning of the government authorities, but also the prevalence of the age-old caste system in the society. India is characterized by a society that prioritizes tradition over the Constitution of India and its laws. To understand this, a look at the history of manual scavenging is imperative, which can be provided by the literary Dalit Literature that presents an honest account of the atrocities the Dalit community has been facing historically.

The paper will be using Dalit literature composed of *Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *Kakkoos*, a documentary on manual scavenging that shows the picture of manual scavenging in pre and post-independent India respectively. As secondary sources, the paper will use surveys and data on manual scavenging to show the inaccuracy of data on manual scavenging prevalent today in comparison to the Dalits literature. The reason behind the prevalence of manual scavenging even today will be addressed by Sharmila Rege’s Dalit Feminist Standpoint and Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s theory on caste discrimination as mentioned in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* by Vasant Koon and “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position.” by Sharmila Rege.

Objective

The paper is a comparative study between the situation of manual scavenging in pre-independent and post-independent India based on Dalit Literature and recent data and surveys on manual scavenging. The paper will expose the inherent issue that is not allowing the extradition of manual scavenging through a theoretical base.

Pride in Disguise: Manual Scavenging in Pre-Independent India

Baby Kamble published her autobiography, *Prisons We Broke*, in 1986. The book provides a glaring picture of the suppression of the Mahar caste, a Dalit community of Maharashtra. It shows the practice of manual scavenging that burdened the caste because of their birth. However, the deeper reality of the practice, which Kamble exposes through her book, is its normalization to the extent that any attempt to

² The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Bill was passed In Rajya Sabha on September 7, 2013. It had a wider scope of prohibition compared to the 1993 Employment of Manual Scavenging Prohibition Act. The act not only prohibited the manual cleaning of sewers, without using protecting equipment, construction of latrines, but also provided rehabilitation and alternative employments to the manual scavengers.

eradicate the practice was considered a threat to the community's tradition. In the book, Kamble talks about 'Yeskers', the people who went to the houses of upper-caste people to clean in return for discarded food. To be a yesker was a matter of pride for people of the Mahar caste. But yeskers were discriminated against to an extent that they were made to carry a stick with a bell so that the upper caste people could hear them from a distance and not hear the polluted voice of the yeskers. However, the poverty and the needs of the community were so big that these humiliations didn't matter until the upper-caste provided them with food, no matter how dirty and discarded. The community went days without eating food. They had to resort to eating carcasses discarded by the upper-caste people or animals dead due to epidemics. "When the Mahar set off in the evening on his begging round, he felt great pride in the sheep-wool blanket on his shoulder and his belled stick. His chest would swell with pride. He would twirl his moustache and clear his throat as if he was a very important man. Then he would stride forward, beating his stick on the ground with great flourish. The stick was like a royal staff and the blanket on his shoulder, the black coat of a barrister. But the moment he entered the village, his chest would deflate like a balloon and he would shuffle around as inconspicuously as possible so as not to offend anyone from the higher castes" (Kamble, 75). Describing the job of the yeskers, Kamble talks about the wedding times at the houses of the upper-caste. She writes, "All lowly jobs, right from collecting fuel for cooking to making arrangements for Akka's morning ablutions, would be thrust upon the Mahars. Akka was not allowed to go out to defecate after they had applied the ritualistic haldi on her, for fear of evil spirits. Instead, she would defecate in the garbage pit. And it was Mahar who had to clean the shit. He had to sweep the house, clean all the shit of a houseful of children...All the dirty and laborious jobs were the privilege of the Mahars!" (76).

