

Manual Scavengers in India: A Marginalized Community

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Abstract

Manual scavenging represents one of the most dehumanizing forms of labour in contemporary India, where individuals from historically marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, are compelled to manually remove human excreta from dry latrines, sewers, and septic tanks. This caste-based occupational practice epitomizes structural violence and perpetuates social exclusion despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, legally abolished this practice, yet implementation remains severely inadequate. According to the 2018 socio-economic survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, approximately 42,303 manual scavengers were identified across India, though civil society organizations argue the actual number exceeds several hundred thousand due to chronic underreporting and reluctance to document this stigmatized occupation. The majority of manual scavengers belong to Scheduled Castes, with specific sub-castes like Valmikis, Balmikis, Chuhra, and Mehtar communities bearing the disproportionate burden of this occupation across generations.

The health hazards faced by manual scavengers are catastrophic, with workers regularly exposed to toxic

gases including hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, and methane while cleaning sewers without protective equipment. The Safai Karamchari Andolan reports that between 2017 and 2022, more than 340 sewer deaths occurred, with workers succumbing to asphyxiation, drowning, or toxic exposure. Beyond physical dangers, the psychological trauma of social ostracization creates profound mental health challenges within these communities. Manual scavengers experience systematic exclusion from mainstream society through residential segregation, denial of temple entry, restricted access to public water sources, and limited educational opportunities for their children. This occupational stigma creates an intergenerational poverty trap, as children of manual scavengers' face discrimination in schools and limited employment prospects outside their parents' occupation, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Economic exploitation further compounds their vulnerability, with most manual scavengers earning meager wages below minimum wage standards, lacking formal employment contracts, social security benefits, or health insurance coverage. The rehabilitation provisions mandated under the 2013 Act, including alternative livelihood training, financial assistance, and scholarship programs for children, have witnessed abysmally low implementation rates. The intersectionality of caste, class, and gender creates additional layers of marginalization, as women constitute a significant proportion of manual scavengers yet remain invisible in official documentation and policy discourse. Despite technological alternatives like mechanized sewer-cleaning equipment and the construction of modern sanitation infrastructure, municipalities continue employing manual scavengers due to cost considerations and entrenched caste prejudices. Addressing this humanitarian crisis requires

comprehensive strategies encompassing strict enforcement of anti-manual scavenging legislation, substantial investment in sanitation infrastructure, robust rehabilitation programs with genuine economic alternatives, anti-discrimination campaigns challenging caste-based occupational hierarchies, and meaningful participation of affected communities in policy formulation. The continuous cases of manual scavenging have been found in this nation, as reflected in the states of West Bengal, Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu since 2021 and is still ongoing till 2025. The persistence of manual scavenging in twenty-first-century India represents a moral failure of society and state, demanding urgent transformative action to restore dignity and justice to these systematically oppressed communities.

Keywords: *Manual scavenging, Dalits, Caste-based occupation, Social exclusion, Structural violence.*

Introduction

According to the 2018 socio-economic survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, approximately 42,303 manual scavengers were identified across India (Chhabra, 2019). Based on the characteristics or attributes like race, gender, sexuality, caste, socio-economic status and disability, a group of individuals or individuals in general often face systematic disadvantage, economic discrimination and a complete exclusion from the society, and this is outlined to be the social identities of the marginalised groups (Darity & Ruiz, 2024). The analytical guideline of intersectionality, forged by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is effective for comprehending this phenomenon (Law.columbia.edu, 2017). The revelation is shaped as per the ways in which the overlapped social identities like for instance a poor Dalit woman, might generate unique as well as compound

experiences of oppression which are not a simple assimilation of individualistic discriminatory approaches (Sharma, 2022).

One of the economically depriving jobs that a marginalised community in contemporary India is mostly associated with is that of the manual scavengers (Jha et al., 2025). The practice of manual scavenging dates back in history, with the approach of employing individuals who are responsible to maintain cleanliness of dry latrines, sewers and septic by following to manually clean human excreta and other forms of dirt (hrw.org, 2014). It is still India's one of the most dehumanising and persistent forms of caste-based oppression, which still operates despite being outlawed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act in 2013 (Fathima & Raju, 2024).



