



Review

Beyond recognition: identity politics and the failure of material justice for manual scavengers in India

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Abstract: Manual scavenging continues in India despite constitutional protections, legislative provisions, and decades of Dalit mobilisation by organisations such as the All-India Safai Mazdoor Congress (AISMC) and the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA). Existing scholarship has documented its historical evolution, caste-based labour relations, legal reforms, gendered inequalities, and civil society activism, but has paid limited attention to why recognition-based legal victories have failed to produce substantive material justice for manual scavengers. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's recognition-redistribution framework, this study examines the disconnect between legal recognition and redistributive transformation. It employs qualitative documentary analysis of laws, parliamentary proceedings, judicial rulings, government reports, media investigations, and civil society documentation to examine how the manual scavenging movement succeeded in securing recognition of manual scavenging as a caste-based injustice but was less successful in achieving substantive redistributive transformation in the lives of manual scavengers. The study argues that the persistence of manual scavenging cannot be understood solely in terms of caste-based hereditary occupation but must also be analysed through systemic failures in human resource management, labour governance, occupational safety, and employer accountability. It highlights how caste-based discrimination and unsafe work in sanitation are reproduced through the absence of formal employment recognition, inadequate labour governance, fragmented contracting arrangements, and weak implementation of occupational safety and workplace dignity norms.

Keywords: manual scavengers; manual scavenging; identity politics; decent work; occupational safety and health; labour governance; dignity at work; informal employment; caste discrimination

1. Introduction

Manual scavenging refers to the hereditary caste-based practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing, and handling human excreta from insanitary latrines, open drains, sewer lines and septic tanks, often without mechanisation or adequate protection equipment. The burden of this occupation is also profoundly gendered, although the pattern differs across categories of sanitation labour. Dalit women constitute the overwhelming majority (about 95%) of those who clean dry and insanitary latrines, whereas the hazardous cleaning of sewer lines and septic tanks is performed almost exclusively by men (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 13; WaterAid India et al., 2020; Kumar & Preet, 2020). After independence, India adopted a democratic constitution that aimed to reduce inequalities based on caste through legal and institutional measures. It abolished untouchability under Article 17, guaranteed equality before the law under Article 14, ensured freedom from discrimination under Article 15, and introduced measures for reservation of

marginalised groups in education, employment and governance under Articles 330, 332 and 335 (Shastri, 2009; BARTI, 2021; Khosla & Mehta, 2025). Moreover, the Parliament of India enacted legislation, including the protection of civil rights Act (1955) and the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act (1989), that bolstered legal protections against caste discrimination (Shah et al., 2006). Since manual scavengers belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy and have faced discrimination since ancient times, these post-independence constitutional and legal provisions were equally meant to safeguard them from atrocities (Goghari & Kusi, 2023).

While these general constitutional protections and anti-discrimination legislation exist, the situation of manual scavengers demanded specific focus as their exploitation was not merely occupational but also included social stigma, poverty and state neglect (Jha et al., 2025; Katiyar, 2022). This recognition led the central and state governments to constitute specialised committees and commissions to examine their living and working conditions more directly. These included the Scavengers' living conditions enquiry committee (1949–1952), the backward classes commission (1953–1955), the central advisory board for harijan welfare (1956), and the scavenging conditions enquiry committee (1957–1960). The committees documented the harsh living and working conditions of manual scavengers and emphasised the urgent need to abolish the practice through technological interventions (such as mechanising the cleaning process) and policies of social inclusion and rehabilitation (Barve, 1958; Malkani et al., 1961; Dasgupta et al., 2023). Their recommendations, however, were never implemented, and the situation of manual scavengers did not change substantially over time.

This governmental neglect led to the development of organised movements led by various organisations. The earliest organised attempts were made by the Sulabh International and All-India Safai Mazdoor Congress (AISMC) in the 1960s and the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) in the 1990s. AISMC was instrumental in raising concerns regarding the rights and welfare of manual scavengers, and took up issues related to working conditions, social discrimination, and policy pertaining to manual scavenging. Its concerted action compelled the central government to pass the employment of manual scavengers and construction of dry latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 (hereafter MS Act 1993), the first-ever Act that officially and directly banned manual scavenging in India (Saldanha et al., 2022). However, the MS Act 1993 proved largely symbolic owing to its poor implementation, legal loopholes (such as the provision to allow manual scavenging under certain conditions) and the absence of strong rehabilitation provisions. This failure of implementation spurred more concerted action where the SKA began a campaign for legislative action and enforcement by organising campaigns across India and utilising public interest litigation (PIL) which ultimately culminated in the prohibition of employment as manual scavengers and their rehabilitation Act, 2013 (hereafter MS Act 2013) (Desai, 2020).

While the enactment of the 1993 and 2013 Acts represented important milestones in recognising manual scavenging, their implementation reveals a different reality (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Jan Sahas Social Development Society, 2014; Meshram, 2019; George, 2020; Khan, 2022). Existing studies consistently show that legal reforms have failed to eliminate manual scavenging or secure meaningful rehabilitation, leaving manual scavengers trapped within caste-based labour and chronic economic insecurity (Mohankumar & Srija, 2023; Jha et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, the present study addresses two interrelated research questions: (1) How did Dalit identity politics secure the legal recognition of manual scavenging as a form of caste oppression? and (2) Why has formal legal recognition failed to translate into redistributive, material justice

for manual scavenging communities? Building on Nancy Fraser's recognition–redistribution theory, the study argues that while the political and legal struggle for recognition of identity has been successful, the failure of substantial reforms in the governance of labour, sanitation provision and rehabilitation has made it impossible for these gains to translate into substantive social and economic justice. The study argues that the persistence of manual scavenging reflects not only the failure of caste policy but also wider failures of human resource management and employer accountability, including the lack of formal employment recognition, inadequate labour governance, fragmented contracting and non-implementation of occupational safety and workplace dignity norms.

2. Literature review

The pattern of discriminatory practice in the sanitation sector is not limited to India. International scholarship also demonstrates that sanitation and waste work has frequently been organised through other systems of social exclusion. For instance, in the United States, sanitation and waste occupations have been racially segregated, with African Americans and immigrants disproportionately recruited into hazardous and poorly regulated work in the waste sector (Zimring, 2004). Similar patterns have been documented in other countries, which highlight insecure employment, occupational health risks, weak labour protections, and the social invisibility of workers responsible for handling human waste across diverse national contexts (Bhakta et al., 2022; Oza et al., 2022). The various comparisons indicate that while the nature of exclusion varies between different societies (i.e., caste in India, race in the United States, and migrant status in other nations), sanitation work tends to be performed by historically marginalised groups. As a result, shared concerns arise about labour governance, occupational safety and workplace dignity as well as institutional accountability across sanitation regimes.

Against this broader international backdrop, the systematic study of manual scavenging began in the late twentieth century, when scholars, journalists, and activists started to engage critically with the caste-based nature of sanitation work and its socio-economic and cultural implications. Although manual scavenging has existed since ancient times, focused academic and activist inquiry emerged only in the 1980s and 1990s. Bindeshwar Pathak's road to freedom offered one of the earliest sociological analyses of manual scavenging, linking it to caste and sanitation practices and proposing eco-friendly alternatives, such as twin-pit toilets, as a means to abolish the practice (Pathak, 1991). Gita Ramaswamy (2005), in her book *India Stinking*, documented the lived experiences of Dalit women manual scavengers in Andhra Pradesh. In a similar vein, Bhasha Singh's *Unseen: The Truth About India's Manual Scavengers* recorded first-hand accounts of manual scavengers, especially women, across India. The book criticises the hollow implementation of the laws banning the practice and holds both state and society responsible for its continuity (Singh, 2014). Building on these autobiographical accounts, a growing body of empirical research has further demonstrated that the experiences of manual scavengers are profoundly shaped by the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Existing studies suggest that gender is not simply an additional axis of vulnerability but a structural dimension through which caste-based labour is reproduced. Dalit women constitute the overwhelming majority (about 95%) of those engaged in the manual cleaning of dry and insanitary latrines, and experience multiple forms of deprivation through lower earnings (as low as Rs 10 to Rs 6000 per month), insecure employment, poor occupational health, limited access to rehabilitation and persistent social stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Kumar & Preet, 2020; WaterAid India et al., 2020).

