

**From Baskets to Manholes: A Socio-Legal
Analysis of the Transition of Manual
Scavenging and the Technological Paradox of
the NAMASTE Scheme**

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Abstract

Manual scavenging in India represents a profound socio-legal paradox while the nation pursues high-technology Viksit Bharat goals, its sanitation infrastructure remains tethered to a 2000-year-old caste-based hierarchy. This paper interrogates the transition from the "Basket Era" characterized by the manual removal of waste from dry latrines primarily by women to the more lethal "Manhole Era" of underground hazardous cleaning performed by men. Through a synthesis of Erving Goffman's "stigma-theory" and B.R. Ambedkar's division of labourers, this study argues that the transition is not an evolution of labour but a survival of caste subjugation within modern urban spaces. Utilizing recent secondary data from the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) and parliamentary reports as of July 2024, the study reveals a staggering mortality rate of over 1340 officially recorded sewer deaths since 1993. A critical evaluation of the NAMASTE Scheme (2022) and the 2024-2025 Union Budget indicates a technocratic pivot toward mechanization at the expense of direct human rehabilitation. Furthermore, analysis of January 2025 profiling data exposes a "Digital Identification Gap", where only 15% of the targeted 2.3 lakh workers have been verified, leaving the majority "invisible" and excluded from safety nets. The findings suggest that the government's March 2025 deadline for 100% mechanization remains a technological mask for the invisibilization of Dalit labour. The paper concludes that true eradication cannot be achieved through machines alone; it requires a radical social shift to dismantle the "stigma of touch" and a commitment to the "annihilation of caste" in the public mindset.

Keywords

Manual scavenging, Caste hierarchy, NAMASTE Scheme, Sewer deaths, Social stigma, Digital identification gap, Urbanization, PEMSR Act.

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1. Introduction and Background

Social stratification based on caste is an inherent feature of the Indian society. This caste system is characterized by hierarchy with Brahmins at the top and Dalit at the bottom. Just like Brahmins and Kshatriyas, Dalits also had their hereditary occupations but their occupation was not considered as pure as Brahmins and Kshatriyas. This hierarchy made them perform the occupation of cleaning toilets manually and considered them unfit for many civilian rights. This eventually made them an underprivileged social caste called as untouchables, Harijans, Exterior caste, Depressed class, outcaste and Dalits that later comprised under scheduled caste.

The Dalits had two different categories of occupations i.e. cleaning and leather processing. The occupation of cleaning included the sweeping of streets, drains and sewers, removal of human and animal excreta etc. Earlier toilets were not provided with the flush; sweeper had to clean the toilets manually by hand and had to carry the human faces on their head. Valmiki, Dom and Hela were the caste performing this task therefore considered lowest in the caste hierarchy. The other occupation of leather included removing the dead animal skin and making leather goods such as shoes, sandals etc. This occupation was not only undesirable but also polluted. They were paid less for their work and compelled them to collect leftover chapatis from upper caste people as a part of their customary wages.

Manual scavenging is the removal of human excreta without protective equipment. This practice has been deeply rooted in India's caste based occupational hierarchy. The people practicing this inhumane activity are known by different names in the different parts of the country. Scavengers have many synonyms like Chuhra, Khakrob, Up of Dust. As a domestic worker they are called Mehtar, as workers of leather they are called Dhed in Gujarat, as a weaver they are known as Megh in Rajasthan and as an executioner they are known as Jallad and called Khatik in Punjab. Historically, these communities were treated as "untouchables", denied civil rights, and forced into hereditary roles of cleaning and leather processing. Even the hierarchy persists within the lower underprivileged caste, those who work in private houses considered themselves superior

than those working in public latrines. The other castes like Doms and Mongd handled activities like sweeping, killing a stray dog. A large number of sweepers changed their caste and religion in order to get better status but this convergence did not bring any real change in their status.

2. Objectives of the Study

Objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To trace the historical evolution of manual scavenging from ancient texts to the colonial era.
2. To analyze the regional distribution and internal hierarchies of scavenging castes across India.
3. To analyze the socio-legal transition from surface-level cleaning “Baskets Era” to hazardous underground work “Manhole Era”.
4. To evaluate the transition from the 1993 Act to the 2013 Act and the current NAMASTE Scheme (2022).

