



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Manual Scavenging Around the World: A Human Rights and Legal Perspective

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Abstract

Manual scavenging — the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing, or handling human excreta from insanitary latrines, sewers, and septic tanks — is one of the most degrading forms of labor known to humanity. Despite being legally banned in multiple countries, including India, it continues to persist in different forms, reflecting deep-rooted social inequality, caste-based discrimination, and state failure to ensure human dignity. The practice violates fundamental human rights, including the right to life, dignity, equality, and safe working conditions. This research paper examines manual scavenging from a global legal perspective, analyzing the human-rights dimensions, the international legal framework, and the national legislations addressing this issue — with India as the central focus. It discusses the historical and social roots of the practice, the legal evolution of prohibitions and rehabilitation measures, the gaps in implementation, and the global parallels where unsafe sanitation work continues. The paper argues that the persistence of manual scavenging represents not just a failure of law enforcement but a failure of moral and constitutional duty. The conclusion emphasizes the urgent need for holistic reform combining legal enforcement, social change, mechanization, and rehabilitation to restore dignity to affected communities and eradicate the practice permanently.

Keywords: manual scavenging, human rights, caste discrimination, sanitation workers, India, forced labor, law and dignity, rehabilitation, human-rights violations.

Introduction

Manual scavenging is still one of the most widespread and degrading forms of labor exploitation in today's world. Although it has been formally abolished, it continues to have an impact on lives and dignity in poor countries. In India, the practice is intimately associated with caste discrimination, in which people from historically oppressed groups, primarily Dalits, are compelled, forced, or socially harassed to clean human feces by hand. Hazardous manual handling of human waste remains in a variety of global countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa, owing mostly to poverty, insufficient mechanization, and a disrespect for sanitation workers' rights.

Manual scavenging is a fundamental human rights issue that goes beyond occupational health and labor rights. It illustrates systemic injustice and relentless hostility. Every year, hundreds of people die while cleaning sewers and septic tanks without sufficient safety equipment, inhaling toxic fumes, or drowning in filth. The tale behind these fatalities is one of discrimination, government apathy, and a failure to provide safe and dignified alternatives. This study analyzes these truths through the lens of international and national law, concentrating on India's legislative and policy successes while drawing parallels to worldwide conditions.

Definition and Concept of Manual Scavenging

Manual Scavenging refers to the process of cleaning, transporting, dumping, or managing human waste from dry toilets, open drainage systems, pits, sewers, or train tracks without using safety equipment. In layman's terms, it is the manual extraction of untreated human excrement, usually with bare hands, buckets, or simple equipment. This employment is not only dirty, but also degrading, robbing individuals of their dignity and posing serious health concerns.

As per the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, a “manual scavenger” refers to any individual who is engaged or employed, either directly or indirectly, in the manual cleaning, transporting, discarding, or handling in any way human waste in an unsanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit where human excreta from unsanitary latrines is disposed, or on railway tracks or in other locations or premises as specified by the Central Government. The definition also encompasses individuals compelled to enter sewers and septic tanks for cleaning without protective equipment or machinery (Government of India, 2013).

The core of manual scavenging involves its degradation — a type of work that flourishes at the intersection of social stigma and poverty with poor governance. It is labor that society overlooks but relies on to uphold sanitation. In legal and moral terms, it is a violation not just of statutory provisions but of basic humanity.

Historical and Social Background

Manual scavenging in India dates back to the severe caste order that exists in Hindu society. For decades, members of specific castes, particularly those dubbed "untouchables" or "Dalits," were socially assigned the chore of cleaning human feces. This art was deemed so defiling that it became hereditary. Families born into these communities were routinely denied other forms of employment, education, and social mobility. While codifying caste for census and administrative purposes, British colonial officials implicitly perpetuated the system by hiring Dalits to work in municipal sanitation.

After independence, India inherited this deeply ingrained problem. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the eradication of "untouchability" under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, manual scavenging continued. Social conventions, combined with economic deprivation and a lack of knowledge, kept entire communities trapped in this inhumane vocation. As sociologist Anand Teltumbde (2010) observed, manual scavenging is "the institutionalization of caste-based slavery in modern India."

Despite constitutional and moral prohibitions, manual scavenging persists due to the combination of caste, poverty, and institutional ineptitude. The issue is more than just cleaning up human waste; it is also about clearing society's moral conscience by confronting the fact that human dignity cannot coexist with caste-based or discriminatory work.