Figure 1: A Manual Scavenger. (Source: Paliath, 2021).

While manual scavenging persists throughout the belts of India, the situation in West Bengal projects a harrowing image or extension of the exploitation and its levels as recently seen in the 2021 Kudghat incident resulting in the death of four manual scavengers in the past 3 months (Chatterjee, 2025). The state

of India has responded to this characterised discrimination against a community by legal performativity, which brings no effective action to resolve the issue. With the presence of laws and regulations of the Supreme Court of India, the aspects of rehabilitation and compensation are forwarded however, remaining abysmal in the agenda of revolving the cases (nls.ac.in, 2025). In India, the loss of lives in sewers has amounted to over 400 since 2018, which is an officially recorded number that in reality might be higher (Staff, 2022). The nation of India, along with the state of West Bengal, illustrates to require a move beyond the basic regulatory field and to enforce a radical shift towards social and moral imagination. The efficient rehabilitation should generate sustainable actions like proper education, opportunities towards a better livelihood and housing facilities. The nation should come forward in order to dismantle the current presence of caste-based livelihood, essentially within the agenda of manual scavengers (Saldanha et al., 2022). The continued presence of manual scavengers in the society is a constant and brutal reminder that modern society is indeed built upon the blood and tears of marginalised communities who are pressured to remain, so that the continuation of the hierarchy is protected (Kumari, 2024).

Review of Literature

Practice of Manual Scavenging: A de-humanising Approach to Labour

As argued by Chawla, (2024), manual scavenging reduces and transforms the agency of human beings to an instrument of disposing of society's most toxic waste, which is the waste of their fellow humans' excretion. The deliberate imposition of discarding the filth with social exclusion and inviting certain diseases which are forwarded within this

community, solely the features based on their birth-based castes. Chawla, (2024), states that this stripping away of the dignity and the treatment of these individuals replicate the tendencies of a human while handling disposable items. The scavengers are treated way less than labourers and not as much as human beings who deserve basic human rights like safety, security and respect (Nambiar & Abhisha K, 2025).

By being an almost exclusive hereditary caste duty of the lower-segment of the community hierarchies, manual scavenging is not merely an occupation rather a painful and constant reminder of their social stand and position. A variety of subgroups within Dalits, featuring Valmiki and Dome communities have been facing a similar agenda-which is deeply embedded within the Brahmanical concept of “ritual purity” (Cherechés, 2024). By this concept, the work for sanitation is considered as “polluting” which is automatically delegated to the ones who are seated at the lowest levels of the social prism (Cherechés, 2024). As argued by Gopal Guru, this categorised segregation of individuals originating from such class structure and are given a specific duty, might be described as a form of “sanitation apartheid”, which is still a crisis within the scenario of West Bengal, a state in India (hklawoffices.in, 2020).

A featured study emphasising on the practice of “bone scavenging” in Birbhum, Coch Behar and Siliguri regions of the state (Kunjappan. & Chandra, 2025). In this practice, the marginalised Dalits, who are already deprived economically, socially and opportunity-wise are cornered so much that they are even forced to be engaged in the practice of collecting human bones from cremation grounds and graveyards to sustain (Chandran, 2020). This showcases a systematic and brutal failure of the society which results in rampant class and caste-based exploitation, in which individuals or groups

of similar individuals are reduced to an extent to which, the dignity of the dead is much higher than the living ones. \

Role of Caste Politics in the Persisting Presence of Manual Scavenging

Karamchedu, (2025), in the paper outlines the persistent presence of manual scavenging which is a practice that is embedded within the society, and even within the state's own legal and economic frameworks. The presence of multiple laws and regulations have determined the fact that it has been banned by practice in the legal arena, however, in practice the picture remains different. The state's agencies and institutional bodies like the municipalities and railway bodies are still directly employing manual scavengers to maintain sanitation, thus, keeping the toxic tradition on (Yachu, 2025). The presence of caste hierarchies grants deeper social sanction towards the agenda that only Dalits must perform this "polluting" labour, which furthermore de-humanises them. The state integrates these by categorically undercounting workers, re-classifying the deadly sewer cleaning job as a "hazardous work" for avoiding any legal accountability (Kundu, 2025). Moreover, the aspect of liabilities is also removed from the considerations by following to outsource the jobs to the contractors thus, maintaining caste ideology while also enforcing the dehumanising labour.