The book is based on the time when Dr B.R. Ambedkar was igniting the revolution against caste-discrimination. As per the account presented by Kamble, Dr Ambedkar visited the Mahar caste people and made them understand the atrocities they had been facing. Addressing the people of the Mahar caste, he said, "Go ahead, educate your children. Let all our women take this step. Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance. My poor dear brothers and sisters, do not eat carcasses anymore. Don't clean the filth of the village. Let those who make the filth clean it up themselves. Let us teach them a lesson. This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. Let three-fourth of our people die in this endeavour, then, at least the remaining one fourth will be able to live their lives with dignity" (65). However, the slavery of manual scavenging was so deeply entrenched in the minds that the community did not pay any heed to Dr Ambedkar's appeal. Rather they discarded his personality and ideas as "padri knowledge" just because he was educated in a White man's land. The community said, "How dare you ask us to give up our custom of eating dead animals! You are asking us to revolt against the village...Suppose we give up all this as you and your Ambedkar say, then how can we call ourselves true Mahars? Aren't we children of this land? This duty of being the yesker has been earned by our forefathers. They worked so hard for it. They suffered a lot but they never thought about giving it up. And you suddenly want us to give it all up! You get these silly ideas stuffed in your head and then come and pour them down on us. Stop preaching us this Christian knowledge. Why do you want us to put our children in schools? Are they going to become teachers? Or are they going to become Brahmins?" (67). The community further underlined the idea of tradition and said, "The village land is our mother. We have to carry forward whatever order she has given us. Why do we need foreign knowledge? The yesker's stick is the mark of the happiness of the land. We have in us real Mahar flesh and blood." The community also talked about religion and justified the limitations it has put on them.

“God has drawn a line for us and you want us to cross it? Listen, we are born for this work. That’s our sacred duty. Why should we give up our religion, our duty? We are the original and pure Mahars” (67) During British rule, the custom of manual scavenging was institutionalized and converted into an occupation. Special posts for manual scavengers were created to clean the British institutions. In her analysis of manual scavenging throughout history, Geeta Ramaswamy said, “British both legitimised and systemised it (manual scavenging)...It is not to say that the British invented caste or manual scavengers; they intervened to institutionalize it. Technology is supposed to remove social prejudices. However, the technology of sanitation was structured to deepen social prejudices in India” (6). Ramaswamy stated that there is an ambiguity in the origin of manual scavenging. She traces the history from the Indus Valley Civilisation, Hindu Religious Texts, and the Mughal Era. While the sanitation and disposal of excreta and waste was done through water in the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Mughal Era, the Indian *Samhitas* have ordained cleaning human shit as a part of slavery. Ramaswamy wrote, “One of the fifteen duties for slaves enumerated in the *Narada Samhita* was the disposal of human excreta. In *Vajasaneyi Samhita* chandals was referred to as slaves engaged in disposal of human excreta” (5).

This narration of the brutal reality of manual scavenging in society points out the historical suppression that the Dalits have been facing. It shows that the caste hierarchy has not just been imposed on but also internalized by the lower-caste people. Contributing to the same idea, Mahatma Gandhi supported the practice as a “dignified occupation” and said, “I do wish to uplift of the Bhangis but it is not my duty to teach them to wrest their rights by the way of the West. It is not our dharma to gain anything in that method” (qtd in. Ramaswamy 87). He was not in favor of challenging the hierarchy of the Hindu religion as he considered it a Westernization of Indian culture. But putting the dignity and humanity, and even the lives, of a selected section of society was not a matter of consideration for him. According to Yui Masuki, the writer of the chapter “Ideas and Practices for Restoring the Humanity of Sanitation Workers” of the book *The Sanitary Triangle*, Gandhi “eulogised” the practice by considering it a “privilege” as scavengers get the chance to improve the sanitation of the country. He believed, “a scavenger doing his or her duty religiously will not merely bury the night-soil but also observe the stools passed by each and inform each person about the state of his or her health” (qtd in. Masuki). He even compared manual scavengers with missionaries and clergymen. Gandhi romanticised the practice of manual scavenging as the “most honourable occupation” of mankind and equal to the work of a mother serving her child who is revered as a Goddess” (qtd in. Ramaswamy 88-89). He further normalized the practice when he said, “The ideal Bhangi of my conception would be a Brahmin par excellence, possibly even excel him” (qtd in. Ramaswamy 90). Furthermore, “I love scavenging...You should realise that you are cleaning Hindu Society” (qtd in. Ramaswamy 18). Wishing to be reborn as a Bhangi, Gandhi chastised the scavengers when he said, “The Shudra who only serves (the higher caste) as a matter of religious duty, and who will never own any property, who indeed has not even the ambition to own anything, is deserving of a thousand obeisances. The very Gods will shower down flowers on him” (qtd in. “But can we sweep caste away”). Dr B.R. Ambedkar vehemently criticized Gandhi’s appropriation and idealization of manual scavenging by labeling it as “killing with kindness” and “political charity” in his book, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, while stating. “It is like a drunkard with a red nose trying to convince his neighbours that he is a teetotaler” (Ambedkar, *What Congress Did* 144). He criticized manual scavenging as an inhumane job that is assigned to a person based on their caste. According to him, the caste system was not a division of labor, but an institutionalized division of caste, which is justified by ancient religious texts. “Under Hinduism, scavenging was not a matter of choice but a matter of force...a man is not a