Historical Background and Socio-Economic Roots

Manual scavenging has a long history, particularly on the South-East Asia, where it became inextricably linked to caste structures and socio-religious practices. Manual scavenging, or cleaning human excreta by hand, was traditionally assigned to members of the Dalit or untouchable groups. This link between caste and sanitation work was an intentional form of social exclusion, exacerbated by centuries of prejudice under the Hindu varna system.

Manual scavenging originated as a byproduct of urbanization during the colonial period. The British introduced dry latrines and unlined sewage systems to India's expanding cities, but they failed to develop humane waste disposal techniques. This resulted in an "invisible labour class" obliged to perform terrible sanitary chores for pitiful pay. The British colonial authority frequently outsourced sanitation labor to certain communities, so integrating caste-based occupational segregation into the state system itself.

After independence, India committed to remove untouchability under Article 17 of the Constitution, yet manual scavenging remained a societal reality. The contrast between constitutional promises and ground reality indicated a severe systemic failure: despite legislative abolition, scavenging employment remained economically compelled and assigned based on caste. This historical abuse is not unique to India; countries

like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal acquired similar caste-based sanitation hierarchy as a result of common cultural and colonial legacies.

Manual scavenging in Africa and portions of Asia is driven by poverty, urban neglect, and a lack of sanitation facilities rather than caste. For example, in Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, informal sanitation workers manually clean pit latrines and open sewers without safety equipment, frequently for subsistence rates. Informal garbage handlers in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, endure comparable violations of health and dignity.

While the moral reason may differ (caste, poverty, or marginalization), the underlying pattern is continuous across borders: the world's poorest, most socially ostracized groups are forced to handle human feces with their bare hands. It is a modern manifestation of systemic violence, in which some lives are considered less valued than others.

Manual Scavenging as a Human Rights Violation

Manual scavenging is against the fundamental ideals of human dignity, equality, and nondiscrimination enshrined in international human rights law. At its core, the practice dehumanizes individuals by assigning them degrading duties based simply on their birth, caste, gender, or poverty. It is a clear violation of the right to live with dignity provided by Article 21 of the Indian Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Right to Dignity and Equality Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Manual scavenging strongly undermines this ideal by subjecting persons to social ostracism and inhumane working circumstances. Manual scavengers in India are frequently denied access to public spaces, education, and even drinking water owing to caste stigma. This systemic discrimination breaches Articles 14 (Equality before the law) and 15 (Prohibition of Discrimination) of the Indian constitution.

Similar forms of prejudice exist around the world. In Pakistan, Christian minorities and Dalit Muslims are overrepresented among sanitation workers. In Bangladesh, the Harijan and Rishi minorities endure similar discrimination. Such occupational segregation constitutes systemic racial and social discrimination, which is forbidden under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Right to safe and healthy working conditions manual scavenging also violates the right to safe and healthy working conditions, which is recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Workers frequently enter toxic septic tanks or handle human excreta without wearing gloves, masks, or other protective equipment.

Asphyxiation is a common cause of mortality following exposure to methane and hydrogen sulfide gasses. These preventable deaths constitute official negligence and structural violence, violating Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which ensures safe working conditions and protection from cruel treatment.

Gender dimensions manual scavenging is disproportionately carried out by women, notably those who clean dry latrines. Women experience triple discrimination: as Dalits, women, and sanitation workers. They are frequently denied equal pay to men and subjected to verbal, sexual, and social abuse. Their children are similarly excluded, perpetuating the cycle of caste-based poverty. This gendered feature of manual scavenging highlights violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), particularly with safe employment and dignity.

Children's Rights and Intergenerational Impact poverty and social marginalization lead many offspring of manual scavengers to work in the same jobs. This breaches the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which requires states to protect children from dangerous labor and offer education. Scavenging's intergenerational nature means that an entire community is trapped in degrading labor, making it a human rights and development failure.

International Legal Framework

Manual scavenging, while frequently regarded as a "domestic problem," falls fully within the purview of international human rights and labor law. Several worldwide agreements, declarations, and frameworks expressly or tacitly condemn such behavior.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 The UDHR establishes the groundwork for recognizing manual scavenging as a violation of human rights. Article 1 affirms the dignity and equality of all human beings. Article 23(1) recognizes the right to fair and pleasant working conditions. Article 25 ensures the right to health and well-being. Manual scavenging violates all of these provisions, including individual dignity and humanity's collective conscience.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was signed in 1966. Article 7 of the ICCPR provides freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment, as well as equality before the law (Article 26). Forcing marginalized people to clean human waste without protection or other jobs breaches their fundamental civil rights.

