

**Research Article**

## The Perpetual ‘Other’: Plight of Women Manual Scavengers

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### ABSTRACT

The practice of manual scavenging has been relegated to Dalit women for centuries. This paper analyses the conditions of manual scavenging women and the different factors such as -caste, traditions, religion; which lead to their employment as manual scavengers. These women are alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender. Their subjugation is two-fold. One from outside the community- the upper castes; Second from within, that is, from their own families or men. They face violence when they try to leave this practice by the upper castes, their families and other Dalit communities, who are above them in the caste hierarchy. The paper aims to study how the intersections of caste, class and gender affect the position of these women. Women manual scavengers are the most marginalised communities, they are the Dalits amongst the Dalits.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Gender, Intersectionality, Marginalised, Scavenging

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### DEFINING MANUAL SCAVENGING

Manual scavenging is the practise of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling in any manner human wastes and excreta, from dry latrines and severs and the removal of animal carcass. It is carried out in private and communal latrines constructed by the government and non-governmental organisations. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, defines the term “manual scavenger” as “a person engaged or employed . . . by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary

latrine or in an open drain or pit.” The International Labour Organisation (ILO) distinguishes three forms of manual scavenging (Cleaning Human Waste “Manual Scavenging,” Caste, and Discrimination in India, 2014):

1. Removal of human excrement from public streets and dry streets, where the manual scavenger gathers the human excrement in a bucket or any other vessel and disposes it at a fixed place.
2. Cleaning septic tanks which function as waste disposal in toilettes in private homes and municipalities
3. Cleaning gutters and sewers

A vast majority of manual scavengers are Dalit women. This persists in all parts of the country. Manual scavengers collect the excrement from the backside of the houses as they are not allowed to enter inside. Similar kinds of arrangements can be found almost everywhere. Several different practices are also adapted to suit local needs. Dry latrines are used in many of the states. Even when toilets are constructed they are cleaned by manual scavengers. This is because sewer lines have not been laid out or have been laid out haphazardly. Such toilets are connected to septic tanks that are cleaned by human hands. The cleaning is usually done at night as the stench is so unbearable that opening the tank during the day when citizens are up is not an option. The task of cleaning septic tanks is more dangerous than the cleaning of dry latrines as the person has to get into the tank to clean it. In order to be able to do the task, one has to be intoxicated because it is impossible to do it in one's complete senses.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The practise of manual scavenging is not only a caste-based practise but also one that is patriarchal. Patriarchy as an overlying structure operates and controls the lives - social, political and economic lives of women. It can be described as a social system of authority and power which privilege men over women and in which 'women can lay claims to material, sexual and intellectual resources, only through fighting for them' (Geetha, 1995: 4). It is the domination or absolute rule of the patriarch/father or the eldest male member of the family. This domination is exercised not only over women but also younger and socially or economically subordinate men. As explained earlier, it is this patriarchal social system that controls every aspect of women's lives.

Patriarchy as a form of power of men over women has existed in various cultural and social contexts during different historical periods. Even though patriarchal social

systems are responsible for women's experiences, conflicts and struggles in various contexts, they are never the same. The study and analysis of these differences started in the 1980s and 1990s when an increasing number of black and third world feminist thinkers posed challenge to the prevalent discourses around feminism of white middle-class feminists. It led to the emergence of three categories - women, experience and personal politics. The category of 'woman' was conceived as collectively, based on their being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. The identities of class, race and ethnicity were excluded from the category of woman. Thus, the experiences of women were universalised. It was in the 1980s that black feminists questioned the sex/class debate arguing that 'the complex interplay between sex, class, race needed to be underlined' (Rege, 1998: 40). This led to the inclusion of the 'different voices' of women of different nationalities, races, classes, and ethnicities. The plurality that existed among women was recognised and the underlying 'analysis of the structures of racism, patriarchies, international division of labour and capitalism' were to be included. This came to be known as intersectionality.

As in the western context, upper-caste, urban, middle class women dominated the Indian feminist movement. In India, the question of caste was left unattended in the feminist discourse. The different voice of Dalit women was not asserted. This led to many scholars arguing that Dalit women needed an autonomous assertion of their issues at both regional and national levels. It was argued that brahmanism underlies in the feminist movements and in Dalit politics. Patriarchy plays out differently for Dalit women. They carry the burden of two identities - gender and caste. Their experiences are different from a middle-class upper caste woman. Further, this discourse does not take caste into consideration the fact that many social ills like child marriage, enforced widowhood and dowry are brahmanical practices. The feminist movement conceived women as 'victims and therefore Dalits'. Thus, caste was contained in class. Efforts were aimed at 'drawing commonalities across classes and to a lesser extent castes or communities' (Rege, 1998: 42) An analysis of the form of violence against women reveals that the upper caste women a higher incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexually by the family. On the other hand, Dalit women are more likely to 'face collective and public treat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and women.