In an ethnographic study, Ziyauddin (2016), based on the Hadi caste of Bokaro in Jharkhand, explores how manual scavenging persists in present-day

India, focusing on the dignity, identity and exclusion of the communities engaged in this stigmatised labour. Similarly, Saldanha et al. (2022) argue that governmental measures have not succeeded because they have not addressed the structural caste-based logic that sustains manual scavenging. Moving from first-hand accounts to legal analysis, Koonan (2021) uses a socio-legal approach to show that the status of manual scavenging has evolved from a customary right into a criminal act. The analysis criticises the state's inaction and emphasises the role of organised resistance in demanding the rights and dignity of manual scavengers. Extending this argument, Wankhede (2021) identifies a significant legal paradox in the MS Act 2013, noting that manual scavenging remains permissible where protective equipment is used, which renders the prohibition conditional and allows the practice to persist in India.

These socio-legal critiques highlight the need to shift attention from the mere existence of prohibitory laws to demands by civil society organisations for implementation, rehabilitation and dignity for manual scavenging communities. Kahle and Kumbhare (2023) examine the approach of Dalit-led non-government organisations (NGOs) and argue that many civil society organisations adopt litigation as a strategy to pressure the government to act against manual scavenging. In another article, based on NGO documents and a series of 13 in-depth interviews with activists, Kahle and Hammerslev (2023) contend that public interest litigation (PIL) should not be analysed simply as a legal strategy for securing a favourable judgment, but rather as a political act through which NGOs renegotiate relations between the Indian state and its most marginalised citizens—specifically with respect to rehabilitation, citizenship and dignity. Similarly, Koonan (2021) also brings civil society resistance into focus, showing how organisations such as the SKA reframed baskets and brooms as symbols of oppression. Through campaigns such as daliya jalao (“burn the basket”), activists rejected the hereditary, caste-based “right” to perform polluting labour and asserted dignity, citizenship, and freedom from degrading work (Gupta, 2013, p. 155).

Existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into the historical trajectory of manual scavenging, caste and labour relations, gender inequalities, legal change and civil society mobilisation. Comparative research also contextualises sanitation labour in the wider debates on labour exclusion and occupational inequality. However, there is considerably less focus on understanding why recognition-based legal victories have not translated into substantive material justice, particularly from the perspective of labour governance and inclusive employment. The present study addresses this gap by tracing the pathways to legal recognition and examining the absence of structural redistribution and the reasons behind the persistence of manual scavenging in India.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design supported by secondary quantitative evidence, utilising Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution to examine the persistence of manual scavenging in India. Fraser identifies two analytically distinct but interdependent dimensions of injustice. Redistribution concerns institutionalised inequalities in access to economic resources, employment and material conditions that sustain disadvantage, whereas recognition concerns cultural devaluation, social exclusion and misrecognition (Fraser, 1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Fraser also distinguishes between ‘affirmative remedies’, which aim to reduce the harmful effects of injustice without changing the social and economic relations that

create it and ‘transformative remedies’, which seek to change the social and economic relations that reproduce injustice (Fraser, 1995, pp. 82–83). This dual-perspectival account has been contested by Honneth who argues that the struggles for justice are fundamentally rooted in relations of recognition and economic injustices are best understood as institutionalised expressions of misrecognition rather than as a separate order of injustice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). However, the present study utilises Nancy Fraser’s theory of recognition and redistribution for analysing manual scavenging since there is a reinforcing relationship between caste-based stigma and material deprivation. Fraser’s framework is therefore adopted not as a competing explanation but as a means of examining both the legal and political recognition of manual scavenging as an injustice grounded in caste and the failure of this recognition to produce substantive redistributive effects across employment, rehabilitation, labour protection and sanitation governance.

3.2. Terminology and analytical scope

In policy documents, news reports, and research, the terms manual scavenging, hazardous sewer cleaning and septic-tank cleaning are frequently used interchangeably. The terminology employed by the original source has been retained and interpreted within its stated context. Furthermore, sanitation work is used as a broad umbrella term encompassing various forms of labour involved in the collection, handling, transportation, containment, and treatment of human excreta and sewage waste. The term manual scavenging is used as a statutory category and understood based on the definition provided under MS Act, 2013. This distinction is crucial since there are different types of identification, prohibition, rehabilitation, enforcement, and compensation mechanisms for each of these types. Terms such as hazardous cleaning are used in cases of injury or death that occurs while working as a manual scavenger in sewers, septic tanks, or related sanitation systems. This approach seeks to maintain conceptual clarity while acknowledging the empirical and documentary overlap that characterises much of the existing literature and administrative record.

3.3. Data sources and selection criteria

The analysis is based on secondary data which included the constitutional framework, manual scavenging Acts of 1993 and 2013, parliamentary debates and questions, supreme court judgments, reports of government ministries and statutory bodies, reports of civil society organisations, media investigations and peer-reviewed academic literature. The peer-reviewed literature regarding manual scavenging was identified through various databases including Scopus, Web of Science and JSTOR using the keyword search “manual scavenging OR manual scavengers” and “India”, which yielded 64 peer-reviewed documents published between 1993 and 2026. Rather than examining the entire review corpus, only documents directly relevant to the objectives of this article were included. The documents were selected on the basis of four criteria: (i) documents on the historical development of manual scavenging and Dalit mobilisation; (ii) documents on legislative and judicial frameworks related to the 1993 and 2013 Acts; (iii) documents on rehabilitation schemes, labour conditions and sanitation employment; and (iv) documents reporting empirical evidence on worker identification, deaths in sewers and septic tanks, mechanisation and sanitation infrastructure. The documentary sources were evaluated on their relevance, empirical richness and direct contribution to the research questions.

In addition to peer-reviewed literature, the study systematically identified documentary evidence from legal, governmental, civil society and media sources, as shown in **Table 1**. The documentary searches were mainly conducted in the period from 1993 to August 2026 that covers the period after the MS

Act, 1993 was enacted, although materials available prior to this time were included where necessary to provide context to the historical development and Dalit mobilisation over time. The documents retrieved were initially screened for relevance, duplication, evidentiary value and direct contribution to research questions. Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords tailored to the nature of each repository and source type. Core search terms included manual scavenging, manual scavengers, safai karamchhari, septic tank deaths, sewer deaths, hazardous cleaning, rehabilitation and sanitation workers. Statutes and constitutional provisions were retrieved from the India Code database and the Gazette of India. Supreme court judgments were identified through the Court's judgment portal and the Indian Kanoon database. Parliamentary questions and the corresponding ministerial replies were traced through the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha digital archives and, where the reply was issued publicly, through the Press Information Bureau release repository. Government reports and policy documents were obtained from the Press Information Bureau release repository and from the websites of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, the Ministry of Jal Shakti, the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog and state institutions such as the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute. Doctoral theses were retrieved from Shodhganga, the national repository of Indian theses. Civil society and international organisation reports were obtained through their websites or other publishing organisations. Municipal tender documents were retrieved from the e-tender portals of the corporations concerned. Media reports were identified through the online archives of national digital outlets.