scavenger because of his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth irrespective of the question whether he does scavenging or not” (qtd in. Ramaswamy 18). Ambedkar stated that manual scavenging is taken up by a certain section of the Dalit community as “hereditary profession” (Masuki), hence establishing the toxic roots and indoctrination sowed by the higher-caste Hindus. This demarcation of inheritance is one of the major reasons behind the continuation of the practice. The attempt to eradicate manual scavenging, as propagated by Dr Ambedkar, was considered the westernization of Indian culture. But it was the West that not only retained the practice but also turned it into an occupation, making the hazardous job a means of livelihood. This conversion further oppressed the caste as it restricted their right to jobs in the septic tanks and sewers. It can be questioned, then, how could the harmful custom be a part of Indian culture, and how can its removal be unacceptable and contaminated with westernization.

Dalit Literature on Manual Scavenging in Post-Independent India

Kakkoos was filmed in Tamil Nadu by filmmaker Divya Bharathi in 2017. The film is hard to watch without cringing or instinctively covering one's nose because of our inherent reactions to such graphic visuals of the dirty toilets and people cleaning them with their hands, or the images of sewers with stagnant water and corpses. The two-hour-long film is successful in inducing the stink of manual scavenging in the viewer's mind, and shows the real picture of the lives of manual scavengers in India. The film begins with an effective line, “To your conspiracy of silence on the septic tank deaths”, which sums up the crux of the documentary that sets out to confront the government and society about the silenced miseries of manual scavenging. The film establishes the basis of caste for the continuance of manual scavenging. It shows that all manual scavengers in Tamil Nadu, or in general in India, belong to certain Dalit communities. They are hired by municipalities for government jobs, but eventually end up cleaning human excrement and waste. The first evidence of their dehumanization is the continual manual scavenging even after its ban in 2013. It is expected that the scavengers use the same equipment to clean the toilets and the sewers of the locality and the whole city. It questions the definition of manual scavenging and urges to include scavengers who sweep and clean the streets as manual scavengers too. In the film, it is visible that people who sweep the streets also clean excrement, sometimes using their bare hands too. Moreover, the harmful waste is not just excreta and dead bodies, but also medical wastes like syringes, etc., that are fatal disease carriers with which manual scavengers come in contact everyday while sweeping or cleaning. Even after making sewers and septic tanks, manual scavengers have to clean the blockages, the heap of human waste and the ditches with bare hands. The manual scavengers interviewed in the documentary raise a compelling question that if people cannot clean their garbage, why do they expect them to do? If the garbage is harmful for people, why must they clean with their hands? Are they not humans?