In Dalit movements such as the Dalit Panther movement, the role of Dalit women was again reduced to that of a 'mother' or a 'victimised sexual being.' Thus, from the 1990s, Dalit women's groups and organisations started to organise themselves independently from the feminist movements and the Dalit movements.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The practice of manual scavenging emerged with the rise of the institution of caste. The sacred scriptures throw light on the existence of manual scavenging. According to these scriptures and other literature, scavenging, especially the disposal of night-soil by a particular caste has been in existence since the beginning of civilisation (Pathak, 2000: 37). It is one of the 15 duties of slaves as enumerated in the *Naradiys Samhita*. In *Vajasaneyi Samhita* the Chandalas are referred to as slaves who were responsible for the disposal of night soil (Srivastava, 1997: 16).

Some scholars have linked the emergence of manual scavenging as a profession with the coming of Mughals in India. It is believed that the need for *purdah* amongst the Muslim women led to the designing and construction of bucket privies. Those who were made prisoners during wars were forced to clean latrines, bucket privies and throw off the night-soil at distant places. These captives when later freed were not accepted by the society and they formed their own separate caste and continued manual scavenging (Singh, 2014: 265). However, this argument is not too strong as manual scavenging was born out of the barbaric caste system which has been pushing Dalits into such inhuman tasks for centuries.

With the expansion of cities, there has been an upsurge in the practice of manual scavenging. It was during the British rule that manual scavenging was a statutory institutional form. Posts were created for manual scavenging in army cantonments, municipalities, railways and civil courts. However, this does not imply that the British created the system of manual scavenging. They institutionalised an already existing practice.

During Partition, the Pakistani government sent all the Hindus to India but kept the manual scavenging castes in their country. They could not afford to let go of the *safai karamcharis* as who would do the dirty work if they went. Similarly, the Indian government was concerned only with the other Hindu castes coming safely to India and not a single thought was spared to the *safai karamcharis*. Dr Ambedkar took this issue with Jawaharlal Nehru, writing him a letter about how the *safai karamcharis* were forcibly being held in Pakistan and requested him to intervene. However, his pleas were unheard (Ambedkar, 2014: 396). The condition of Dalits remains terrible even in an independent India and the cruel practice of manual scavenging persists.

## **WOMEN AS MANUAL SCAVENGERS**

Dalit women engaged as manual scavengers are alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender. They are amongst the most marginalised communities. Caste hierarchy

and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the Brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected. Dalit women's subjugation is characterised by their expression of two distinct patriarchal structures - a Brahmanical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatises Dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of their women.

The Brahminical and patriarchal structure of society has relegated these women to inhuman practices such as manual scavenging. This is due to the social evaluation of work in the caste system as 'clean' or 'unclean'; 'pure' or 'impure'; 'polluting' or 'non-polluting'. The superior tasks are the domain of the so-called "upper caste" and the jobs considered as "filthy" and "inferior" are to be done by the Dalits.

Manual scavenging is a pan-India phenomenon. Almost 95% of women are engaged in this practice. The practice is similar in all parts of the country but several different practices have developed in areas to cater to the local needs. The position of women in each of these manual scavenging communities is the same across different regions and even religions. The basket in which the women manual scavengers carry the excrement is a symbol of the oppression and slavery that they have been pushed into and the daily struggles they face. That is why, when some of these women decide to leave the inhuman practice of manual scavenging they first burn their baskets as a sign of liberation.

The caste system has designed the subjugation of these women for generations and has ensured that "the basket" is passed from generation to generation. The suppression has continued for so long that the majority of these women find it impossible to even think of coming out of this practice. They are forced to engage in manual scavenging as they have no other alternative profession as an option.

### **ENSLAVED BY TRADITION AND RELIGION**

The most common observation throughout India is that women mostly get engaged in manual scavenging after their marriage. They are forced into this practice because of their families. The mother-in-law who herself works as a manual scavenger hands over a part of the responsibility to the daughter-in-law. Usually, families try to keep their daughters away from such practices but pressurise the daughter in law into doing it.

When the women protest, the families resort to violence. The women are trapped by the husband and his family and are threatened to be thrown out of the family if they refuse to work. They choose the indignity of manual scavenging than facing the humiliation of being thrown out of their husband's homes.

Marriages are fixed on the basis of the number of houses the boy's family 'do'. More the number of houses, the more rotis they earn. It determines the status of the family. This arithmetic is carried out very carefully by the families to ensure that their daughters don't suffer later.

These women have also been known as '*jagirdars*' at some parts of India such as Madhya Pradesh. Each *jagir* or feudal property consists of the houses from where these women collect human excreta. The inhuman act of picking up excrement from one's bare hands has been wrapped in a 'wealth-indicative' term like *jagirdari* and this is how centuries of exploitation has been legitimatised. The mother in law is the *jagir* who passes on the *jagirdari* to the daughter-in-law. After the marriage, the mother-in-law is entrusted with the task of dividing this *jagirdari*.