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a Qualitative Descriptive Research Design based on Secondary Data Analysis. The analysis relies on the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) Annual Report 2021-22, the Status of Sewer/Septic Tank Death Cases and the PEMSAR Act 2013 and the NAMASTE 2025-26 projections. A synthesis of Erving Goffman’s Theory of Stigma (1963) and B. R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) is used to interpret the issue of manual cleaning. It also investigative accounts by Bhasha Singh (Unseen) and Gita Ramaswamy (India Stinking) to provide the historical and modern era analysis about the persistence of manual scavenging.

4. Historical & Regional Context: The Mapping of Caste Labour

The ancient texts have no record of manual scavenging in its literature. However, Dr Bindeshwar Pathak in his book “Road to Freedom” states that ancient scriptures discuss scavenging, especially the disposal of human feces by a particular caste that has been in existence since the beginning of civilization. In Naradiya Samhita, Scavenging was included in the fifteenth duties allocated to the slaves. Vajasaneyi Samhita discusses Chandals and Paulkasa as manual scavengers. During the Mughal empire, scavenging emerged as a formal profession. It is believed that the system of buckets was designed and constructed for the women in purdah. The convicted slaves were forced to clean the dry latrines and carry human feces to throw off at distant places. These slaves, when freed, were not accepted by the society, then formed a separate caste and continued to work as scavengers. This practice was institutionalized during the British period when they had a

requirement of a large workforce for army cantonment and urban sanitation. Instead of developing technology they hired the lower caste people to perform manual scavenging. So, it has been a traditional practice persisted since ages in Indian society. Cleaning dry latrines manually has been commonly used practice in earlier societies. The toilets did not equipped with the facility of flush. Therefore, lower castes had to clean by the broom and collect all the human feces in the basket, carrying on their head to the disposal sites. Such jobs were not only considered polluted but also paid less. Primarily this task was performed by lower castes like Valmiki or Mehtar females and was associated with customary arrangement where families performed cleaning to higher castes in exchange of food/grains.

This situation has not changed despite modernization and technological advancement. It seems it is their work in the present modern era too. Those occupied in this profession were not only considered polluted and but also oppressed and repressed by the upper caste people due to their caste and occupation. The transition from the “Basket” (surface cleaning of dry latrines) to the “Manhole” (underground sewer cleaning) marks a shift from social stigma to physical mortality. This paper investigates why, despite modernization, the Dalit person remains the primary mechanism for waste management in India. This transition changed the gender of the scavengers but not the caste.

5. Regional Mapping of Scavenging Castes

The scavengers are known by different names in different parts of India as shown below:

Table-1: Community Names of Scavengers in different Parts of India

Region	Community Names
Northern India	Bhangi, Balmiki, Chuhra, Mehtar, Mazhabi, Lal Begi, Halalkhor
Eastern India	Hari, Hadi, Hela, Dom, Sanei
Southern India	Mukhiyar, Thoti, Chachati, Pakay, Relli
Western & Central India	Ghasi, Olgana, Zadmalli, Barvanshia, Metariya, Jamphoda, Mela

5.1 Scavenging Castes of Northern India

Northern India shows the practice of manual scavenging deeply rooted in the region because of the long survival of dry latrine systems, low sanitation modernization and caste-based occupational continuity. Northern Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab historically contained a high concentration of manual scavengers because dry latrines remained common in old towns, municipal settlements, railway colonies, and semi-urban localities.

The persistence of manual scavenging in northern India was closely linked to traditional sanitation arrangements in which human excreta from dry latrines had to be manually removed every day. Manual scavenging in northern India was a hereditary caste occupation. Communities such as Valmiki, Bhangi, and Mehtar were traditionally assigned this work. The hereditary transfer meant that sanitation labour passed from one generation to another, making occupational mobility extremely difficult. In villages, sanitation workers often received grain, leftover food, or old clothes instead of wages.