However, even after the hard work, the scavengers are paid very little, around Rs 300, which is the required minimum wage. As per the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights' Policy Brief “Livelihood and Access to Work for Dalit Women Engaged in Manual Scavenging”, 347 sewage workers died in the last five years and 1035 since 1993 (5). Even in Delhi, the country's capital, a number of septic tank deaths have been registered but eventually they have been silenced. Bezwada Wilson, one of the founders and National Conveners of *Safai Karamchari Andolan*, rightly said, as quoted by *The Quint*, that Manual Scavenger deaths are “murders by state”³ (Rjeswaran). When the scavengers apply for another job, the

³ Bezwada Wilson, born in 1996, belongs to a manual scavenger's family in Tamil Nadu. He began his struggle for the elimination of manual scavenging in 1986 and founded *Safai Karamchari Andolan*, a human rights organization to end manual

employers either refuse to recruit or offer cleaning jobs once they know their caste's identities. Besides, even the children of the manual scavengers do not escape from this discrimination. Even though reservation in education is provided to the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, they are unable to access it. Children are driven out of the school because of their stink or forced instead to clean the school's sewers. Hence, Dalits are caught inside a vicious circle of discrimination and humiliation, as the profession is passed on to the next generation.

These instances from the documentary show that, besides being a caste marker, the stench of human shit affects the lives of the manual scavengers in many ways. In *Odor and order: How caste is inscribed in space and sensoria*, Joel Lee observes how the routine exposure to the stench and toxicity of abject matter inscribes onto their bodies, minds, and sensoria, which comprises the central premises of caste ideology. The smell never goes away, even after returning home, bathing, and changing clothes—manual scavengers are haunted by the odors of their work. He also writes, “Every caste has its “place” in the world that look, smell, and feel different from one another, whose distinctiveness is manifest in the air itself, in the presence or absence of the fragrance of ghee, the smell of charred flesh, the sting of ammonia” (Lee 488). The documentary shows how the government, on one side, provides reservations and frames amendments in laws, but on the other side, continues the privatization of cleaning jobs to the Dalits.

Practical Politics of Brahmanism: Stench of Manual Scavenging Today

In 1951, the Madhya Pradesh High Court stated, “I do not think that it can be contended with any force that such a custom could have been reasonable at its commencement. That it would not be reasonable today under the Constitution of India, giving all citizens the fundamental right to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business, is clear enough”(qtd in. Kanoon 5). The tradition of manual scavenging of which the Dalits were proud of, later turned into their customary right over the practice and the owners. They started using the idea that manual scavenging can be done by the Dalits to monopolise the practice and the owners they worked for. Scavengers marked their territory and didn't let another scavenger work in the house or the area that was ‘owned’ by one manual scavenger. Moreover, scavengers ‘misbehaved’ with the house owners by leaving work undone or improper sanitation. This bothered the house owners, who took the matter to court. The Madras High Court in the year 1938 criminalised the idea of considering manual scavenging as ‘customary practice’ by stating “the right to scavenge cannot be a valid custom because, if allowed, it would turn out to be an oppressive monopoly” (qtd in. Kanoon 4). In the opinion of the court, the idea of ‘customary practice’ affected the legal rights of the house owners. Clearly, these judgments cared about the exploitative nature of the customary right and the breach of the owners’ (upper caste) rights more than the dignity, equality, and humanity of the manual scavengers. The menial and dehumanizing nature of the duty remained untouched (5). Even after independence, when the Constitution of India gave equal rights to every citizen and also eliminated the caste system, the judgment regarding the customary right didn't see a change.

In these attempts to take away the monopoly of manual scavengers on the practice, the practice turned into an occupation, which worsened the situation of the scavengers. The court mentioned that everyone in India had the right to choose their occupation, but making the menial, dehumanizing, and even hazardous work a job or an occupation was unconstitutional. However, giving everyone the right to choose their jobs remained on paper because manual scavengers couldn't secure any job apart from scavenging because of

scavenging, in 1994 along with Paul Diwakar (Dalit activist) and S.R. Sankaran (retired IAS officer). He has been honored with Ramon Magsaysay Award on July 27, 2016.