International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966. The ICESCR requires member states to provide just and favorable working conditions (Article 7). Article 12 guarantees the right to

the best possible physical and mental health. Right to education (Article 13). The existence of manual scavenging demonstrates that a state has failed to meet these commitments.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) Standards. The ILO treaties, particularly the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No. 155) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), place legal requirements on nations to eliminate hazardous labor and employment discrimination. Manual scavenging falls under both because it is risky and based on social inequality.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a new framework for evaluating the eradication of manual scavenging. Goal 3: Ensure healthy lifestyles and promote well-being for people of all ages. Goal 5: Ensure gender equality and empower all women and girls. Goal 6: Ensure universal access to water and sanitation, as well as their sustainable management. Goal 8: Encourage adequate employment and economic growth for everyone. Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and between countries. The continued existence of manual scavenging globally represents a direct failure to achieve these goals.

International Advocacy and UN Special Rapporteurs. The UN Special Rapporteurs on Water and Sanitation and on Contemporary Forms of Racism have regularly condemned manual scavenging in India, Pakistan, and Nepal. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Dalit Solidarity Network all described it as "a form of modern-day slavery."

For example, Human Rights Watch's 2014 report, *Cleaning Human Waste: "Manual Scavenging," Caste, and Discrimination in India*, documented that, despite legal prohibitions, thousands of sanitation workers continue to clean dry latrines by hand, a clear violation of India's international human rights obligations.

National Legal Framework

India's Legal Response India has undertaken multiple legislative attempts to eliminate manual scavenging, but the practice continues due to inadequate enforcement, societal stigma, and a lack of rehabilitation.

Constitutional Provisions The Indian Constitution expressly prohibits untouchability and other forms of demeaning work. The key provisions include: Article 14 guarantees equality before the law. Article 17 explicitly abolishes untouchability and prohibits its practice in any manner. Article 21 protects the right to life with dignity. Article 23 prohibits forced labor, including caste-based manual scavenging. These constitutional guarantees declare manual scavenging unlawful and incompatible with the right to live in dignity.

The Act of 1993 Prohibiting the Employment of Manual Scavengers and the Construction of Dry Latrines. This was India's first central regulation that clearly prohibited the employment of manual scavengers. The Act prohibited the use of hand scavengers to clean dry latrines, as well as the building or maintenance of dry (non-

flush) latrines. However, the Act had significant flaws, including: weak implementation--no harsh punishment or clear rehabilitation provisions--limited scope--it only applied to dry latrines and not septic tanks, manholes, or sewer cleaning--and poor enforcement--most states failed to notify or implement the law.

In short, while symbolically important, the 1993 Act failed to address the deeper social and economic roots of the issue.

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Rehabilitation Act of 2013. Recognizing the flaws of the 1993 law, Parliament passed a more comprehensive statute in 2013. This Act sought to not only outlaw, but also rehabilitate manual scavengers.

Section 5 prohibits the employment of manual scavengers and the installation of unsanitary latrines. Section 6 requires municipal governments to destroy or renovate unsanitary latrines. Section 13 addresses the identification and rehabilitation of manual scavengers. Section 14: Employers of manual scavengers face up to two years in prison and penalties.

Most crucially, the Act acknowledged that rehabilitation must include alternative livelihood opportunities, housing, and education for affected families.

The 2020 Amendment Proposal. In 2020, the Indian government proposed revisions to the 2013 Act, introducing the "Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020." This attempted to completely automate sewage cleaning through the "NAMASTE" initiative (National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem). Provide insurance, safety equipment, and health benefits to sanitation personnel. Implement real-time monitoring for sewer deaths.

Though well-intentioned, detractors contend that implementation is spotty, and septic tank deaths occur. Between 2014 and 2023, over 1,000 sanitation workers died while manually cleaning sewers, serving as a stark reminder of the gap between law and practice.

Judicial interpretation and landmark cases. The Indian judiciary has played an important role in enforcing the constitutional and human rights aspects of manual scavenging.

Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India (2014, 11 SCC 224) This important Supreme Court decision determined that manual scavenging violates Articles 17 and 21 of the Constitution. The Court mandated the immediate implementation of the 2013 Act, rehabilitation of manual scavengers and their dependents, ₹10 lakh compensation for families of sanitation workers who died in sewers, and declared every death inside a manhole or septic tank as a crime of negligence by state authorities. This judgment remains the strongest judicial pronouncement on the dignity of sanitation workers in India.