Table 1. Documentary sources: category, repository searched, inclusion criteria and number of documents retained.

Source category	Repositories and search locations	Inclusion criteria applied	Documents retained
Peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters	Scopus; Web of Science; JSTOR	Direct relevance to selection criteria (i)–(iv); published 1993–2026	40
Scholarly monographs and edited volumes	Publisher catalogues and library holdings identified through citation tracking of the database results	Sustained treatment of caste, manual scavenger or Dalit mobilisation	15
Legislation and constitutional provisions	India Code; Gazette of India; Ministry of Law and Justice	Statutes and amendments governing manual scavenging, caste discrimination or municipal responsibility	4
Supreme Court judgments	Supreme Court of India judgment portal; Indian Kanoon	Judgments directly concerning the prohibition, enumeration or rehabilitation of manual scavengers	1
Parliamentary questions and ministerial replies	Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha digital archives; Press Information Bureau release repository	Replies reporting official counts, rehabilitation disbursement, sewer and septic-tank deaths or compensation	5
Government reports and policy documents	Press Information Bureau release repository; websites of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Ministry of Jal Shakti, NCSK, NITI Aayog and BARTI; Internet Archive for historical committee reports	Official enquiry, survey, policy or scheme documents bearing on the research questions	8
Municipal contracting documents	E-tender portals of the municipal corporations concerned	Tenders for sewer or septic-tank cleaning specifying method, machinery or labour terms	1

Continued table:

Source category	Repositories and search locations	Inclusion criteria applied	Documents retained
Civil society and international organisation reports	Organisational websites of Human Rights Watch, Jan Sahas, WaterAid India, Centre for Equity Studies, Centre for Science and Environment, Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, SNV, ILO, World Bank, Observer Research Foundation and the Sanitation Workers Knowledge and Learning Hub	Reports presenting primary fieldwork, survey data or implementation review with a stated evidential basis	11
Media investigations and news reports	Online archives of national newspapers and digital news outlets	Original investigation or first release of official data; derivative reports of the same release excluded	8
Doctoral theses	Shodhganga national repository of Indian theses	Empirical fieldwork on manual scavengers in an identified state or district	3
Total			96

3.4. Analytical Approach

Evidence was triangulated across the various categories of documentary sources to improve the validity of the research. Official records were compared with independent evidence from peer-reviewed scholarship, historical records, parliamentary records, government records, doctoral theses, supreme court judgments and independent media and civil organisation's investigations. However, because they have varying objectives and documenting and reporting practices, none of the sources was considered definitive. Rather, evidence from several sources was cross-checked to enhance the reliability and credibility of the analysis. The documentary evidence was analysed by employing three analytical categories. First, identity politics was operationalised as documentary proof of the recognition of manual scavenging as an injustice of caste, as seen through Dalit mobilisation, civil society advocacy, PILs, legislations, judicial interventions, and policy initiatives. Second, redistributive failure was operationalised as documentary evidence indicating the absence of material improvements despite legal recognition, including limited rehabilitation, insecure employment, inadequate livelihood support, weak occupational safety, insufficient compensation and ineffective implementation of statutory provisions. Third, the structural sanitation infrastructure gaps were translated into documentary evidence as institutional and infrastructural gaps, such as lack of sewer connections, low level of mechanisation, continued use of septic tanks and on-site sanitation systems, and the absence of effective enforcement of labour and occupational safety standards which continue to incentivise and allow for hazardous manual labour. The analytical categories were used uniformly across the documentary corpus to analyse the impediments to the realisation of material justice for manual scavengers from a lack of redistributive policies, a lack of labour governance, and a lack of sanitation infrastructure.

4. Findings and analysis

The analysis proceeds in two parts. The first traces how identity politics and activism secured legislative recognition of manual scavenging as a caste-based injustice. The second part examines why that recognition has failed to change the material conditions of manual scavengers in India.

4.1. Identity politics, activism and legislative measures

The discourse on manual scavenging in post-independence India carries the imprint of the debate between Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, whose arguments have shaped successive approaches to this hazardous occupation (Barua, 2018). Gandhi regarded manual scavenging as socially valuable

and emphasised the dignity of labour, while simultaneously condemning the caste-based discrimination and untouchability experienced by scavenging communities. But he did not fundamentally question the caste system that was the genesis of manual scavenging occupation. Ambedkar, in contrast, viewed manual scavenging as a product of the caste system itself and called for complete emancipation from this occupation (Masuki, 2022). Ambedkar's position particularly influenced the post-independence Dalit movements and played a pivotal role in identity politics by bringing manual scavenging into public discourse (Shah et al., 2006; BARTI, 2021; Ambedkar, 2016).

Various political parties and civil society organisations publicly denounced manual scavenging as a form of caste oppression and demanded its eradication by protesting, filing petitions, and seeking state action and structural changes (Pai, 2002; Teltumbde, 2010; Bhattacharjee, 2024; Kumar & Naz, 2026). The state's response, however, focused on investigation rather than redistribution. It claimed to be a champion of social justice and established several commissions including the Scavengers' Living Conditions Enquiry Committee (1949), the Backward Classes Commission (1953), the Central Advisory Board for Harijan Welfare (1956) to document the prevalence and condition of manual scavenging communities (Ali, 1995; Barve, 1958). While these bodies recommended the abolition of the practice, their recommendations had little impact. The state policy adopted was instead largely technocratic, emphasising the conversion of dry latrines into sanitary latrines through schemes such as the Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns Scheme (1969) and Sulabh Shauchalaya Scheme (1974). These schemes paid little attention to rehabilitation, alternative livelihoods or the caste system that underpinned manual scavenging across India. More substantive efforts emerged through the initiatives of Sulabh International under Bindeshwar Pathak which installed over 1.5 million twin-pit toilets in India and constructed over 10,000 public toilet complexes in the country. However, there is little evidence of how far these initiatives changed the lives of manual scavengers (Bhattacharjee, 2024; Rastogi, 2016; Srinivas, 1995).

Following this phase of social mobilisation, Dalit politics increasingly shifted from movements for social justice to electoral mobilisation. Organisations such as the Dalit Panthers and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati picked up this legacy and employed Dalit identity as a mobilising force and an electoral vehicle (Omvedt, 1994; Narayan, 2011). The BSP became the main electoral instrument of Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh, forming governments in 1995, 1997 and 2002–03 and, most notably, winning a majority government from 2007 to 2012. The party introduced caste-related issues into the mainstream of electoral politics, thus increasing the political and symbolic visibility of Dalits. However, the available evidence does not indicate a comparable transformation in the material conditions of manual scavengers. While the BSP succeeded in enhancing the political visibility of Dalits, subsequent national surveys continued to identify Uttar Pradesh as the state with the largest number of manual scavengers (PIB Delhi, 2023; Lakshman, 2024). Also, the state continues to record a high number of deaths during the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks (Tulsian, 2026). Thus, the limitations of recognition politics are visible in this context, as participation in the electoral process increased the visibility, but did not adequately remove the structural factors that perpetuated manual scavenging in Uttar Pradesh. Inspired by the Dalit Panthers founded in Maharashtra in 1972, the Dalit Panthers Iyakkam (DPI) emerged in Tamil Nadu during the 1980s (formally organised in 1982 under Thol. Thirumavalavan's leadership later in the 1990s, after earlier activism by A. Malaichamy and others). It eventually evolved into the political party Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in 1999. The movement emerged as a significant force mobilising against

caste-based exploitation, including the deeply entrenched practice of manual scavenging (Gorringer, 2017; Collins, 2017). Although this movement remained confined to a single state, its methods, which combined legal advocacy with grassroots campaigning, catalysed broader Dalit mobilisation across the country and influenced organisations such as AISMC and SKA (Bhattacharjee, 2024).

