

The Lived Realities of Dalit Women Engaged in Manual Scavenging



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Engaged in Manual Scavenging
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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Constitution, in its preamble, guarantees equality and social justice for all citizens. Yet, the deeply entrenched practice of manual scavenging, a relic of the caste system, continues to blight the lives of millions, particularly Dalits. This abhorrent practice, despite being legally prohibited, persists due to the complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors.

Manual scavenging is defined under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, as any person engaged in manually handling human excreta. This hazardous and dehumanising task of cleaning human excreta from dry latrines, septic tanks, and open drains, is inherently linked to caste discrimination. Dalits, historically relegated to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, have been traditionally assigned this degrading occupation. This systemic oppression perpetuates a cycle of poverty, ill health, and social exclusion for generations.

While the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, prohibits manual scavenging, its effective implementation requires adequate financial resources for rehabilitation and alternative livelihood programs.

While the challenges faced by manual scavengers are multifaceted, the situation is particularly dire for Dalit women. They bear the brunt of the social stigma, face heightened risks of sexual violence and exploitation, and have limited access to education and employment opportunities.

The intersectionality of caste, gender, and age discrimination creates a unique set of challenges for these women, exacerbating their vulnerability and hindering their socio-economic mobility.

This section aims to shed light on the lived realities of Dalit women engaged in Manual Scavengings, their daily struggles, the psychological impact of this occupation, and the obstacles they face in escaping this cycle of poverty and discrimination.

By understanding their experiences, we can develop targeted interventions to address their specific needs and empower them to lead dignified and fulfilling lives.



Manual scavenging is defined under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, as any person engaged in manually handling human excreta.

THE EVERYDAY STRUGGLES OF A DALIT WOMAN ENGAGED IN MANUAL SCAVENGING

The life of a Dalit woman manual scavenger is a constant struggle against poverty, discrimination, and the constant threat to her health and well-being. Her days often begin before dawn, as she accompanies her family to the designated scavenging site, typically a dry latrine.



Case Study

Meera Balu, a Dalit woman sanitation worker, developed uterine prolapse as a result of regularly pulling heavy waste carts. The physical strain of this labour-intensive work, combined with a lack of medical support and protective measures, led to serious reproductive health complications.

A DALIT WOMAN ENGAGED IN MANUAL SCAVENGING FACES:

- Respiratory problems, skin diseases, and reproductive complications
- Social exclusion and discrimination in schools
- Significantly lower rates of literacy among Dalit women
- Ostracization and denial of basic human rights.
- Sexual violence, exploitation, and human trafficking.



Photo: Sudharak Olwe

■ HEALTH RISKS

Their day begins with the arduous task of manual cleaning, often involving wading through human excrement, often in unsanitary and hazardous conditions. The risk of exposure to harmful pathogens. The constant exposure to these toxins takes a severe toll on their physical health. Respiratory problems, skin diseases, and reproductive complications are common among women engaged in manual scavenging.

■ EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

Education often becomes a distant dream for these girls. The stigma associated with manual scavenging leads to social exclusion and discrimination in schools. Lack of access to proper sanitation facilities within schools further exacerbates the issue, forcing many girls to drop out. Moreover, the need to contribute to the family income often compels them to forgo education and join the family's scavenging work.

According to the National Sample Survey Office, the literacy rate among Dalit women is significantly lower than the national average, and school dropout rates are high among children from families engaged in manual scavenging.

■ SOCIAL STIGMA & EXPLOITATION

The social stigma surrounding manual scavenging extends beyond the family. These young women face constant discrimination in their communities, often being ostracised and denied basic human rights. This vulnerability increases their risk of sexual exploitation and violence. Numerous reports from human rights organizations document cases of sexual violence, exploitation, and human trafficking against Dalit women engaged in manual scavenging.

■ THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

The psychological impact of manual scavenging on Dalit women is profound and far-reaching.

MENTAL HEALTH:

The constant exposure to hazardous environments, the social stigma, and the lack of opportunities can lead to severe mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The traumatic experiences associated with manual scavenging, such as exposure to hazardous substances, witnessing violence, and experiencing discrimination, can lead to PTSD, characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, and hypervigilance.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM:

The constant discrimination and social exclusion can significantly impact their self-esteem and self-worth. They may internalise the societal stigma and feel ashamed of their occupation and their caste identity.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA:

The trauma of manual scavenging can be intergenerational, with the psychological impact affecting not only the individual but also their families and future generations.