State of Maharashtra vs. Bandu Mukundji Karade (2009) In this case, the Bombay High Court ruled that employing manual scavengers violated the right to life with dignity and ordered the state to give alternative employment to people involved in such activity. The Court highlighted that mere restriction was insufficient; rehabilitation needed to be effective and rapid.

People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India (1982), 3 SCC 235 Though not directly related to scavenging, this case enlarged the definition of "forced labor" under Article 23. The Supreme Court ruled that any labor performed under the compulsion of poverty, caste, or social circumstances is forced labor. This concept clearly applies to manual scavenging, where social coercion replaces direct physical force.

Legal and Policy Developments in Other Countries

PAKISTAN manual scavenging is frequent in Christian and Dalit Muslim communities, which are overrepresented in sanitation personnel. While Pakistan does not have a particular law outlawing manual scavenging, its Constitution (Articles 11 and 25) outlaws forced labor and guarantees equality. Municipalities, on the other hand, continue to hire sweepers manually, without the use of machinery. Civil society organizations, such as the Center for Law and Justice (CLJ), have called for comprehensive legislation to eliminate caste-based employment.

BANGLADESH In Bangladesh, the Harijan and Rishi groups continue to clean sewers and pit latrines manually. The Local Government (City Corporation) Act, 2009, and the Municipal Act, 2009, govern sanitary activities, however there is no clear prohibition on manual scavenging. The World Bank-supported government effort "Citywide Inclusive Sanitation" seeks to mechanize waste management and rehabilitate informal sanitation workers.

NEPAL Though Nepal abolished the caste system in 1963, Dalit communities—particularly those historically concerned in cleaning—continue to endure prejudice. The Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment) Act of 2011 criminalizes untouchability and social exclusion, which indirectly includes manual scavenging. NGOs like FEDO (Feminist Dalit Organization) have spearheaded programs to rehabilitate female manual cleaners.

AFRICAN CONTEXT In Sub-Saharan Africa, pit latrines and open drains are frequently cleaned manually. Kenya's Occupational Safety and Health Act (2007) compels employers to supply protective equipment, yet informal sanitation workers are nonetheless unprotected. In Ghana and Nigeria, sanitation workers frequently work in the informal sector without legal registration or safety precautions, violating international labor norms.

WESTERN CONTEXT Manual scavenging, which is common in South Asia, is almost nonexistent in wealthy countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom due to technology sanitation systems. However, the concept continues symbolically in the form of "dirty jobs" that are disproportionately assigned

to migrants or marginalized racial groups, raising worries about structural labor inequality rather than manual scavenging itself.

Comparative Global Perspective

When looking at manual scavenging globally, two tendencies emerge: caste-based exploitation in South Asia and class-based exploitation elsewhere. In both cases, marginalized groups are obliged to perform degrading sanitation tasks. In India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the problem is entrenched in caste-based exclusion. In African countries, it is linked to economic inequality and a lack of sanitation facilities. Informal rubbish pickers in Latin America suffer similar perils, albeit without the stigma of caste.

Globally, the practice persists since sanitation is still an undervalued sector. Governments emphasize infrastructure over the dignity of the workers who maintain it.

International agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, and UN-Habitat have undertaken a number of projects to promote mechanization and occupational safety (for example, the Sanitation Workers Safety Initiative, 2020), but their impact has been restricted by local politics and social inertia.

Challenges and Barriers to Eradication

Despite constitutional protections, robust regulation, and court action, manual scavenging persists in modern society. The longevity of this practice demonstrates that it is more than just a law enforcement issue—it is a deeply social, structural, and psychological problem.

Social and Caste-Based Discrimination

The long-standing caste structure in India and South Asia is the greatest impediment to eliminating manual scavenging. Manual scavengers, primarily from Dalit sub-castes like Valmikis and Madigas, are sometimes labeled as "untouchable." Despite legal protection, people continue to endure prejudice in education, housing, and social interactions. Many people refuse to leave this career for fear of social marginalization and a lack of alternative employment opportunities. Society continues to regard sanitation work as dirty, sustaining intergenerational stigma.

Lack of Political Will and Administrative Apathy

Legislation alone cannot effect change without enforcement. Local governments frequently fail to correctly identify manual scavengers, underreporting their numbers to avoid liability. The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) and state-level monitoring agencies usually lack autonomy and funding. Furthermore, bureaucratic carelessness has caused several sewer deaths, with officials rarely convicted.