their caste. Not that the government didn't try to make the occupation safe, because it removed dry latrines, introduced bullock carts and standardized pans to collect human waste from toilets, and provided long rubber boots and gloves. But, the indirect contact of the manual scavengers with the waste and its smell, which often led to death due to asphyxia, was not visible to the authorities (Kanoon 6). Moreover, "...it is only when one's bodily smell is acceptable, that s/he can be socially accepted and included in social interaction. Attitudes and acts of inclusion and exclusion are therefore influenced by the presence of acceptable or non-acceptable smells respectively" (E.Y.Low, 46). Kanoon further analyzed the law prohibiting the customary right and wrote, "the major focus was on the so-called indiscipline and arrogance of manual scavengers and therefore municipalisation was seen as a measure to bring manual scavenging under the administrative and punitive powers of local bodies" (6).

The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act was passed by the government in the year 1993 to further penalize the practice. However, the law faced backlash for focusing on environmental sanitation over the dignity of the manual scavengers. Kanoon rightly pointed out, "It has been argued that the 1993 Act ignores the issue of human dignity, which is mentioned in the preamble of the Act itself. Another major drawback of the 1993 Act is that individuals are not allowed to file complaints. Specifically appointed authorities have the power to initiate legal actions. As a result, very few complaints were filed under the 1993 Act" (10). Then, the most recent and prevalent law against Manual Scavenging came into existence, which was the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. The law identified the inhumane practice and stated, "These evils are inconsistent with the right to live with dignity which is an essence of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed in Part III of the Constitution" (qtd in. Kanoon 11). However, even this law was not adequate. Only five State governments complied with the law and eradicated the practices. Many others took years to implement the 2013 law despite the strict orders of the Supreme Court. Delhi, the capital, complied with the 1993 law in 2010, and some offices of Rajasthan stopped the practice in the year as late as 2018. The Patna High Court pointed out that, except for one district, all the districts of Bihar didn't even know any such law existed. It took four years for the President himself to pass the 1993 law. Quoting the work of Shomona Khanna, "Invisible Inequalities: An Analysis of the Safai Karamchari Andolan Case", Kanoon wrote, "...the 2013 Act has watered down 'unambiguous illegality of the practice of manual scavenging' with 'exemptions, exceptions and proviso'" (12). Kanoon also considered the reluctance of the State governments in implementing the law and ignoring the dignity of the manual scavengers as "denialism, indifference and insensitivity of the implementing agencies" (13). Kanoon gave many probable reasons behind the inadequate implementation of the laws and the Constitution in eliminating the practice of manual scavenging. The reason that stood out was the impact of the strong caste system on the functioning of the country. Kanoon stated, "The domino-effect of several extra-legal factors including caste on law indeed led to a nihilistic approach to law, particularly by the marginalised classes" (21).

The above analysis of the trajectory of the history of manual scavenging in pre-independent India to its legal ban in post-independent India was to understand the amount of struggle manual scavengers had to undergo to attain their basic right to dignity and humanity. It is the evidence of society's blind eyes to the obvious exploitation of a section of society that spends days surrounded by shit and smell just because of the historical hierarchy. People have internalized that being born into a certain caste justified the exploitation a person undergoes.

Where Caste and Gender Intersect: Women Manual Scavengers

Besides the caste discrimination, *Kakkoos* also mirrors another reality of manual scavenging, the feminization of this profession, as 90% of the manual scavengers are women. According to the National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights policy brief of December 2024, out of more than 1.5 million manual scavengers, 98% are women, and 50% of the urban sanitation workers are women (Verghese and Bisht 9). They are made to clean dry latrines, carry human excreta in leaking baskets, dispose of placenta post-delivery, face sexual harassment, and receive minimal pay (Verghese and Bisht 11). They also clean used sanitary napkins in the washrooms and the household garbage without any tools, while the Indian Constitution does not even recognize cleaning sanitary napkins under manual scavenging (Shetty). Women manual scavengers face sexual and physical harassment by their male counterparts- who are often alcoholics after the distressing impact of scavenging- contractors, and owners. Their uterus becomes weak and dissociated due to hard work, which often leads to hysterectomy. Here, the stench becomes a disease carrier; besides, regular fluctuations in health can even cause lifelong diseases. Women are never hired as contract cleaners, which is higher paying than cleaning toilets. The male workers are at least defined as manual scavengers, whereas women are not even recognized as one (Shetty). According to the National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights' December 2022 policy brief, "Dalit Women and Girl Sanitation Workers: Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent", Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, they weren't provided with proper protection. The gloves, masks, and sanitizers provided to them were of such low quality that they couldn't be reused. They have to clean sewers and carry excreta at the wee hours when their safety is adversely compromised (Biswakarma and Verghese 12-13)