Similarly, Rajan, (2024), illustrates the association of caste politics that perpetuates the integration of manual scavenging as a practice that is omnipresent within a state's cultural, social and economic framework. The prevalence of caste system associates the practice of pushing the "menial jobs", likely that of handling of human wastes, to another community as has been described as the duty of Dalits, who are usually considered to be the "untouchable" segment of the social hierarchy (Dandapat & Tripathi, 2025). The paper

outlines the ways in which the social sanction has normalised this approach, with politically reserving the objective towards upliftment. This is resulting due to the deeper-seated caste hierarchy that builds a situation in which almost 1.3 million Dalits are pushed towards this vulnerable and degrading work (Pasic, 2022).

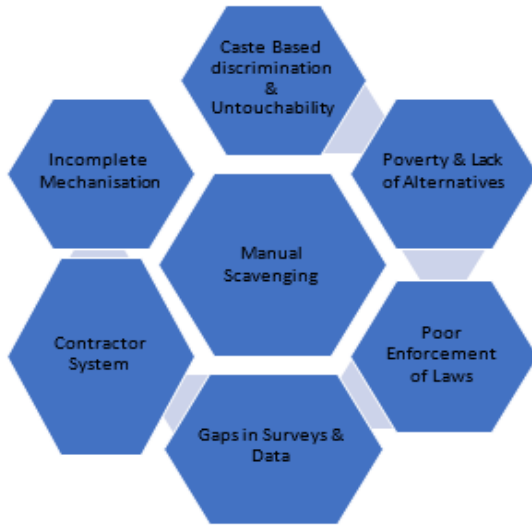


Figure 2: Reasons for Continued Manual Scavenging in India.

A Lack of Political Will

Anurag, (2025), in this paper outlines a lack of political will to be one of the central factors being accountable for the continuation of the practice manual scavenging. The state as Anurag, (2025), argues highlights the fact that it exhibits the sense of “apathy” and a total generation of “indifference” with politics that does not concern their cause. Moreover, with “poor enforcement” and with a substantial absence of robust and proactive integration of regulations and rules discrediting the manual scavenging practices are seen. Thus, critically the political will of the government denies

the presence of the practice which exists, by suppressing the available information and pressuring to claim that there are zero incidents happening (Bajoria, 2023). This precisely calculated denial and inaction towards barring such inhuman practice is present within the framework of the privileged caste culture, which ties the structure together and stops it from getting dismantled.

The persistence of manual scavenging can be directly attributed to a shortage of governmental commitment. The article claims that there is excessive indifference and wilful carelessness in the actualisation of laws and social projects. Important governmental organisations, such as the railways and towns, openly dispute the method and some file fraudulent affidavits to prove it does not exist. Despite legislative restrictions, this institutional denial and inability to enforce laws allows the practice to continue.

Situations of Practical Instances in India

A total of five case studies is to be forwarded here to outline the aspects of manual scavenging in India and its implications on the lives of the individuals who are involved in it. This practice of hazardous sanitation practices in India has resulted in hundreds of deaths in a single year, and one such incident in 2021 Kolkata Kudghat region changed the scenario, in which a total of 4 sanitation workers died while cleaning sewers (Chatterjee, 2025). In Delhi, multiple sanitation workers have died after inhaling toxic gases while cleaning sewers, which forced the media and civil society to renew this call for dignity, strict accountability and mechanisms (Mehta, 2024).