AISMC organised manual scavengers by combining Ambedkarite ideas of equality, self-respect and the annihilation of caste with trade union activism. Rather than treating manual scavenging as merely an occupational hazard, AISMC saw it as a systemic violation of human dignity, owing to caste hierarchy and social order of the Brahmanical structure (Saldanha et al., 2022; Raj & Tiwari, 2026). The organisation called for a complete ban on manual scavenging, rehabilitation of affected communities, workplace safety, fair wages and alternative livelihoods through continuous engagement with the central government, petitions and demonstrations. By the early 1990s, this accumulating pressure forced the government to recognise caste-based exploitation explicitly. The recognition took institutional form in the Task Force for Tackling the Problems of Scavengers (1990–91), the National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (1992), the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) and the enactment of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 (Katiyar, 2022; Raj et al., 2024). This Act marked an important legislative step, criminalising the practice for the first time and mandating the demolition of dry latrines (Government of India, 1993). However, as the NCSK's 2003 report noted, the MS Act 1993 collapsed owing to widespread non-implementation, with municipal corporations and panchayats (village councils) continuing caste-based hiring practices (Gupta, 2016; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

The failure of the 1993 Act generated a more focused wave of grassroots campaigning led by the SKA. The SKA, through its public interest litigation (PIL) and advocacy work, highlighted the neglect of previous legislation and the failure of the government to tackle manual scavenging in India (Singh, 2020). Other organisations such as Garima Shakti Sangathan and Jan Sahas (Madhya Pradesh), Navsarjan Trust (Gujarat), and Movement for Scavenger Community (Karnataka), mobilised manual scavengers to protest against the state and society (Bhattacharjee, 2024). Building on decades of activism by manual scavenger organisations, Dalit movements and civil society groups, growing public and political pressure culminated in the enactment of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, which explicitly criminalised all forms of manual scavenging, emphasised rehabilitation, and provided for the punishment of those who continued to employ scavengers (Government of India, 2013). Following the enactment of the 2013 Act, civil society organisations continued to mobilise in response to weak implementation and the continuing deaths of manual scavengers. The SKA obtained the historic decision in the *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014) case, in which the Supreme Court of India recognised the continued existence of manual scavenging and ordered the government to eliminate the practice and initiate intensive rehabilitation programmes for rehabilitating manual scavengers across India (Khanna, 2019). SKA also initiated the Bhim Yatra in 2015, which covered 500 districts in 30 states. The Bhim Yatra aimed at highlighting the caste-based labour and the ongoing deaths of manual scavengers during the hazardous cleaning of sewer lines and septic tanks (Zico, 2022; Bob, 2007; Bhattacharjee, 2024). These post-2013 initiatives shifted the focus from legislative recognition to implementation, accountability and enforcement, highlighting the continuing gap between legal abolition and material transformation.

These developments collectively demonstrate the evolution of the politics of

manual scavenging from Ambedkarite social mobilisation and grassroots activism to electoral representation, civil society activism and legislative recognition. Caste-based identity politics gradually brought manual scavenging to the forefront of legal and political discourse as a caste injustice but did not secure the redistribution of resources and opportunities needed to break the structural foundations of manual scavenging. The next section examines this disconnect between official recognition and actual change, which has allowed manual scavenging to persist despite successive laws.

4.2. Formal bans, informal continuities: Legislative breakdown and labour reproduction

Even after prohibition, manual scavengers continue to be engaged in the practice in both cities and villages. The distance between statutory intent and lived reality is too wide, and has lasted too long, to be dismissed as an implementation lag. The survival of manual scavenging appears less an administrative failure than part of a deeper structural logic.

4.2.1. Legal prohibition without structural disruption: The illusion of reform

Implementation of the MS Act 2013 began, as the statute required, with identification of manual scavengers and stalled there. The Act required the survey of manual scavengers to be completed within two months, but in practice it dragged on until 2018. The surveys carried out by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment in 2013 and 2018 together recorded 58,098 manual scavengers in the country (i.e., 13,881 in the first round and a further 44,217 in the second survey) with Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra reporting the largest numbers (PIB Delhi, 2023; Lakshman, 2024). Set against the ministry's own earlier figures, the count is difficult to credit. In 2002–2003 the same ministry had recorded 676,009 individuals engaged in manual scavenging (Sathasivam, 2014, p. 3), and the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 had identified 182,505 manual scavenger families in rural areas (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2015). Although these figures are not directly comparable because they are based on different definitions, geographical coverage, and enumeration procedures, the contrast between the ministry's earlier estimate of 676,009 individuals and the later surveys identifying 58,098 manual scavengers raises serious concerns about the adequacy of official identification exercises. The resulting underestimation is both geographical and definitional. Definitional limitations arise because enumeration was restricted to individuals falling within the statutory definition of a manual scavenger, thereby excluding workers engaged in the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, even when such work constituted a regular part of their occupation. Geographically, the survey is limited to statutory towns in only 14 states. Rural India, where the majority of manual scavengers are believed to live, was therefore largely omitted (Saha & Upadhyay, 2021).

Independent enquiries point the same way. The Safai Karmachari Andolan has estimated that over 1.2 million people remain engaged in the practice throughout India (Sathasivam, 2014). At the regional level, the government surveys of 2013 and 2018 reported only 398 manual scavengers across all 38 districts of Tamil Nadu. A study by George (2020), however, identified 306 manual scavengers in the single district of Tiruchirappalli, of whom only 102 had received compensation and rehabilitation support under the MS Act 2013. The remaining 204 manual scavengers were not included in the official survey and continued to perform this hazardous labour without any form of rehabilitation. The state of Bihar shows the same gap. The official count listed only 137 manual scavengers across all 38 districts, yet the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) documented more than 300 individuals engaged in manual scavenging in the Bhagalpur district alone (Luthra et al., 2020). The Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan

(a national organisation campaigning nationwide against manual scavenging) reached the same conclusion from its own multi-state survey, stating that both state and central governments have consistently underreported the actual number of individuals involved in this occupation (Nair, 2018). **Figure 1** compares official counts and independent estimates of manual scavengers in India, illustrating the substantial divergence between different enumeration exercises.

