



Intergenerational Disadvantage & Educational Marginalization of Manual Scavenging Communities : A critical analysis of policy gaps & social stigma

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Abstract

Manual scavenging as a way of earning livelihood is problematic in many aspects. It is at the same time also inundated with myriad misfortunes. Although, the deaths in the man holes or sewer pits do not make it to official records as deaths because of manual scavenging, it must be a deep concern for many good samaritans because it affects a significant chunk of the society who are still forced to do this job because of no other alternative or delayed relief (one time payment). In some cases, after a person has ceased to do the work under review, the pecuniary benefit is received after years, not even months. It is a travesty of the social upliftment and the so called eradication of this ghoulish practice must be thoroughly scrutinized. This paper attempts to delve into the intricacies that deeply influence the lives of individuals. It is also observed that people who are engaged in the aforementioned task pray before beginning their work, but in reality they should be raising their concerns to the relevant authority and the common practice of checking the possibility of toxic gas by doing a candle-test must remind them that they are just like the candle, wherein the bright flame symbolizes their life and it's just moments before they might experience sheer darkness. By understanding these dynamics, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on how to break the cycle of disadvantage, advocating for a more holistic approach that combines legislative reform with cultural shifts towards acceptance and integration. This not only addresses the immediate needs of these communities but also aims at long-term societal transformation where education becomes a genuine pathway out of manual scavenging for future generations.

Keywords : Manual Scavengers, Children & Education

Introduction

“The sewer is the conscience of the city. Everything there converges and confronts everything else.”

~ Victor Hugo, *The Intestine of Leviathan (Les Misérables)*

The issue of intergenerational disadvantage and educational marginalization within manual scavenging communities in India represents one of the most entrenched forms of social and economic exclusion. Manual scavenging, a practice deeply rooted in the caste system, not only imposes health risks but also a profound social stigma that marginalizes entire communities. Despite legislative efforts like the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, the persistence of manual scavenging underscores significant policy implementation failures. These communities face not just the immediate dangers of their occupation but also the long-term effects of social ostracism, which severely impacts educational access and attainment.

Manual scavengers usually use hand tools such as buckets, brooms and shovels. They often pay with their life as they are doing tasks without any safety equipment.*

Education, often seen as the great equalizer, fails to reach these children effectively due to a combination of factors: the economic necessity for child labour, social stigma that discourages school attendance, and educational systems ill-equipped to address the unique needs of these marginalized groups.

French Sewer workers - Sewer workers, like other employees, contribute to the national pension system. However, due to the physically demanding nature of their job, they might qualify for early retirement or enhanced pension benefits under certain conditions, such as disability due to work-related conditions. French labour laws promote a 35-hour workweek, with overtime regulated. While not directly mentioned for sewer workers, public sector jobs often include generous vacation days, which could be inferred to apply here. A strong emphasis on protective gear, regular health check-ups, and immediate medical attention in case of accidents, which is standard across hazardous jobs. India can draw inspiration from France’s comprehensive welfare system for sewer workers, adopting robust health, safety, and compensation measures.

Researches focusing on manual scavengers and the education of their children include **Sreya S.P.** and **Panneer S.** from the book “Manual Scavengers and Sustainable Development” discussing the broader implications of manual scavenging on education and development.

“No one goes into a sewer willingly. But when your kids are starving, these things do not matter. Children, wife, family, all these things take priority.

It can take seconds for a man to die in a sewer because the gases are so toxic. He won’t even know what has happened to him. Some gases can be checked for by burning a matchstick, another method is to throw sand in, or when we open the lid of a sewer we can see if it is all white or yellow and that shows that there is gas. But there is another kind of gas inside the sludge that can erupt from beneath and kill you.” – Shafique Massih, Sewer worker^

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of existing research papers concerning manual scavenging communities and their access to education. Data was collected primarily through secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and policy documents accessed via Google Scholar and other academic databases.

Data & Analysis

The children of manual scavengers, who are considered the most disadvantaged, are referred to by various names across different states. Bhangis can be found in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. The term “broken identity” carries a pejorative and dehumanising connotation. The Phakis reside in Andhra Pradesh, the Balmiki live in Haryana, and the Sakkiliars are found in Tamil Nadu. The children from different castes also refer to them by their caste name, which is considered abusive.

The children are imbued with the stigma that they are destined to engage in this activity due to its traditional nature, leaving them with no alternative but to carry out the labour. ¹ (Kennedy & Chatterjee, 2024)

The practice of referring using caste reference or association of utterance with caste significance should be discouraged from an earlier age. Societal change may take time and it's very difficult to achieve and experience total turnaround but educational institutions must take cognizance of this very thing so as to ensure that the practice dims to a certain extent and the brightness of an equal society is somewhat achieved.