FUND ALLOCATION FOR LIVELIHOOD SCHEMES FOR MANUAL SCAVENGERS UNDER SC BUDGET IN FY 2023-24 BE (RS IN CR)

	<i>Fund Allocation under SC Budget</i>				
Budget Allocation	National (SC)	MP (SC)	MH (SC)	Delhi (SC)	Jharkhand (SC)
Budget allocated under NAMASTE Scheme (FY 2023-24)	97.41	NA	NA	NA	NA
Budget allocated under SRMS (FY 2023-24)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.10	0.10
Budget allocated under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan	1354.90	9.88	19.80	0.00	17.00
Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) / National Rural Drinking Water Mission	15400.00	1145.12	1291.08	0.00	651.72
Budget allocated to Jal Board	0.00	112.00	1	0.30	26.19
Budget allocated to National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation	10.00	23	2.50	3.35	0.00
Scholarship for children of people engaged in unclean occupation	0.00	4.27	0.12	0.00	0.00

	<i>Fund Allocation under General Budget</i>				
Budget Allocation	National (SC)	MP (SC)	MH (SC)	Delhi (SC)	Jharkhand (SC)
Budget allocated under NAMASTE Scheme (FY 2023-24)	97.41	NA	NA	NA	NA
Budget allocated under SRMS (FY 2023-24)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Budget allocated under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan	12192.00	42.98	4025.00	447.50	60.00
Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) / National Rural Drinking Water Mission	70000.00	6157.92	5992.00	0.00	1903.01
Budget allocated to Jal Board	0.00	703	5608.1	2094.00	396.85
Budget allocated to National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation	10.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Scholarship for children of people engaged in unclean occupation	0.00	4.27	0.00	0.00	0.00

	Government Official Data					
Indicator	National	MP	MH	Delhi	Jharkhand	Bihar
Number of Dry Latrines	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Manual Scavengers	63063	560	7378	0	281	137
Number of Manual Scavengers(Rural) (SEC Census 2011)	182505	23105	68163	0	4153	7268
Number of Sanitation Workers (Urban) (SEC Census 2011)	1299116	78643	134482	49024	23691	47551
No. of survey conducted to identify the Manual Scavengers under the MS act of 2013	Two surveys conducted A. 2013 & B. 2018					
Eligible person identified by the Govt. for OTCA	58098	510	6325	0	192	131
Total amount transferred under OTCA (Rs. In Cr)	23239	2	25	0	1	1
Number of people receiving the Skill development Training UNDER NSKFDC(PM DAKSH)	16057	98	1332	0	34	18
Number of self-employed person after the Training (Skill Development Training)-Received Capital Subsidised Self-employed projects & sanitation related projects for manual scavengers including Sanitation Workers	1387	3	0	0	0	0
Death reported of Manual Scavengers between (2017-2021) (Highest-UP-52)	920	10	32	89	0	12

	Government Official Data					
Indicator	National	MP	MH	Delhi	Jhar-khand	Bihar
Number of Dry Laterines	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Manual Scavengers	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Manual Scavengers(Rural) (SEC Census 2011)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Sanitation Workers (Urban) (SEC Census 2011)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
No. of survey conducted to identify the Manual Scavengers under the MS act of 2013	2018	2018	2018	2018	2018	2018
Eligible person identified by the Govt. for OTCA	58098	510	6325	0	192	131
Total amount transferred under OTCA (Rs. In Cr)	232	2	25	0	1	1
Number of people receiving the Skill development Training UNDER NSKFDC(PM DAKSH)	1888	98	1556	0	34	18
Number of self-employed person after the Training (Skill Development Training)-Received Capital Subsidised Self-employed projects & sanitation related projects for manual scavengers including Sanitation Workers	2090	63	3	0	7	0
Death reported of Manual Scavengers between (2017-2021) (Highest-UP-52)	846	7	25	67	0	12

	Government Official Data					
Indicator	National	MP	MH	Delhi	Jhar- khand	Bihar
Number of Dry Laterines	2600000	60975	209382	69640	17139	87842
Number of Manual Scavengers	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Manual Scavengers(Rural) (SEC Census 2011)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of Sanitation Workers (Urban) (SEC Census 2011)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
No. of survey conducted to identify the Manual Scavengers under the MS act of 2013	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Eligible person identified by the Govt. for OTCA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Total amount transferred under OTCA (Rs. In Cr)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of people receiving the Skill development Training UNDER NSKFD(PM DAKSH)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Number of self-employed person after the Training (Skill Development Training)-Received Capital Subsidised Self-employed projects & sanitation related projects for manual scavengers including Sanitation Workers	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Death reported of Manual Scavengers between (2017-2021) (Highest-UP-52)	1760	4	30	26	No Data	9

COMPARATIVE BREAKDOWN OF BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

Under Scheduled Caste Budget and the General Budget across National and select States

Inconsistent State-Level Allocation

Several schemes, such as the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) and National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation, show zero or negligible allocation in most states, indicating uneven policy implementation. Notably, Delhi shows no allocation under most schemes in the SC Budget section.