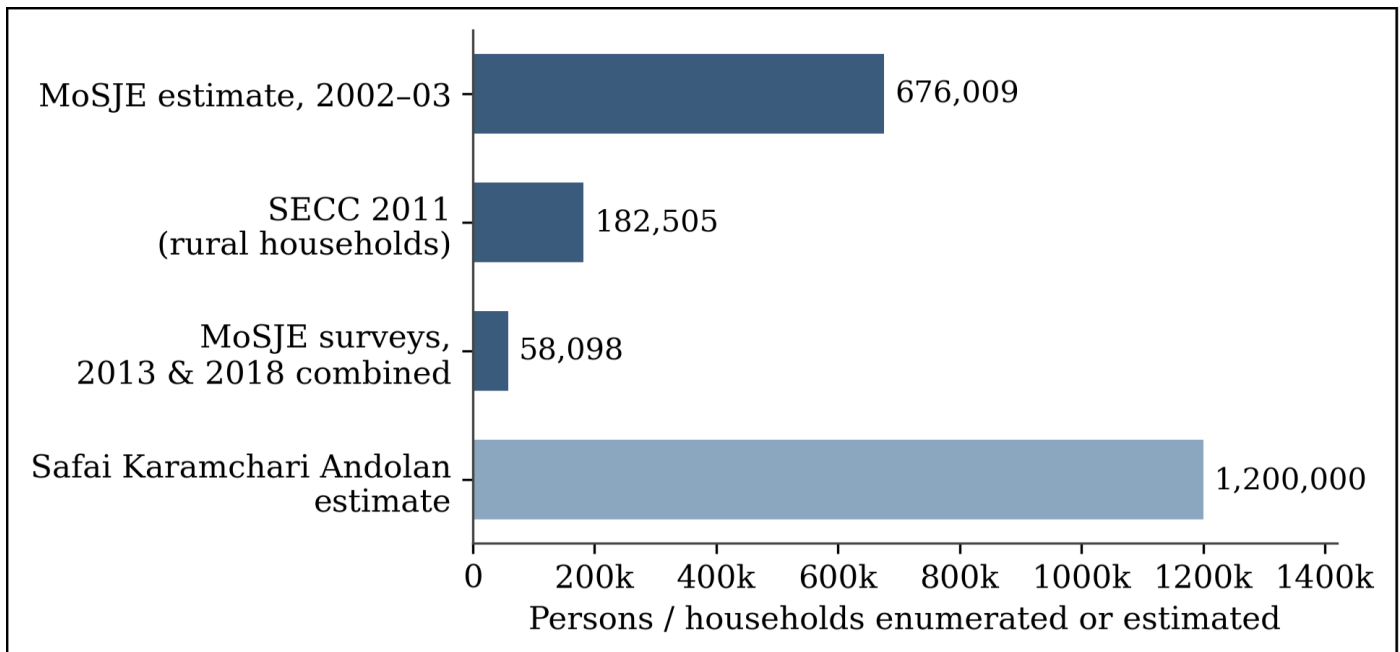


Figure 1. Official data and independent estimates of manual scavengers in India (Author's own preparation using data from Sathasivam, 2014; Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2015; PIB Delhi, 2023; Lakshman, 2024).

4.2.2. From exclusion to exploitation: the economic necessity of Dalit labour

Weak enforcement thus begins with a flawed count and workers left off the official lists. For those formally recognised, the rehabilitation support has fallen short as the financial aid provided meets neither basic living expenses nor the costs of moving into dignified alternative employment (Mander et al., 2020). As shown in **Figure 2**, all 58,098 officially recognised manual scavengers received one-time cash assistance of ₹40,000 (approximately US\$460). Although some government documents describe the assistance as being provided 'per family', all figures reported here refer to the 58,098 identified individuals, and percentages are calculated using this denominator. The components of the scheme intended to build longer-term economic stability reached far fewer people. Only 38.4% (22,294 individuals) of identified manual scavengers and their dependents received skill training, although such training was intended to anchor the rehabilitation strategy for all of them, which raises serious questions about the follow-up mechanisms attached to these programmes (PIB Delhi, 2023). Self-employment proved even less accessible. Only 3.98% (2,313 individuals) managed to obtain the subsidised loans meant to finance alternative enterprises because of lack of collateral property (PIB Delhi, 2023). Most of the manual scavengers (many of whom are illiterate) could not muster the resources that sustaining a new venture demand, and many returned to work out of economic compulsion.

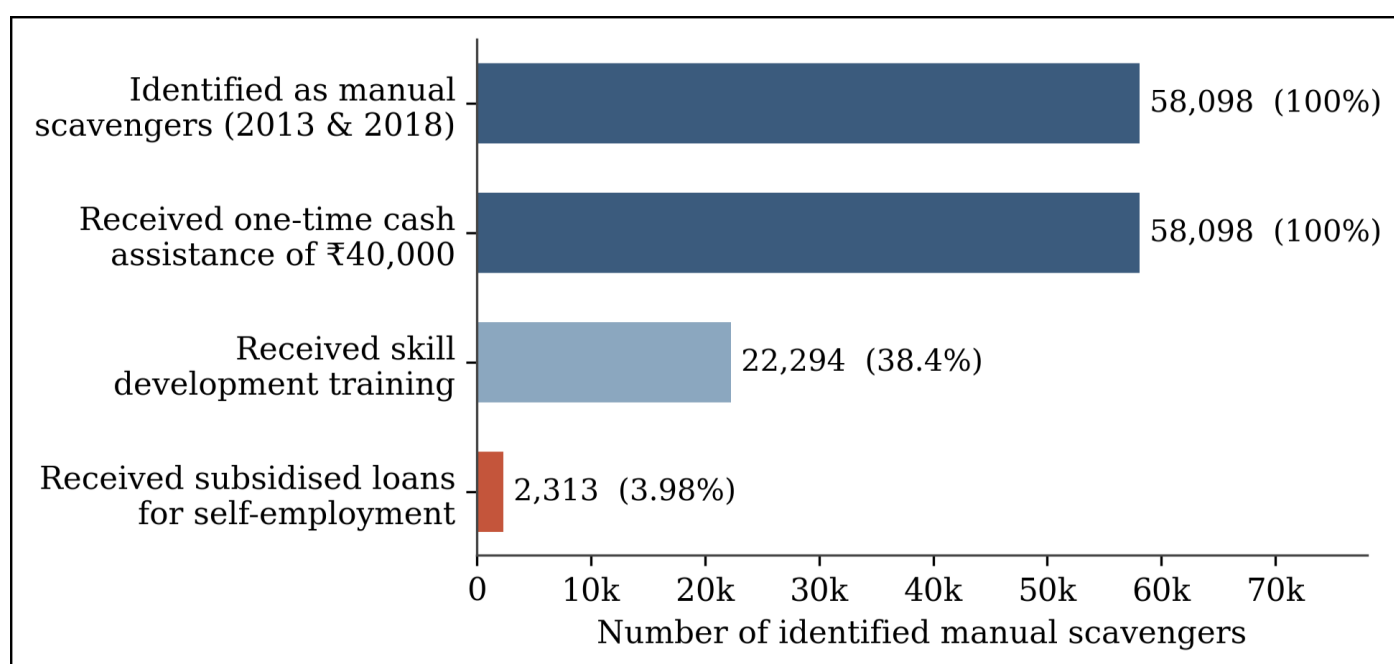


Figure 2. The narrowing reach of rehabilitation under the SRMS: identification, cash assistance, skill training and subsidised loans (Author's own preparation using data from PIB Delhi, 2023).

The most comprehensive account of this vulnerability in practice is a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW). Based on over 135 interviews with both male and female manual scavengers in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh that were conducted in the field between November 2013 and July 2014, it documented the nature of payments that barely qualify as wages as some workers were paid as little as ₹10 (US\$0.11) per month, others earned no monetary payment whatsoever and relied on donated leftover food to survive (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 15). Regional studies also show the ongoing economic deprivation of manual scavengers in India. George (2020), in a study of 306 manual scavengers in Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil Nadu, found that the average monthly income of those who had received rehabilitation support was still approximately ₹5,000, whereas non-beneficiaries were earning about ₹4,000 per month, suggesting that rehabilitation had yielded only minimal gains in economic security. The findings are similar in West Bengal, where a field survey of 110 manual scavengers in Malda district revealed that 69.09% of the respondents were earning below ₹15,000 per month, and 20% below ₹6,000 per month. Moreover, lack of job opportunities (25.45%), indebtedness (9.09%) and the continuation of traditional family occupation (38.18%) were found as major reasons behind the persistence of manual scavenging (Hoque, 2024).