Economic Compulsion

Manual scavenging continues due to economic weakness. Most scavengers lack formal schooling or employment training, leaving them reliant on low-wage, dangerous sanitation occupations. In rural places, women earn as little as ₹30-50 per day to clean dry latrines. Rehabilitation plans frequently fail because they focus on one-time financial aid rather than long-term livelihood training.

Inadequate Implementation of Laws

The 2013 Prohibition and Rehabilitation Act requires the identification and rehabilitation of all manual scavengers. To avoid compliance, several state governments postpone surveys or assert that there are no manual scavengers. For example, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment claimed in 2023 that only 58,098 manual scavengers were recognized in India, despite NGOs estimating that over 1.8 million people were involved in various sorts of manual sanitation work. This massive data gap demonstrates how institutionalized denial promotes injustice.

Health Hazards and Lack of Safety Equipment

Manual scavengers labor without masks, gloves, or protective suits, which can lead to chronic skin infections, respiratory ailments, and, in extreme situations, death from poisonous gas exposure. These job hazards are frequently neglected, and victims' families receive little recompense. A 2022 report by the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis found at least 482 deaths in sewers since 2017, emphasizing the dismal enforcement of safety laws.

Gendered Nature of Exploitation

Women account for roughly 70% of those who clean dry latrines manually. Their work is largely unappreciated, undocumented, and unpaid. They frequently experience sexual harassment, societal stigma, and limited access to healthcare. Rehabilitation programs rarely cater to their individual needs, continuing a cycle of caste, class, and gender discrimination.

Lack of Awareness and Social Change

Social attitudes towards sanitation workers remain contemptuous. Many people still believe that such labor should be performed by "certain communities." Awareness initiatives are frequently tokenistic, failing to address the underlying institutional bias that perpetuates this type of servitude.

Recommendations and Future Path

Eliminating manual scavenging requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines legal reform, technological innovation, social change, and economic empowerment.

Strengthening Implementation and Accountability

Establish impartial monitoring agencies that collect real-time data on manual scavengers. Make officers personally accountable for any sewer deaths under the 2013 Act. Ensure obligatory reporting and prosecution in all cases of violation. Judicial activism, as demonstrated in *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014), must be accompanied by administrative responsibility.

Mechanization and Technological Intervention

Fully automate sewer and septic tank cleaning with robots and vacuum-based devices. Implement the NAMASTE scheme as a mission mode across all municipalities. Encourage public-private collaborations to implement technology-driven sanitation solutions. Mechanization not only eliminates manual scavenging, but it also improves the dignity and safety of sanitation workers.

Rehabilitation Through Livelihood and Education

Provide long-term vocational training, not just money compensation. Provide educational scholarships to the children of sanitation workers. Affirmative action should be used to ensure skill-based job opportunities. Rehabilitation should empower, not pity. It should try to elevate entire families out of caste-based poverty.

Gender-Sensitive Policies

Recognize women's invisible efforts in the sanitation sector. Offer equal pay, maternity benefits, and access to healthcare. Include women in municipal decision-making processes.

Gender-sensitive rehabilitation measures ensure that women do not fall behind in social reintegration.

Public Awareness and Social Reform

Launch massive campaigns that connect sanitation labor to dignity, not caste. Engage religious leaders, celebrities, and educators to challenge caste prejudices. Include human dignity education in schools and civic programs. Social change begins when the idea of purity and pollution is replaced by equality and respect for labor.

International Cooperation and Best Practices

Japan and Singapore have completely mechanized sanitation systems. The Water Research Commission of South Africa trains and equips pit emptiers with safety equipment. worldwide organizations such as the ILO and UN Habitat can help develop worldwide occupational standards. By combining domestic legislation with international best practices, India can turn sanitation labor from a source of humiliation to a symbol of development.

Conclusion

Manual scavenging is more than just a public health or sanitation issue; it is a moral stain on mankind. It embodies centuries of social marginalization, structural prejudice, and state failure. The practice directly contradicts the principles of equality, liberty, and dignity contained in the Indian Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Despite improved legislation, the situation remains dismal. Manual scavengers are still dying in sewers, their families are not being rehabilitated, and society continues to turn a blind eye. The issue is not a lack of legality, but an absence of empathy and enforcement.

True abolition involves three revolutions: legal, social, and technological. Laws must be enforced boldly, caste barriers must be broken down via education, and sanitation work must be dignified by complete mechanization.

The end of manual scavenging will represent the genuine achievement of Article 17 of the Indian Constitution—not just the abolition of untouchability, but the affirmation of humanity itself. When no human being is obliged to manage another's trash, the promise of equality will finally be realized.

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