High Investment in Infrastructure but Low Direct Support

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Jal Jeevan Mission have high allocations, particularly under the General Budget. However, direct livelihood schemes like SRMS have minimal allocations, suggesting a preference for infrastructure over direct community empowerment.

Dependence on General Budget for Major Schemes

Essential schemes like Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat are largely funded through the General Budget, not SC-specific budget, which may dilute focus on targeted community needs.

Neglect of Children in Manual Scavenging Communities

There is no recorded allocation for “Scholarship for children of people engaged in insanitary occupations” across national and state budgets, highlighting a critical gap in intergenerational support and rehabilitation.



STATE/UT WISE SEWER/SEPTIC TANK DEATHS AS ON 31.10.2022

<i>State</i>	<i>Number of Deaths</i>
Gujarat	153
Uttar Pradesh	116
Delhi	103
Maharashtra	46
Rajasthan	38
Haryana	94
Tamil Nadu	226
Andhra Pradesh	24
Punjab	41
West Bengal	22
Uttarakhand	9
Goa	6
Bihar	2
Odisha	2
Puducherry	9
Karnataka	86
Dadra & Nagar Haveli (UT)	3
Chhatisgarh	1
Chandigarh	3
Tripura	2
Kerala	13
Telangana	21
Madhya Pradesh	16



TABLE SOURCES:

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CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN ENGAGED IN MANUAL SCAVENGING



■ **Perpetuation of Caste-Based Occupations:**

The continued existence of manual scavenging despite legal prohibitions, demonstrates the deep-seated nature of caste discrimination in Indian society.

■ **Health Hazards:**

Exposure to hazardous substances, leads to severe health issues like respiratory problems, skin diseases, and reproductive complications.

■ **Social Stigma and Discrimination:**

The social ostracization faced by manual scavengers and their families, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and other basic human rights.

■ **Lack of Rehabilitation and Alternative Livelihoods:**

The inadequate support provided to those who escape manual scavenging, hinders their socio-economic mobility.

■ **Government Schemes and Rehabilitation Efforts**

While various government schemes exist to rehabilitate manual scavengers, their implementation is often flawed. Many women remain unaware of these programs due to a lack of outreach and education. An evaluation reveals that these initiatives frequently fail to meet the needs of the community effectively.

However, the intersectionality of caste, gender, and age exacerbates these challenges for Dalit women. They bear the brunt of the social stigma, face heightened risks of sexual violence and exploitation, and have limited access to education and employment opportunities. This section delves deeper into the lived realities of these young women, their daily struggles, and the urgent need for targeted interventions.

OBSTACLES TO UPLIFTMENT

Even those who escape the cycle of manual scavenging face significant barriers to upward mobility.

Lack of Access to Resources:

- Access to skill development programs, vocational training, and higher education is often limited for Dalit women. Scholarships and financial assistance are scarce, and societal prejudices often hinder their access to opportunities.

Societal Discrimination:

- Even after leaving manual scavenging, these women continue to face discrimination in the job market. Their caste identity and the stigma associated with their past often limit their employment opportunities.

Lack of Support Systems:

- There is a dearth of support systems and mentorship programs specifically designed to empower Dalit women. They often lack access to guidance and support networks to navigate the challenges of finding alternative livelihoods.

Role of Political Representation

- The lack of political representation for Dalit women impacts their ability to advocate for their rights and access to resources.

Role of Media & Popular Culture

- Media portrayals and popular culture often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce caste-based discrimination.
-

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address the challenges faced by Dalit women engaged in Manual Scavengings, targeted interventions are crucial.

1. EDUCATION & SKILL DEVELOPMENT

- **Scholarships and Financial Assistance:** Implement scholarships and financial aid programs specifically for Dalit youth women to access quality education, from primary to higher education. Go beyond financial aid.
- **Mentorship:** Pairing students with successful women role models from similar backgrounds.
- **Counselling Services:** Providing access to professional counsellors to address mental health concerns, social anxieties, and career guidance.