Women clean the night soil (human shit) and collect garbage from houses every morning and are paid ten and fifty rupees every month; while men have to clean the sewer once or twice in a month, as hired by the corporations earn up to Rs. 300 (Verghese and Bisht 12). This shows the disproportion in stress, stench, and discrimination between women and men. Women scavengers are forced to continue their job also because of the inappropriate rehabilitation measures that are provided to 'liberated' manual scavengers. Bezwada Wilson says, "The community never had any kind of business skill for their livelihood except scavenging. When you are thinking about the rehabilitation of a woman, you can't offer a tractor to her if she is not willing to work with it. So the government has to develop a clear mechanism to offer rehabilitation and promote it" (Sarfraz). This shows how the occupation, caste, and gender intersect in the identity of women manual scavengers.

On Paper and in Reality: Misery Uncontested

The eradication of manual scavenging fails to address the social prejudices related to the caste system and the gender discrimination wrapped in Brahmanism and Casteism. None of the laws or hearings have mentioned the perils of women scavengers, which is much different from the experiences of men. The issue of alcoholism among Dalit men after the toxic interaction with practice is also not given consideration. Even if Dalits resist and stop the practice, they are threatened by the municipalities about taking away their homes, cutting down the water supply, or abusing their families, especially the women. According to the field study by Human Watch Report of 2014, "Cleaning Human Waste" Manual Scavenging, "Caste, and Discrimination in India", a manual scavenger said, "We have farming and labor work, but then if I go for farming work I get threats from the *panchayat*—"If you don't work, empty the house." I am afraid to lose my house. If I had a place to live I would not do this dirty work" (Human Rights Watch). Another scavenger was reported saying, "I studied commerce and banking, but I couldn't find