4.2.3. Gendered redistribution failure: intersection of caste and gender

Manual scavenging remains deeply gendered, although the gender composition of the workforce varies across different forms of sanitation labour. The widely reported figure of 95–98% women manual scavengers are based on research on the manual cleaning of dry and insanitary latrines and should not be extrapolated to sanitation and sewerage work in general (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 13; Tandon & Basu, 2016; Kumar & Preet, 2020). While dry-latrines cleaning is performed overwhelmingly by Dalit women scavengers, the hazardous cleaning of sewer lines and septic tanks is undertaken almost exclusively by men scavengers. Accordingly, these different types of labour create different kinds of harm: dry latrine cleaning puts the burden of chronic illness on Dalit women while septic-tank and sewer entry puts the burden of acute occupational risk and mortality on Dalit men. The evidence for the first pattern

is consistent. A multi-state study conducted by WaterAid India, the Centre for Equity Studies and ARUN (2020) across 36 towns in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh found that nearly 95% of workers engaged in cleaning dry latrines were women, demonstrating that the burden of this caste-based occupation falls overwhelmingly on Dalit women. Patriarchal family norms also help perpetuate the occupation, as manual scavenging is often passed on to young women after marriage, alongside their mothers-in-law. A survey conducted by Jan Sahas Social Development Society in 2014 among 480 women scavengers across Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh revealed that 85% of women manual scavengers were married (Jan Sahas Social Development Society, 2014; Kumar & Preet, 2020). Some of these women are paid as little as ₹10–20 (approximately US\$0.11–0.23) per month, sometimes supplemented only by a single daily meal, while others are paid nothing at all (Jan Sahas Social Development Society, 2014). Besides economic exploitation, they face significant occupational health and safety risks, including skin diseases, respiratory ailments, gastrointestinal and musculoskeletal conditions, reproductive health issues, permanent hair loss and recurrent infections, along with limited access to healthcare, housing schemes, the Public Distribution System (PDS), Anganwadi services, and other welfare programmes (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, 2018).

Regional evidence also reinforces this national pattern. In a study conducted by Meshram (2019) in Nagpur district, Maharashtra, most women manual scavengers were found to live in confined dwellings of only one or two rooms, without separate kitchens. The majority of these women used open defecation and were living in close proximity to open drains, while having very limited access to basic health services. In spite of statutory prohibition, more than 92% of respondents earned less than ₹6,000 (US\$62.79) per month, indicating that extreme economic deprivation persists. The same trend can be observed in other parts of India. Based on data collected from 1,846 households in Haryana, Shokeen (2022) found that daughters of manual scavengers often concealed their caste identity to avoid discrimination at school, while performing unpaid domestic duties at home. Similarly, Bag and Jagadala (2018) found that Ghasi women in Odisha continue to perform manual scavenging owing to the normalisation of hereditary based labour through caste norms, patriarchal expectations and the absence of alternative livelihoods. The findings from Andhra Pradesh also indicate that women are predominantly engaged as manual scavengers, and that cash transfers and training programmes intended to improve their livelihoods have not succeeded in securing durable change (Prasad, 2007). Legal recognition has therefore enabled little substantive economic redistribution for Dalit women, and they continue to suffer from multiple disadvantages in the form of low-paid sanitation jobs, limited access to education, limited livelihood options, and ongoing social exclusion.

4.2.4. Infrastructural denial and deaths

From the above evidence, it can be confirmed that manual scavengers still persist across India despite legislative provisions and rehabilitation efforts. Now the question arises why does manual scavenging persist, and what conditions keep its workers vulnerable? The answer to this question lies beneath the state of India's sanitation infrastructure. India's approach to human waste management is decentralised and rests on two types of system: on-site sanitation (in which excreta is contained and partly treated at or near the point of generation through septic tanks, pits or twin-pit toilets) and off-site sanitation (in which wastewater and excreta are transported through sewer networks to treatment facilities) (Conaway et al., 2023; Centre for Science and Environment, 2020). Sanitation services in India are currently facing various challenges, including the limited reach of sewer connectivity and a shortage of mechanised cleaning equipment.

Progress in connecting households to sewer networks has been both sluggish and uneven. Between 2000 and 2022, the proportion of India's population connected to underground sewer networks rose from 7% to only 12.2% (i.e., an increase of merely 5.2 percentage points over two decades) and even this modest gain was confined largely to urban centres (WHO & UNICEF, 2023).

In addition to this (as shown in **Figure 3**), India generates 72,368 million litres per day (MLD) (about 26.41 billion m³ of sewage waste per year) yet only 40% of urban toilets connect to sewer lines, and treatment capacity, at 31,841 MLD (about 11.62 billion m³ per year) across approximately 1,000 sewage treatment plants (STPs), covers less than half of what is generated. The remaining share of sewage and faecal waste is managed through on-site sanitation systems such as septic tanks and pits. In many locations, the maintenance and desludging of these systems is undertaken by private contractors, and where mechanised services are unavailable or inadequate, manual cleaning practices continue to be reported (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2017; Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2022). In the absence of regulated and mechanised desludging systems in urban areas, that task falls to private contractors, who deploy economically disadvantaged manual scavengers to carry out faecal sludge removal, commonly in unsafe conditions and without essential protective equipment (Dhawan, 2021). The problem is more acute in rural and semi-urban regions, which remain reliant on insanitary latrines and decentralised sanitation systems such as septic tanks that fill up over time and overflow, requiring periodic emptying and cleaning.

In response to these infrastructural gaps, recent policy initiatives have shifted focus from prohibiting manual scavenging alone towards transforming the sanitation ecosystem through mechanisation and faecal sludge management. Mechanised sewer and septic tank cleaning, scheduled desludging, faecal sludge management, worker safety with personal protective equipment (PPE) and training, rehabilitation, alternative livelihoods, and enhanced monitoring and accountability systems are promoted in the National Policy on Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (2017), Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban 2.0, and the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2017, 2021; PIB, 2025). These measures are integrated into wider sanitation governance and are designed to eliminate hazardous manual operations and to make sanitation a technology-based service.