Moreover, in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, three Dalit workers have died of asphyxiation while cleaning a sewage tank, which in turn has outlined the concurrent and present

issue of caste-based vulnerabilities for the communities which resulted due to the absence of protective gears and amenities (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). Four more manual scavengers migrated from Bihar, were found to have suffocated inside a septic tank in Surat, Gujarat and died, thus, showcasing the migratory marginalised segment of the society's implications (Newindianexpress.com, 2023). Another region of Haryana also saw the death of four sanitation workers, after inhaling poisonous gases while properly maintaining a sewer (ndtv.com, 2022). Thus, with a collective approach these cases primarily outline the systematic discrimination that the marginalised, migratory and lower-sections of the societies goes through, as resulted due to the multi-fold reasons like caste systems, lack of political will and political practices.

Methodology

Case Study Analysis

A case study analysis is an approach towards researching a theme with in-depth analysis as emphasised on illustration of a contemporary phenomenon as against the real-world context (Crowe et al., 2022). The approach of case study analysis outlines a single or a complicated instance, involving people, groups, business, policy and events which are required to comprehend its dynamic and underlying principles. Thus, the qualitative approach here highlights an in-depth evaluation with a focus on context-based analysis. Case study analysis's objective is to eradicate the aspects of generalising statistically yet to provide rich information and explore specific pathways to understand the situations with precision (Babbie, 2021)

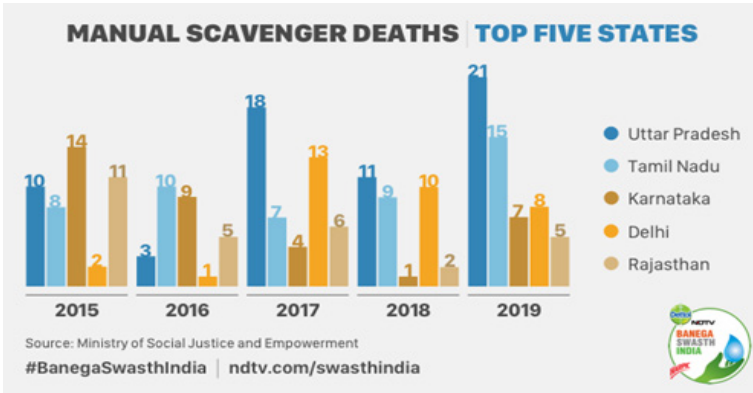


Figure 3: Death Rates of Manual Scavengers. (Source: Mathur & Bhaskar, 2020).

The case study-based investigation is crucially required as manual scavenging is not a monolithic incident, rather it has layers of complications and issues as shaped by regional, caste, class, government and social tenets (Ridder, 2017). A singular incident in this matter will fail to capture the complicated scenario of the issue. Moreover, by associating and evaluating five such incidents as outlined above, this has permitted a comparative analysis of the ways in which the different governments were incorporating or subverting the central regulatory approaches (like the 2013 Act). It will aid to reveal the trend of a lack of political will, administrative insensitivity along with regionalised resistance. Additionally, these case studies are relevant to be included as it creates a broader image in which local and central-driven systematic failures are uplifted that is precisely discriminating against a social group.

Secondary Data-Usage Evaluation

The paper here is strictly based on secondary data as sourced from the governmental reports, academic literature, news articles and media archives (Perez-Sindin, 2017). With circumstantial difficulties present to collect first-hand information from the manual scavengers in India, the investigation is crucially based on including information from the secondary sources for evaluation.

The statistical insights on manual scavengers or any types of cleaners in India are found from the governmental information as collected from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. A proper triangulated approach with counter-information is resulting from the Dalit-based firms like Safai Karamchri Andolan (SKA) alongside the reports from the bodies like National Human Rights Commission (PTI, 2022). Moreover, in the paper here, peer-reviewed articles, journals and academic knowledge are also to be involved to present the framework of knowledge that will evaluate the theoretical and practical basis of caste, class, discrimination, societal programs and its human repercussions.

The usage of secondary information is highly presentable for illustrating a macro-level, policy-based and historical evaluation that is spread throughout multiple states, in which the paper's aim is understood. The utilisation of secondary information is highly relevant for constructing a macro-level and insightful basis of policy-based analysis throughout the multiple states of India, that are facing similar challenges of manual scavenging (sawtoothsoftware.com, 2024). The involvement of secondary information permits for longitudinal monitoring of legislation, scheme incorporation and discourse over decades, which illustrates a scope of impracticality of the primary research.