Manual Scavenging is not only prevalent among the Hindus but also the Muslims. In both the religions, the task of collecting and disposing of excrement is carried out by women and they are treated as untouchables. Muslim women face discrimination like Hindu Dalit women. In Madhya Pradesh, this work of manual scavenging falls on the shoulders of the *Hela* community and they face discrimination for it on various levels. However, it is very subtle and not very visible from the outside.

Entry in the mosque is allowed for everyone for the namaz but the discrimination is evident during festivals. During *roza-iftaari* in Ramzan, people from the *Hela* community are not allowed to sit and have meals with everyone else. They are not invited for *roza-iftaari* and are even served separately. Their children are humiliated in schools and are not allowed to take water from the communal pitcher. They are discriminated and alienated by their own community.

There is great resistance among women of the *Hela* community against leaving their jobs as manual scavengers. They believe that they are the *jagirdars* and it is their duty to do this work. They continue to engage themselves in manual scavenging even when many of their family members have moved out of this practice to other clean, dignified, secure professions.

A few similarities can be found in the Hindu and Muslim manual scavengers. The women cover their faces- Hindu women wear *ghoonghat* while the Muslim women are in *purdah*. They both wear a *lugda* which is a piece of cloth about one fourth the length of a sari and is worn over the petticoat. Hindu women wear the *lugda* over the petticoat instead of a sari when they go out for cleaning toilets. The *Hela* women, on the other hand, hoist up their *salwars* and wear the *lugda*. They pull over their veils as they go out for work.

However, there are a few contradictory aspects of the *Hela* community. They don't allow their women to step out of the house except for work. They are made to observe *purdah* strictly. Girls are not allowed to go to schools or madrasas and are confined in the four walls of the house. These are the same women who have to step out of their houses early in the morning to sweep roads and clean toilets.

### **PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONS**

The relation between the manual scavengers and the upper castes who employ them is traditionally that of a patron and client. The manual scavengers are seen as 'filthy' and 'impure' and are considered as 'untouchables'. The discrimination is carried out at various levels. The houses of the manual scavengers are separate and are located at a distance from the upper caste settlements. As the manual scavengers pass by roads and lanes with their basket of excrement, people move aside giving passage, so that their shadow does not fall on them. Their children are referred to as '*bhangin*' in schools and are made to sit separately. They are even made to clean toilets after school hours.

Contrary to this, there is another side of the relationship where there is no hostility. For instance, Uttar Pradesh employs the highest number of manual scavengers. In the city of Kanpur, 60% of the areas do not have sewers and use dry latrines which are "cleaned" by manual scavengers. These are mainly found in Muslim dominated areas.

The manual scavengers in these areas are mainly women because of the strict observance of *purdah* among most of the Muslim houses where men are not allowed to enter. Many of these manual scavenging women work on credit since the people in the locality are not in a good financial position. People are unemployed and do not even have enough to fill their stomachs. In this scenario, only very few houses are able to pay these women for their services. They are paid every month or whenever their financial situation is somewhat stable. The relations between the manual scavenging women and the Muslim women are not at all hostile. They treat each other as equals.

Both these communities suffer due to the filth. They understand each other's problems and limitations. The poor Muslims have not benefitted from the government schemes for the construction of flush toilets. They do not have the money to get the toilets constructed themselves. The schemes and policies never reach them. Manual scavengers, too, have not been able to access the rehabilitation and eradication of manual scavenging schemes. Both communities continue to suffer due to the lack of political will and apathy of the policymakers.

## **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMPULSION**

Women are forced into manual scavenging because most of them are the sole bread earners in the family. The burden of the entire household falls upon their shoulders. This makes leaving this inhuman profession impossible for them. They succumb to the pressure from the families and the need for minimum survival. They continue to work for wages as low as 12 rupees per day. There is gender disparity in terms of wages where men are paid more than women for the same tasks. It also varies from state to state. For example, the state of West Bengal fares better in terms of wages for women manual scavengers than most of the other states. The temporary workers are paid 85 rupees a day and the permanent workers receive a salary of 5000-6000 per month here.

The government provides loan as rehabilitation for manual scavengers to provide them with an alternative profession. However, there is refusal on part of the women to accept these loans as they see no benefit in it. This is because most of the men are drunkards largely clean only sewers and sewer tanks and the burden of the household falls on the shoulders of the women. They are afraid to take loans, especially large amounts of money.

Women have not benefited from the projects and schemes for the eradication of manual scavenging either. Most of them are unaware of the existence of such projects. Even when they are aware they are not able to access them due to the apathy of the political elite and red-tapism among the officials who are responsible for the implementation of these schemes.