Children frequently leave school due to their involvement in household duties and the need to support their family's income. As a result, their motivation for education diminishes, and they face various obstacles in accessing education, including discrimination from teachers and peers within the school setting.² (Kennedy & Chatterjee, 2024)

School environment plays a crucial role in shaping and moulding the life of any pupil. It stays with the learner for a considerable period of time. There's also a great variation as to how an individual perceives the same. One can use it to harness the positive factor in himself/herself, whereas some other might not be able to overcome certain incidents and might as well think of giving up considering the abominable nature of affairs. In order to ensure that caste based atrocities in any form are not inflicted, the educational institution must pay specific attention and timely assessment becomes paramount.

Some participants who worked at housing societies revealed that they felt scared of rich, educated, and high-caste people, and this was the reason why they couldn't do much to demand their rights. One participant described his fears: “These people are at a high caste, they are at a higher level, and if they do anything to me, then what will my family do? There is only one earning member in the family.” Another participant opened up and talked about his employers: “When I look at them, I feel scared. They are like this. They harass us.” As he went on to explain, “we have to get scared, what can we do? I have little children at home.”³ (Dubey & Murphy, 2020)

The aforementioned is a blatant example of why there's still an explicit existence of the deplorable practice of manual scavenging.

Two participants reported that the residents at their work sites hurled casteist slurs at them (Dubey & Murphy, 2020). “They insulted our entire community,” the participants shared. Another participant concluded, “there is no dignity in this work. There is no doubt about it.” The participants were determined to educate their children so that they would not have to work as manual scavengers. However, while on the one hand private schools are expensive because of the privatization of the education sector, on the other, government schools that are still affordable have poor quality of education. The participants reported that when their children attend government schools, they lose interest in education and drop out easily:

*If you go to a municipality school which starts at 7 in the morning, you will see that till 10 a.m. the teachers would be sitting inside the office only, chewing tobacco, etc. Even if they take a class, they hardly teach for half an hour. How will the children of our community focus then? They don't get education; they get only fun and play time. Later as they grow, they start feeling hungry to earn.*⁴

The above excerpt is a reminder of how we are behaving as a society. A person is going inside gutter holes to carry feces in tubs and in return he experiences abuses being hurled. It is not just that whether manual scavengers have been able or successful in raising their voice vis-à-vis grievances or issues but this also forces

us to imagine how difficult it must be for them to just explain their situation and condition. The indifferent attitude of society and authority concerned must also be taken into consideration. The state of education, as is perceived by people is a striking reminder of how we must work hard to ensure that the institutions have to deliver certain things for which they are designed or provided grants. If it's not able to provide something to the society in return, at least it must be reprimanded.

“Nobody cares when they die, nobody is scared, and nobody feels guilty. It's easier for the government to compensate for the loss of life with a few lakhs of rupees but they are not interested in investing in processes like mechanisation that would yield long-term benefits for the manual scavengers.” - Sanjeev Kumar, secretary of Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM).⁵

The way forward...

One of the most unsettling things about manual scavenging is that it happens right out in the open, in full view of people rushing to their offices, markets, or schools. Some people even stand by, watching. A train pulls into a station, and hundreds of passengers step off, not one of them really acknowledging the women cleaning waste from the tracks. Maybe they notice but don't grasp how terrible it is, or maybe they do and just don't care. (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021)⁶

While the Ministry for Social Justice claimed that there is no manual scavenging in India currently, two surveys conducted in 2013 and 2018 identified 58,098 'erstwhile manual scavengers'.

Even as the Union government claims that manual scavenging is not a caste-based occupation, it has been reported that close to 92% of the Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) profiled by the Social Justice Ministry belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Class (OBC) communities. The Ministry has been profiling SSWs as part of its National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) programme, formulated “to stop SSW deaths and to promote mechanisation of cleaning operations with a vision to reduce hazardous cleaning and ensure the safety of sanitation workers.”

An exclusive report published by The Hindu says that an analysis of this yet-to-be-published profiling data points towards a high consolidation of Dalit workers in the profession.⁷

Despite constitutional guarantees and policy interventions aimed at improving educational access for marginalized groups, the lived realities of these communities reveal persistent exclusion. The failure of policies to address the socio-cultural dimensions of manual scavenging, coupled with inadequate implementation, perpetuates educational disparities. Social stigma, tied to caste and occupation, reinforces segregation, limiting upward mobility and access to quality education. To overcome these challenges, there is a need for more holistic and intersectional policies that address not only economic but also social barriers.

Strengthening affirmative action, fostering inclusive pedagogies, and addressing the psycho-social impacts of stigma are critical. Only by bridging policy gaps and dismantling societal stigmas can India fulfill its promise of equitable education for all, breaking the cycle of disadvantage that has bound manual scavenging communities for generations. A transformative change requires not only legal frameworks but also a cultural shift towards acceptance and genuine integration, supported by comprehensive educational and social policies.

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