work. Even though I am educated, the *panchayat* hired me to clean toilets because I am from this community” (Human Rights Watch). In addition to this, their mobility is shadowed by their identity that ties them with the untouchable practice of manual scavenging. K M Ziyauddin conducted a field study of the Haddi caste of Bokaro, which is considered to be a traditional manual scavenger. In his work, “Occupation and Dignity of Unseen Population: Yes They Are Manual Scavenger”, he wrote, “Even now, though there are flush toilets, still all the shit goes into the septic tank. Once the septic tank is full, who cleans it? At least until these vacuum-based mechanized machines were introduced, it was again the manual scavengers who used to collect manually the shit from the septic tanks and there are still such practices. So what used to be a daily affair earlier, the introduction of septic tanks turned it into once in a while” (7). He also wrote about the obstacle in manual scavengers seeking any other job. Their surname alone gave away their traditional duty of working as scavengers. They were reluctant to talk to the authorities, who were always upper caste people (14). In another survey conducted by Vinay Reddy Venumuddala, “Patterns of social mobility across social groups in India”, to examine social mobility through education and occupation among the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, he concluded that despite increasing educational opportunities and the consequent educational mobility, the socio-economic situation remains stagnant (17). He wrote, “...equality of opportunity in education may not be sufficiently helpful in gaining access into occupations that are socio-economically better positioned. Particularly for SCs and STs, despite an increasing trend observed in education mobility in the recent times. occupational mobility is found to either remain stagnant. or decline, in both cases being much below that of other social groups. There might be structural reasons as to why certain occupations are more accessible to some social groups and difficult for others, which may need further investigation” (Venumuddala 17). When the 2013 Prohibition Act came into existence, 12,742 manual scavengers were working in 13 states, with UP recording 80% of them. However, this was a misrepresentation because the 2011 Census depicted that are 7, 40,078 households in India that employed manual scavengers to clean dry latrines. The Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 revealed that around 1, 82,505 families in rural India were engaged in the dehumanizing job (qtd in. Sen). The data today has not seen a significant change because, according to the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem, 54,574 sewer and septic tank cleaners were recorded in India in 2024. Only 257 districts have officially uploaded their manual scavenging-free certificate on the government portal (qtd in. “Manual scavenging, Accessibility Reforms”). This data is again not conclusive because, as quoted above, data presented before the Supreme Court in January 2025, 432 districts claimed to be manual scavenging-free. Data on the deaths due to the practice is also not accurate since different sources cite different numbers. During an inquiry by the Rajya Sabha in the year 2021, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment stated that ‘zero’ deaths were recorded due to manual scavenging (“Deaths Due to Manual Scavenging”). It overlooked the gross data of 321 deaths in sewer and septic tanks between the years 2017 and 2021, and 954 sewer deaths between 1993 and 2021. The same ministry, in 2023, observed that more than 400 deaths were reported in sewer and septic tanks in the years 2018 to 2023 (“Over 400 manual scavengers died”). These irresponsible and inaccurate records undermined the authenticity of the government, making it an ally in silencing the pain of the manual scavengers and encouraging their discrimination. *Kakkoos* also talks about the “fake” policies and “inaccurate” data about manual scavenging. The perils of this section of society are not taken seriously because its people are already socially excluded. In the documentary, the scavengers say that the ‘safety tools’ are of such poor quality that they give them rashes and exude a poisonous smell that doesn’t go away even after washing their hands. Ultimately, they have to discard the ‘safety measures’ to avoid at

least one source of disease. The government doesn't feel the urgency or threat either because the community of manual scavengers is not educated enough, or is not willing to question the upper-caste authorities, as they have internalized the oppression. It is the upper-caste and the authorities who can aid them in getting education and a job, and if they are 'enraged', the lives of the lower castes will worsen.

Findings: Psychological Sweeping Through a Dalit Feminist Standpoint

The reason behind the prevalence of this dehumanizing practice is beyond the ambit of the law. Its eradication requires a 'sweeping' of the mindsets of people in India that is ruled by the Brahmanical hierarchy and patriarchy. Criminalizing the practice and providing rehabilitation is a reductionist approach towards addressing the issue of manual scavenging. It doesn't address the deeper problem of normalization and internalization of caste and patriarchy. Until and unless the idea of caste discrimination and Brahminical patriarchy is eradicated, people will continue employing manual scavengers without any sense of accountability. Moreover, the prevalence of the ideologies will not let Dalits leave the toxic sewers or get rid of their stench as they will always remain excluded. By criminalizing the practice, the deprivation will only increase because other job options are barely available for them, and they are too afraid to raise their voice against their contractors, owners, or other upper-caste people in the employment sector. To survive, they are forced to internalize the caste system. There is a need to change the course of action by replacing, as Rege points out, "from 'their cause' to 'our cause'" to fight the social stigma against Dalits (Rege 45). She talks about the importance of the dominant caste to take accountability for their discriminatory practices rather than just address the experiences of the Dalits. Quoting J. Grant, she writes, "The failure of dominant groups to critically and systematically interrogate their advanced situation leaves their social situation scientifically and epistemologically a disadvantaged one for generating knowledge" (Rege 45). It is undeniable that, despite the mention of equal rights and punishment against caste discrimination in the Constitution, a significant section of the country is cleaning and dying in sewers. Caste empowerment in India seems to have paused at the reservation system, which is impactful but not practical. Brahmanism is still practiced uncontested, resulting in heinous crimes, especially against women. The most recent and hair-raising example was the Hathras Gangrape Case. Therefore, even though the issues of the Dalits are taken into consideration, they are a mere superficial glance with no intention to change the roots of the issue which covers the entire society. If manual scavenging was a 'holy' work of maintaining sanitation and they were ordained by God to do the religious duty, it should get as much respect as any other occupation. If Brahmins are invested with the duty of representing God and are respected for the same, manual scavenging too can be considered as the order of God and hence shouldn't have faced discrimination. Moreover, sanitation is indeed extremely important for a healthy environment. Therefore, it can be concluded that people working in sanitation are important for sustainability. But, on the contrary, people stay away from scavengers, stride to a distance while passing near them, and instinctively close their nose. The stench of human shit cannot be changed, but its association with the Dalits can be changed.