Despite having multiple advantages, the secondary information-based research includes multiple limitations as well. The most crucial disadvantage is the potential unreliability and politically manipulated data are present, which often creates an imbalance between the real issues and the propaganda factors (Mora, 2022). Moreover, it might create a nuanced absence of embodied presence and encounters of the scavengers which is precisely provided by the studies of ethnography. These factors are to be resolved by focusing on centering the Dalit and marginalised voices with focusing more on SKA information while increasing the access to collecting first-hand experience-driven information from the manual scavengers in India.

Findings & Discussion

Case Study No. 1: 2021 in Kolkata, West Bengal

The initial incident that took place regarding the manual scavengers and its dangerous implications has resulted in the death of 4 young cleaners from Malda, took place in Kolkata in the year 2021 (Staff, 2025). It was come to light that all four these cleaners died resulted from the toxic fumes which they inhaled, however, featuring how these are not an isolated accident rather a systematic and continued failure of the nation towards safeguarding and securing to provide better working conditions to a certain section of the workers, who are also socially discriminate (Chatterjee, 2025). This dehumanising labour of manual scavenging has been taken under the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court, which passed a landmark ruling statement which holds the Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the state-based authorities the main culprits (Das, 2025).

The work is primarily dehumanising in which a fellow human's labour is commodified to an extent in which they

might lose their lives and can be disposed of at will. The Court noted that a crucial tracking process under the mechanisms of Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers Act, 2013 were effectively not illustrated in execution in Kolkata (Staff, 2025). The complete violation of the law features the class-based political economy that is present here, which has exclusively featured this job for the Dalits or the marginalised communities of the societies. The nation, via its municipalities, contractors and railway agencies are still remaining the relevant and primary employers to not only embed but also to increase the actions.

A complete absence of political will was seen in this case of the nation, as the police filed a perfunctory FIR against the “unidentified persons” with the Court mandating a thirty lakh rupees compensation to the deceased families-which failed to concretely solve the issue (Chatterjee, 2025). The presence of such apathy is nationwide, with regulations being present on paper yet they find no ways to get executed in the reality segment, which has outlined the aspects of evading liability and a refusal to invest in machines that might potentially replace humans.

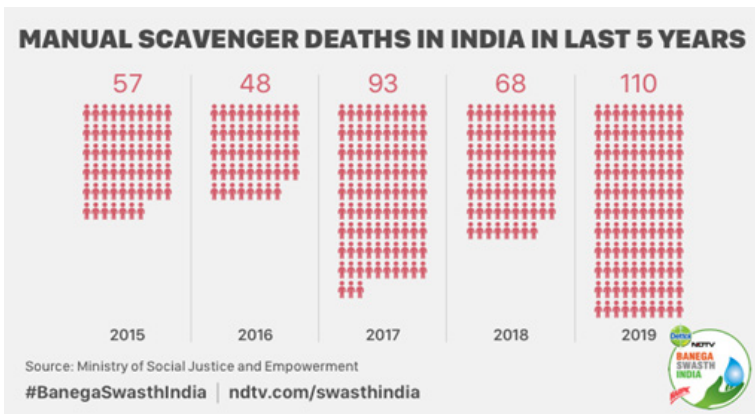


Figure 4: Death rates of Manual Scavengers in India. (Source: Mathur & Bhaskar, 2020)

Case Study No.2: 2022 in Faridabad, Haryana

A similar situation of death of four sanitation workers occurred in the next year, in 2022, at a hospital in Faridabad, Haryana which is not a tragic anomaly but is a predictable system that categorically targets Dalits and marginalised communities to live their lives at the expense of other's ignorance (Dogra, 2022). Haryana's incident projects a stark image of the reality which features a dehumanising core of the manual scavenging in Indian society, the way cheap labour and its source are exploited with presentation of no dignity and respect.