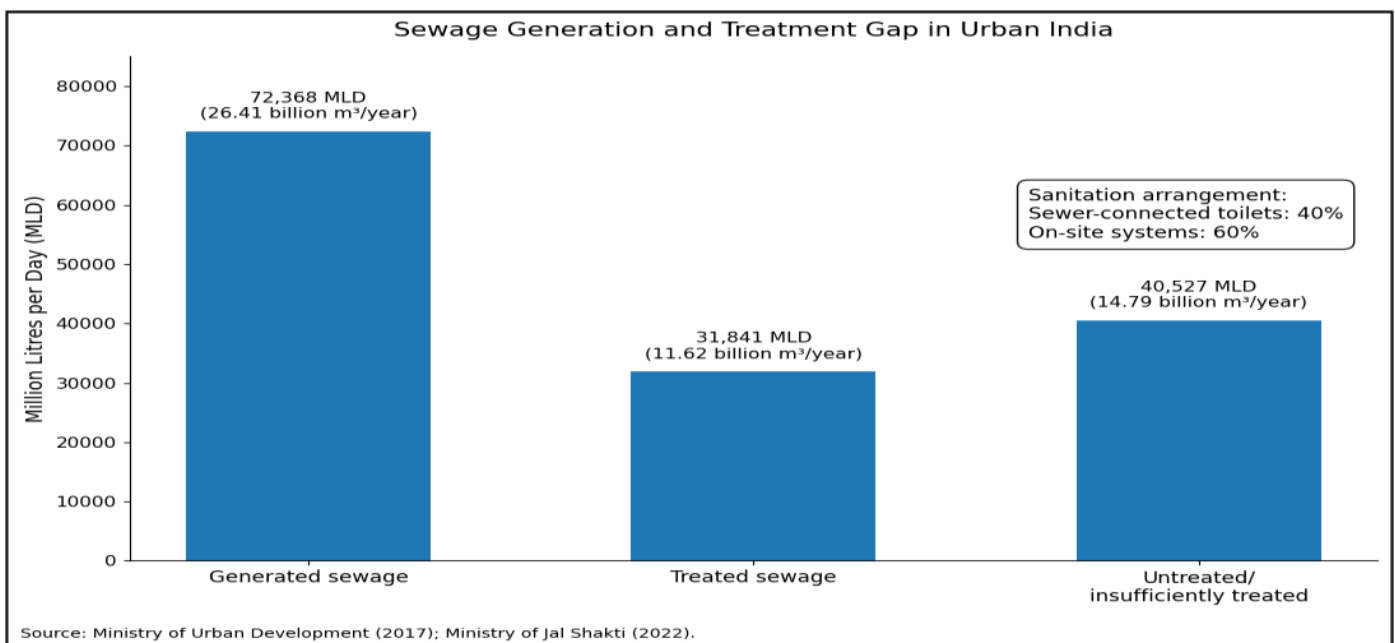


Figure 3. Sewage generation and treatment gap in urban India (author's own compilation).

However, ground reports present a contrasting picture and show that mechanisation does not in itself eliminate manual cleaning where machines are insufficient, inaccessible, or poorly integrated into municipal operations. In Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), nearly 300 manual scavengers were reportedly engaged in sewer cleaning because of limited cleaning machines. The municipal department (Jalkal) had only 18 machines for 110 municipal wards for a sewer network of over 800 km carrying nearly 250 million litres of wastewater each day. Because of this infrastructural deficit, manual scavengers are deployed for the hazardous cleaning of sewer lines using bamboo poles, buckets and ropes (Deep & Kumar, 2023). Similar patterns were reported in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh), where contractor-employed manual scavengers continued to enter sewers despite the availability of multiple sewer-cleaning machines because of their limited capacity to desludge accumulated solid waste (Deep & Kumar, 2023). Even Delhi, the national capital, continues to rely on caste-based occupation despite repeated state claims of zero manual scavengers. In Delhi, manual scavengers were found entering drains 8–10 feet deep without boots, gloves, body kits or medical support, earning around ₹300–400 (US\$3.50–4.70) per day. In case of injury some manual scavengers reported that the cost of bandages was deducted from their wages (Deep, 2023). Similarly, data collected from Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (Mumbai, Maharashtra) also confirms that the majority of manual scavengers are now engaged under insecure contractual arrangements in which they receive irregular wages, lack job security and adequate labour protection (Khatarker, 2025; Sreenath, 2023).

In the absence of effective mechanisation and governance, the continued deployment of manual scavengers for hazardous cleaning has also contributed to multiple fatalities. As shown in **Figure 4**, 622 manual scavengers died while working in sewer lines and septic tanks across India between 2017 and 2025, with Uttar Pradesh recording the highest fatalities at 86, followed by Maharashtra (82), Tamil Nadu (77), Haryana (76), Gujarat (73) and Delhi (62) (Tulsian, 2026). The cost of this practice does not end with the deaths of these workers but extends to their families after death. Official figures presented before the Lok Sabha show that 498 manual scavengers died while performing hazardous cleaning of sewer lines and septic tanks between January 2019 and June 2026. Of these, the government had provided compensation to 420 bereaved families (i.e., 345 families received ₹10 lakh or US\$10,500 and 75 families received ₹30 lakh or US\$31,500, in accordance with the order of the Supreme Court), and 22 families received partial compensation, while in 56 cases the government was unable to confirm whether any compensation had been paid. Thus, compensation remained incomplete or unverified in 78 cases, exposing a significant implementation gap between statutory entitlements and actual state practice (Verma, 2026). The failure to pay compensation reproduces the redistributive dimension of injustice even after the deaths of manual scavengers in India.

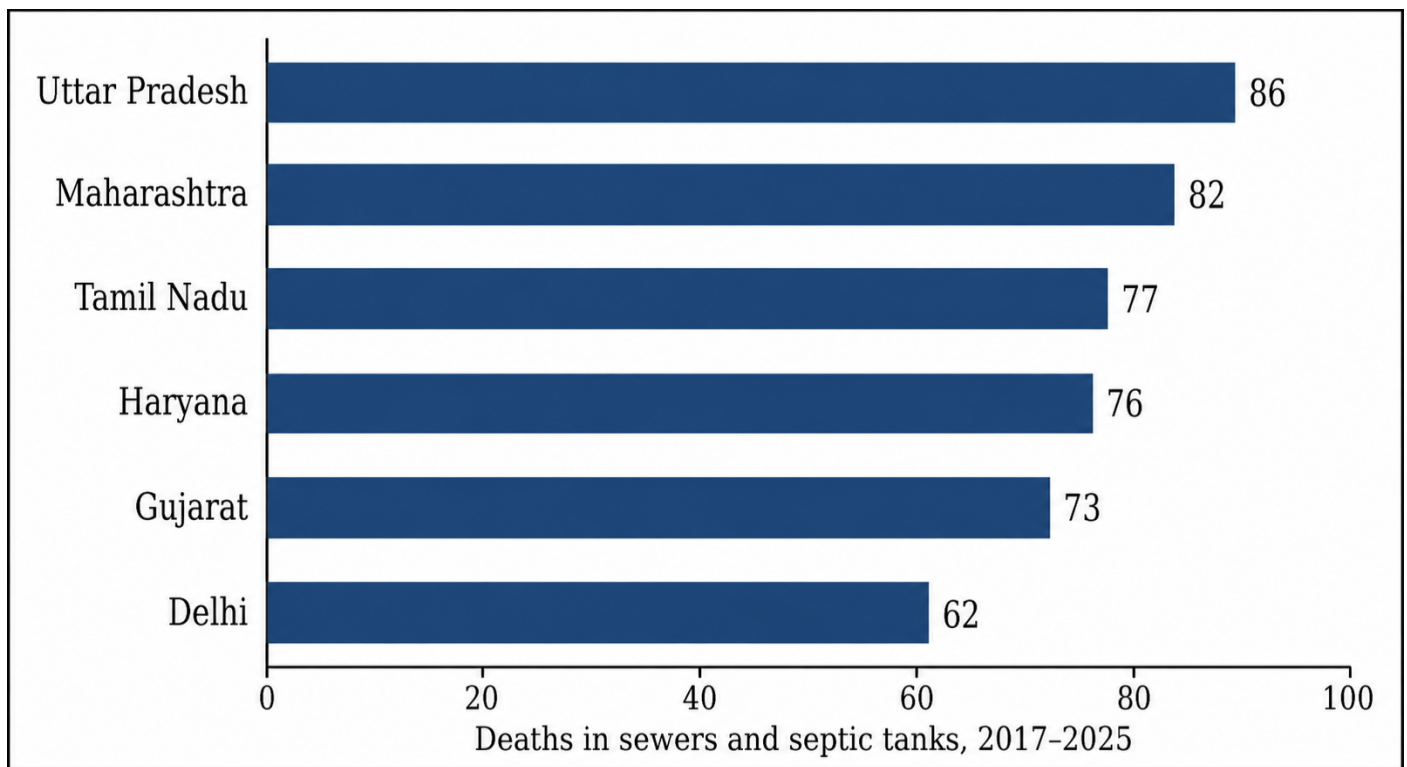


Figure 4. State-wise deaths of manual scavengers in sewer lines and septic tanks, 2017–2025 (author’s own compilation using data from Tulsian, 2026).