2. SKILL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

- **Workshops:** Organizing workshops on communication, leadership, and entrepreneurship to enhance their employability.
- **Vocational Training Programs:** Develop and implement vocational training programs in skills such as tailoring, embroidery, IT, and other relevant fields, equipping them with marketable skills.

- **Life Skills Development:** Incorporate life skills development programs, including financial literacy, communication skills, and leadership training, to empower them to make informed choices and navigate challenges.
-

3. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT:

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct widespread social awareness campaigns to challenge caste-based discrimination and break down stereotypes associated with manual scavenging.
-

- **Community Mobilization:** Engage with local communities to create a more inclusive environment for Dalit youth women, promoting social harmony and breaking down social barriers.
-

- **Mentorship and Support Networks:** Establish mentorship programs and support networks to provide guidance, counselling, and emotional support to Dalit women transitioning out of manual scavenging.
-

4. ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS:

- **Stricter Implementation of Laws:** Ensure strict enforcement of laws against manual scavenging and caste discrimination. Hold perpetrators accountable and provide adequate compensation to victims.
-

- **Strengthening of Legal Aid:** Provide access to legal aid and support services to Dalit women facing discrimination and exploitation.
-

5. PRIORITIZE HIGH-NEED AREAS:

- The allocation of funds should be prioritized based on the needs and challenges faced by different regions, with a focus on states with a high prevalence of manual scavenging and limited access to resources.
-

6. TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

- There needs to be greater transparency and accountability in the utilization of funds allocated for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers. Regular audits and monitoring mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that the funds are used effectively and efficiently.
-

7. REHABILITATION PROGRAMS:

- Develop targeted that provide financial support and skill development for Dalit women. Foster community awareness campaigns to educate both employers and workers about rights and available resources.
-

8. ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY:

- Improve access to information, resources, and online learning opportunities through digital literacy programs. Improve access to healthcare services, especially in remote areas, through telemedicine. Connect them with employment opportunities, support networks, and markets for their products through online platforms.
-

9. ROLE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR):

- Encourage the involvement of corporate entities in supporting rehabilitation programs and creating employment opportunities for Dalit women.
-

10. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:

- Explore the potential for international cooperation and collaboration in addressing the challenges faced by Dalit women engaged in Manual Scavenging.
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11. ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES:

- Eliminate Manual Scavenging and ensure that women do not continue this work either public or private spaces. Multi-pronged strategy to support women engaged in Manual Scavenging for alternative livelihood, including training and capacity building. And to ensure preventive measures are adopted so that no women continue this work.
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- **Caste Discrimination:** Advocate for the effective implementation and strengthening of reservation policies in education and employment to ensure equitable access for Dalit women. Advocate for the strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and the strengthening of legal frameworks to protect the rights of Dalit communities.
-

12. STRUCTURAL CHANGES:

- Implement comprehensive rural development programs that address poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to resources in rural areas where Dalit communities are concentrated. Advocate for land reforms to ensure equitable distribution of land and access to resources for Dalit communities.
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13. MONITORING AND EVALUATION:

Establish a robust system for regular data collection on the progress of rehabilitation programs, the impact of interventions, and the ongoing challenges faced by Dalit women.



Conduct independent evaluations of government programs and initiatives to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Ensure transparency and accountability in the implementation of all programs and initiatives aimed at empowering Dalit women.

14. BUDGET:

Allocate sufficient and targeted funds which serve the developmental needs of the Dalit women. Make these budgeted schemes accessible, available and timely delivered. Address the systemic gaps and loopholes in the accessibility of these budgeted Schemes and programmes.



Introduce more Dalit Sanitation workers specific livelihood scheme which is not confined to various kinds of sanitation work rather expand the horizon and make the mobility to other livelihood options easy and available.

CONCLUSION

The continued existence of manual scavenging in India is not just a policy failure, it is a moral and constitutional crisis. For Dalit women, this practice represents a brutal intersection of caste-based oppression, gendered violence, and systemic neglect. Their bodies bear the burden of a society that has long denied them dignity, safety, and choice.

This is a pressing human rights emergency that demands urgent, uncompromising action from policymakers, civil society, and institutional leaders. Reform cannot be symbolic, it must be rooted in justice, backed by robust financial commitment, and guided by community-led solutions. Rehabilitation programs must be fully funded, transparently implemented, and tailored to the lived realities of Dalit women. Anything less is complicity. India must rise to this moment, not just to abolish manual scavenging, but to affirm the humanity and agency of those who have been most violently erased.

Dignity is not a privilege, it is a right.



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