The sanitation workers-Vishal, Ravi, Ravi Goldar and Rohit were made to clean and enter a manhole without having any basic security and safety tool, which is known to be the direct violation of the 2013 Act (ndtv.com, 2022). All four of them died resulting from the toxic gases that caused asphyxiation for them, and this should be dubbed as a 'social murder' with a systematic faulty system that is based on the neglect which cost the lives of marginalised individuals. The practice that is featured with neglect, cost-cutting and convenience has got the priority before the aspect of protecting human life, which in a sense dehumanises and reduces the human agency to be a disposable instrument.

The incident's occurrence and the following case which unfolded outlines the agenda of caste politics which perpetuates the whole system. The work is outsourced via a labyrinth of contractors and venders, in here it was named 'Santosh Allied Service', involving a deliberate strategy which makes them evade legal duties and accountabilities (ndtv.com, 2022). The reduction of human agency and the sense of projecting security to their cause are reduced resulting from commodifying their working force with contractualization.

This process makes their labour informal, unprotected, homogenous and can be easily replaceable-which was correlated with the contemporary economic association of caste-based discrimination and alienation.

The repetitive nature of these incidents underlines a complete lack of political will which should have been featured to eliminate all sorts of oppression and alienation of a community from the society. The role of the state towards transforming from prosecutor to perpetrator has failed to ensure rehabilitation processes for this community that has been resulting in more deaths in the upcoming years.

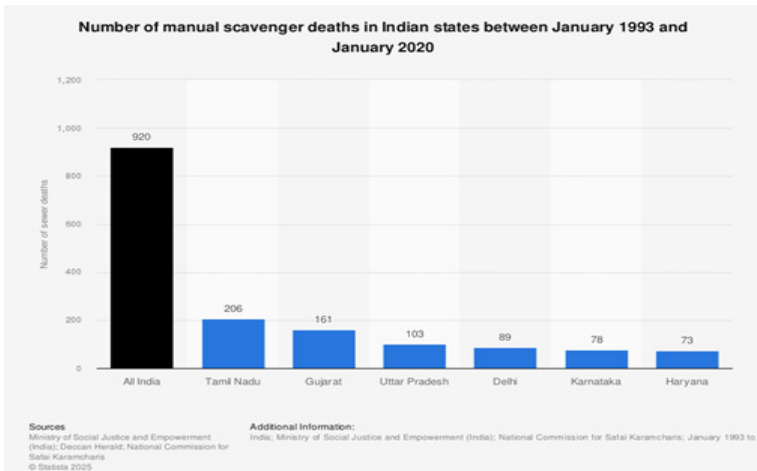


Figure 5: Death Rates in India till 2020. (Source: Galal, 2020).

Case Study No.3: 2023 in Surat, Gujarat

Similar to the above cases, four migrant workers from Bihar, died while manually scavenging a septic tank in Surat, Gujarat (Staff, 2023). This projects a repetitive and grim reality of India in which the practice of manual scavenging is still embodying the inhuman approach towards labour and is fortified on the basis of the complete absence of the political will of the state.

Four men in Gujarat died resulting from asphyxiation, which is a common killer in these cases, highlights the dehumanising and lethal conditions that illustrate this work (Newindianexpress.com, 2023). They were pushed to clean a confined space filled with toxic gases without them carrying any safety tools, thus performing a task which society has bestowed upon them against their lower positioning in the social hierarchy. Stripped of all human agencies, respect, safe working conditions and dignity, they were dubbed as the waste disposal garbage tools, which fundamentally goes against the Indian Constitution which promises to provide each and every one with equal opportunities and respect (Ncsk.nic.in, 2020).

As argued above, with the issues Haryana and Bengal, a deep-seated caste politics have also been seen here in Gujarat. Migrant workers, who are usually emerging from the lower strata of the social framework, illustrate to be familiar victim segments, as the occupation of manual scavenging crucially remained a work of Dalit communities and their sub-groups in certain matters (Staff, 2023). The factory-based recruitment here used the workers to clean a septic tank, without following the regulation to use mandated machines, thus reflecting the positioning of the society and the executive legacy of Indian rules and laws among its people. The geographical displacement of the labourers from Bihar to Gujarat illustrates how economic desperation is often-based on caste-driven landlessness and poverty which are the grave cases of modern India.