Hence, Rege proposes Dalit Feminist Standpoint as the base of the social struggle rather than the "practical politics" that falls down the slippery slope of pluralism, relativism, and identitarian politics (45). Even Dr Ambedkar pointed out the alienness of the Brahmins to the issues of the Shudras and the Untouchables. In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, he rightly mentions, "The record of the Brahmins as law givers for the Shudras, for the Untouchables and for women is the blackest as compared with the record of the intellectual classes in other parts of the world, For no intellectual class has prostituted its

intelligence for the sole purpose of inventing a philosophy to keep his uneducated countrymen in a perpetual state of servility, ignorance and poverty as the Brahmins have done in India. Every Brahmin to-day believes in this philosophy of Brahmanism propounded by his forefathers. He is an alien element in the Hindu Society. The Brahmin 'vis-a-vis the Shudras and the Untouchables is as foreign as the German is to the French, as the Jew is to the Gentile or as the White is to the Negro. There is a real gulf between him and the lower classes of Shudras and Untouchables. He is not only alien to them but he is also hostile to them. In relationship with them, there is in him no room for conscience and no call for justice" (469-470). He raises a compelling question on the politics and governance of the country by writing, "is there anywhere in the world a governing class with such selfish, diseased and dangerous and perverse mentality, with such a hideous and infamous philosophy of life which advocates the trampling down of the servile classes to sustain the power and glory of the governing class ?" (470).

Since more than half of the manual scavengers are women, doing the lowest grade scavenging, they certainly stink more and are marginalized to a greater extent. If the harshest form of slavery in manual scavenging is channeled through women, its liberation should also start from women. Thus, as a solution to the struggle, Rege suggests the Dalit Feminist Standpoint to not only eliminate the social stigma but also gain the right knowledge of the social evil- its inception, history, present condition, and the subjectivities of the survivors. She writes that Dalit Feminist Standpoint is "emancipatory" because it is a form of epistemology in which the "subject of knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e, the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought)" (45). By beginning the struggle through the emancipation of Dalit women, the most (triple discrimination) disadvantaged group of society, the root cause of the social evils like patriarchy, caste, class, sexuality, and more can be identified. Rege also acknowledges that 'Dalit women' is not a homogeneous term. It is heterogeneous in the sense that their subjectivities and standpoints involve not only them, but the men and the upper caste society that have caused Dalit women's deprivation.

Dalit Feminist standpoint becomes a significant part of Intersectional Feminism as it changes the frames of feminist epistemology in India by historicizing the limited positions accorded to Dalit women in social movements. Dalit Feminist Standpoint, as Sharmila Rege explains, expands identity politics based on mere objective experiences of the Dalits as the "other" into collective politics by considering their subjectivities of the lived experience (Dalit Epistemology) for a social reformation (45). It is a non-Brahmanical rendering of Feminist politics, challenging the structures of patriarchy, class, and caste historically constructed by Brahmanism (44-45). Dalit Feminist Standpoint takes in its ambit not only an individual with a particular group identity but the society as a whole. Hence, it becomes a step towards universality by removing the overarching hegemony in the societal structures.

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