The manual scavenging women suffer numerous ailments including skin diseases, dermal ailments, lung diseases, TB, pneumonia, acute anaemia due to unhygienic conditions at work. Extreme poverty does not allow them to rest even during their pregnancy. They have complicated pregnancies which sometimes result in miscarriages. They even get infected with harmful diseases which have an impact on the health of their children.

Thus, the first enemy of these women is the basket full of filth, the second is the drinking habit of their husbands and other men of the family, and third, addictions to smack and other intoxicants spreading like a fire among the children. These children steal utensils and even grills of cooler to pay for these drugs. There are smack rackets in every street and lane. Women were earlier burdened with manual scavenging now also have to witness their children's life getting destroyed.

## REHABILITATION: THE WAY FORWARD

Women are caught in the vicious cycle of caste oppression, gender exploitation and economic disparity. They have been forced to live their entire lives in this way. The feudal oppression has continued, with the basket passing generation after generation. They face relentless pressure from their families, the upper castes and even the government which sees them as 'indispensable functionaries of the state'. Manual scavenging is considered to be the duty of Dalit women which they have to perform. This notion is so deeply embedded that women themselves feel that it is their responsibility.

The caste system has organised this oppression so systematically that the women can't even think of leaving their jobs. They get one roti and few rupees for the cleaning that they do and sometimes are given a little extra money for removing animal carcasses. They are handed old clothes during festivals, all this translates into a support system for these women. This 'support system' is a trap which makes it difficult for the women to leave the practice of manual scavenging. The barbaric, Brahmanical and patriarchal society has mentally enslaved them and thus the exploitation never ends.

The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993 made the employment of manual scavengers for cleaning of dry latrines a criminal offence. The law, however, was never truly implemented as there were several drawbacks. It did not deal with social issues such as untouchability, caste and gender discrimination. The rehabilitation schemes have focused only on the financial aspect and ignored the social aspect, causing several "rehabilitated" people to eventually fall back to the practice. The financial rehabilitation programs were male-centric, while it is the women who make up the largest chunk of those engaged in this occupation.

Legal provisions banning manual scavenging under the above-mentioned law have remained on paper and were not implemented. The penalties were never imposed on the perpetrators. According to the National Advisory Council, "almost no one has been punished under this law." In fact the municipalities, corporations and the local bodies have continued to employ people as manual scavengers. With their new identity of *safai karamchari* given to them by the state, it may appear that they have earned a secular status in the society. Social scientists call them 'professionals of the city' and the Delhi Municipal Corporation has named them *swasthya kamgar* (the health workers). But the reality doesn't do any justice to these seemingly respectable identities.

Organisations like the Safai Karamchari Andolan and Jan Sabhas have been playing a crucial role in liberating women from manual scavenging. Jan Sabhas have identified women and have provided them with alternative jobs. They are trained to actively participate in campaigns against manual scavenging through door-to-door campaigns, talking to other women, informing them about rehabilitation under the law and giving them hope to dream of a better future for themselves and their families. The Safai Karamachari Andolan too has liberated many such women. It has fought legal battles for the eradication of manual scavenging and has organised women along with many other Dalit organisations across the country.

## CONCLUSION

Women have tried to break free from this cruel practice of manual scavenging. They have organised themselves with the help of the civil society groups. They have even taken the course of political representation to fight for their causes. They have contested for municipalities and local government elections and have been victorious in many. However, they are met with challenges at every step. It has been difficult for them to leave behind their past lives as there have been many incidents where they were boycotted for leaving their jobs. The boycott comes not just from the upper castes but also from their own communities, the Dalits. The Dalits, who are at a higher position in the caste hierarchy, tend to look down upon the manual scavengers, who are usually the lowest rung in the social ladder. This shows how deeply the Manu order has penetrated society.

The Dalit women have been the perpetual 'other'. Their centuries' long alienation by the Brahmanical, patriarchal structure, has caused invisibility, exclusion and structural and domestic violence. Even among the women, they are the 'others'. They are the Dalits amongst the Dalits. Besides these external factors, several other internal factors have led to the mobilisation of these women separately vis-à-vis the Dalit men. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated and at times suppressed an independent political expression of Dalit women. They have faced exclusion not just politically but culturally as well. Dalit men are producing the same mechanisms that their upper-caste adversaries have been using to oppress them. The resistance amongst the women is extremely crucial.

People have been unaware of the agony of this community. The manual scavenging women have been kept invisible deliberately. The insensitivity can also be seen in the Dalit communities towards manual scavengers. The Dalit movements have taken up the issue of manual scavenging. The liberation of these women has also not been part of the feminist movements either. The issues and struggles of manual scavenging

women were never important enough for these movements to fight for their liberation. These women are the Dalits among the Dalits who remain unseen and their voices unheard.

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