Case Study No.4: 2024 in Delhi, the Capital of India

Since 2021, the situation did not release any redemption or strategy from the side of the state or its associated agencies, which would have permanently eradicated the practice of

manual scavenging. This proved to be right when in 2024, at the centre of India's republican democracy, 4 individuals died resulting from the toxic gas impacts while cleaning sewer and similar establishments with no security and safety towards their working conditions (Lakshman, 2025). Harikrishna Prasad, Yashdev, Ramasrey and Deshraj-all of these individuals, distinctively died while cleaning sewers at Rohini Mall, at a sewage treatment plant in Kondili and gutter in Pillanji villages, respectively (Mehta, 2024). Even though these individual manual scavengers died apart from each other, every incident reflects the similar image of negligence and discrimination.

These workers are often faced with marginalisation due to their backgrounds, thus, getting trapped in certain occupations due to extreme poverty and are forced to work in uncompromising conditions, which threatens and even ends their lives. The practice of manual scavenging comes to individuals or a group which gets this social deviation and are forced to follow the caste-based occupation, despite having other choices and goals. Despite having legal regulation like the Act 2013, features how the lack of political will is not the only case here, rather a collective rejection of obedience of such rules from the Indian society are emanated (spaceandculture. in, 2025). Each of these deaths were tragedies that could have been prevented with the fostering of genuine political will and an inclusion of effective constitutional protection towards the dignity and safety of its people.

Case Study No.5 : 2025 in Tamil Nadu

The last case study outlines the death of three manual scavengers namely Venugopal, Hari Krishnan and Saravanan in Tamil Nadu, who went to clean the sewage tank, which increased the omnipresent crisis as presented. Moreover, this

incident outlines the practice and its present existence since 2021, with no signs of improvement and development (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). As it has been arguably one of the most dehumanising agenda to make use of human labour, which results in hundreds of deaths each year, and is still continuing. The workers here, in Tamil Nadu all belonged from Scheduled Caste (SC), which is a lower group from the social hierarchy that are eternally marginalised and dominated by other segments of the society (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). The common killer asphyxiation occurred while they all entered a 7-ft tall deep tank which choked them to death. This practice is thus not only lethal but also degrading to the agencies of human lives which forces them to be nothing but a discarding tool for cleaning and maintaining places that no others want to visit.

The nation's reaction to the manual scavenging fatalities demonstrates an extreme absence of political determination. While reactive strategies like registering a formal complaint and reimbursement obligations are available, they are ineffective in addressing problem structures. There have been no prosecutions for those killed worldwide, and the failure to execute present regulations enable nations to avoid consequences by lying about statistics. Tamil Nadu holds the biggest incidence of septic or sewer reservoir mortality in India. The current pattern of shifting dangerous jobs to excluded individuals goes on unabated unless societal-based ideas are fixed and official backing of justice and industrialisation is established.

Conclusion

The paper here rightfully labels the practice manual scavenging as a de-humanising approach to labour, which is precisely and deliberately shaped by caste politics and

positioning of the same. The focus of the research was clearly stated in the beginning of this investigation, which highlighted how to decode the practice of manual scavenging that is an illegal happening, yet a commonly used aspect to maintain cleanliness as a cost of someone's life. A systematic review of literature was forwarded that focused on the ongoing practice of manual scavenging and certain grave reasons for it, likely that of caste politics, social discrimination, class hierarchy and blatant absence of political will-which proves to be relevant for removing such practices.

Then in the following part of this research, the investigation outlined 5 case studies which were essential to illustrate the issue of manual scavenging and its ongoing practice in India. A chronological presentation of the incidents, taking place within the regions of Kolkata (2021), Haryana (2022), Surat (2023), Delhi (2024) and in Tamil Nadu (2025) have been outlined in this paper, showcasing a continuous approach of this practice that is surviving on the evil practice of manual scavenging that dehumanises the agency of humanity and its basic tenets. The summary of these 5 instances resonates a larger or broader image in which the illegal practice is still continuing in India, which clearly reflects the ways in which lack of political will and caste politics are collectively destroying a social community.

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