4.3. Municipal outsourcing, labour governance and the reproduction of caste-based manual scavenging

The continuing deaths of manual scavengers reveal that the problem is not only technological but also institutional. They highlight persistent failures in labour governance, employer accountability and workforce management, which have been reinforced through the outsourcing of sanitation services. While sanitation services continue to be a municipal responsibility, competitive tendering transfers the recruitment, supervision and day-to-day management of the workforce to private contractors and subcontractors. This model encourages a “cheap labour” approach based on temporary and informal employment, so that many manual scavengers have no written contract, provident fund coverage, health insurance, occupational safety training or effective legal protection. This fragmentation of employer responsibility allows municipalities to shift liability for workplace injuries to contractors, who are subject to weaker regulation and public oversight (Koonan, 2021; Mander et al., 2020). The implications of this governance model are evident in municipal contracting practices. For instance, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) awarded a ₹7.88 crore (approximately US\$0.93 million) contract in 2021 for the systematic cleaning of sewer lines. The tender specified the requirement for high-capacity machines for suction and jetting operations but did not explicitly ban manual scavengers from participating in the cleaning process. The lack of such a provision created a huge loophole in the regulation, allowing private contractors to continue to employ manual scavengers for hazardous sewer-cleaning work. This illustrates how loosely designed contracts can weaken legislative protection and perpetuate unsafe and caste-based occupational practices (MCGM, 2021; Raj & Tiwari, 2026).

5. Discussion

The findings reinforce earlier scholarship that manual scavenging persists despite constitutional guarantees and prohibitory legislation because the problem

extends beyond legal recognition to the structural organisation of labour, sanitation governance and resource distribution (Koonan, 2021; Saldanha et al., 2022; Kahle & Hammerslev, 2023). While previous studies have documented implementation failures, inadequate rehabilitation and the role of Dalit movements in securing legal recognition, the present study advances this scholarship by integrating these strands through Fraser's recognition–redistribution framework. The analysis shows that identity-based mobilisation was effective in making manual scavenging visible and in framing it as a matter of caste discrimination, labour rights and human dignity, but these gains remained largely affirmative, as they were not followed by redistributive reforms. Consequently, the persistence of manual scavenging does not only reflect the limitations of the MS Act 2013 but also deeper failures of labour justice, public policy and employment governance.

The study also highlights the issue with the human resource management that lies initially with the municipal corporations which ultimately outsource the employment of manual scavengers to private contractors through contract tenders. By doing so, they systematically convert manual scavengers' labour into informal employment, working under discriminatory and inhumane conditions, weak labour governance, poor working conditions, lack of employer accountability and lack of dignity at work. The persistence of manual scavenging also raises questions about governance and policy implementation, as responsibility for sanitation, rehabilitation and labour regulation is distributed across multiple institutions operating at central, state and local levels. The scope of rehabilitation, sanitation infrastructure, and secure livelihoods for manual scavengers may be affected by differences in administrative capacity, resource allocation, and implementation across jurisdictions.

Thus, the practice of manual scavenging cannot be solved by only recognising the problem and addressing it directly. Rather, it is important to shift towards more institutional and redistributive reforms that change the conditions of sanitation labour organisation and governance. Comparative experience from the South Asian region also reveals that, in addition to legislative prohibition, institutional change is needed to eliminate manual scavenging in India. In Bangladesh, the work of formalising pit-emptying services and mechanised desludging has fostered a safer working environment and boosted the visibility of manual scavengers in the municipal governance framework. However, research also warns that formalisation does not automatically end labour precarity, as workers can still find themselves in insecure jobs and in unequal bargaining positions in newly formalised service contracts (World Bank, 2019; Poustie et al., 2024). In Nepal, reforms have focused on worker professionalisation, occupational health and safety standards, provision of PPE and the accountability of the sanitation chain (SNV, 2021; ILO, 2025). Together, these experiences suggest that mechanisation and formalisation are most effective when accompanied by labour protections, worker training, and institutional accountability. At the same time, policy transfer should be approached cautiously because India's sanitation system operates at a much larger scale and under more diverse administrative conditions. The experiences of Bangladesh and Nepal are not offered as models for replication, but they emphasise the need to link sanitation reform to labour rights, worker protection, and redistributive support mechanisms.

6. Conclusion

Therefore, the gap between recognition and structural transformation echoes the Gandhi–Ambedkar debate that has shaped the politics of caste and social justice since the early twentieth century. Although Gandhian intervention helped bring the moral injustice of untouchability and manual scavenging into public consciousness, Ambedkar repeatedly argued that dignity could not be achieved

without transforming the caste, labour, and economic relations that sustained these practices. The findings lend support to this latter proposition by demonstrating that legal recognition, although indispensable, cannot by itself eradicate the practice unless it is accompanied by substantive redistributive reforms in employment, labour governance and sanitation infrastructure. The study accordingly offers practical implications for policy makers, public organisations, municipal employers, and municipal human resource practitioners for managing sanitation services. For policymakers, prohibition should be accompanied by sustained investment in sanitation infrastructure, universal mechanisation, adequately funded rehabilitation and skilling programmes and effective fiscal coordination between central, state and local governments. Municipal employers and private contractors should formalise sanitation employment through written contracts, fair wages, social security coverage, mandatory occupational safety standards, regular skills training and clear accountability for workplace injuries and fatalities. Human resource practitioners should incorporate workplace equality, dignity at work, inclusive recruitment, career mobility, occupational safety, and rehabilitation support into sanitation workforce management to address the marginalisation of manual scavengers in India. While these practical implications are important, the study has several limitations. The findings draw largely upon documentary and secondary sources, which limits their capacity to capture the lived experiences of both rehabilitated and non-rehabilitated manual scavengers. Although evidence was aggregated across a number of states, the study does not offer comparable ethnographic detail for rural and regional contexts, where labour practices, rehabilitation outcomes and implementation capacities can differ significantly, nor does it trace public expenditure on sanitation and rehabilitation across the three tiers of government. These limitations also open opportunities for further research.

7. Future research directions

Future research should therefore undertake longitudinal ethnographic studies of both rehabilitated and non-rehabilitated manual scavengers to examine long-term livelihood transitions, occupational mobility and social inclusion. Further research should also focus on the gendered dimensions of manual scavenging, given that women predominate in the manual cleaning of dry and insanitary latrines. This would strengthen understanding of differences in employment trajectories, occupational health, access to rehabilitation and workplace discrimination between male and female manual scavengers. Comparative analyses of labour governance, fiscal devolution and rehabilitation policies across Indian states, together with comparative studies of sanitation governance in other South Asian countries, would also help identify institutional arrangements that more effectively translate legal recognition into durable redistribution, decent work and inclusive employment. From a Human Resource Management (HRM) perspective, future research should examine recruitment practices, contractualisation, occupational safety management, performance monitoring and employer accountability within municipal and contractor-led sanitation services. Such studies would help identify how HRM policies and labour governance arrangements contribute to the reproduction or reduction of caste-based employment inequalities and hazardous working conditions in the sanitation sector.

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