Women were primarily engaged in cleaning household dry latrines and carrying excreta in baskets on their heads, while men were more frequently employed in public sanitation spaces such as drains and municipal cleaning. This division demonstrates that caste oppression intersected with gender-based labour distribution. In northern India manual scavengers became socially excluded caste. Workers were denied equal social interaction, segregated in settlements, and treated as untouchable despite providing essential sanitation services. Thus, manual scavenging represented both occupational exploitation and everyday caste humiliation.

An important transition identified in northern India is the gradual decline of dry latrines accompanied by the emergence of new sanitation risks. As urban sanitation systems expanded, workers increasingly moved from surface-level cleaning to septic tanks, drains, and sewer chambers rather than leaving sanitation labour entirely. This suggests that manual scavenging changed form rather than disappeared. Thus, northern India provides strong evidence that manual scavenging persisted because technological change in sanitation was slower than social change in caste relations. It clearly depicts the picture of modern era, how caste-based labour adapted into newer hazardous forms.

5.2 Scavenging Castes of Central India

In states like Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Central India presents a hybrid landscape where traditional and emerging forms of scavenging coexist. Historically, communities such as the Mehtar, Bhangi, Ghasi, and Jamphoda were the primary managers of the “Basket Era”. As these states urbanized, these same communities re-absorbed into the “Manhole Era”. Today, they form the backbone of the workforce engaged in drain cleaning and septic pit extraction.

5.3 Scavenging Castes of Western India

The western belt comprising Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan reveals a striking Urban Paradox. Despite being home to India’s most industrialized hubs, municipal bodies remain structurally dependent on manual labour. In rapidly growing towns, sewer systems often remain

poorly maintained, forcing local authorities to rely on castes like the Metariya, Olgana, and Halalkho for sanitation.

A critical transition in Western India is the “Contractualization of Caste”. The traditional hereditary service has shifted into municipal contract systems, where large public sanitation complexes still mandate manual cleaning. This formalization of informal labour allows the state to maintain a mask of modern sanitation while keeping the actual work rooted in the manual labour of marginalized bodies.

5.4 Scavenging Castes of Eastern India

In Eastern India, particularly West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam, manual scavenging persists within municipal settlements and traditional urban pockets. While the absolute number of dry latrines may be lower than in the North, the social exclusion remains acute.

Drawing from the ethnographies of H. H. Risley (1891) sub-castes such as the Bara-bhagiya, Siuli, and Har Santan continue to occupy the lowest social stratum. The stigma remains so potent that social commensality sharing food or water is still a distant dream and temple entry remains restricted for these communities. In Assam, clans like the Pawar, Sarowan, and Tejia remain trapped in a generational cycle. For these groups, sanitation is not a choice but an inescapable hereditary duty, passed down through clans for over a century.

5.5 Scavenging Castes of Southern India

In southern India most of the scavengers were migrants from northern India. Most of the castes involved in scavenging were Madiga, Mala, Thoti, Paky, Lingayats, Kuruba, Mudaliyars, Adi Andhras, Adi Dravidas and Adi Karnatakas but later they abandoned their traditional occupation and engaged in the jobs of sweepers and employed in municipalities. Southern India saw earlier conversion to sanitary latrines in many cities, but workers were still employed in septic tank cleaning, municipal drains and public toilet maintenance.

6. Theoretical Framework: The Sociological Lenses

Ambedkar’s Division of Labourers theory in his book *Annihilation of Caste* explain why the Dalit follows the waste regardless of technology. Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste* argued that the caste system is not just about what work is done, but who is allowed to do it. Lower caste people are predestined to handle waste. Whether the waste is in a basket on a woman’s head or in a manhole under a man’s feet, the caste system ensures that the same “labourer” follows the “waste”. The technology changed from dry latrines flush toilets but the social requirement for a Dalit to touch the waste remained fixed. He explains how caste system is built on a hierarchy of purity and pollution. The Brahmin represents the purity, while the

“Untouchable” (Dalit) is considered polluted. Therefore, the caste system pushes the marginalized community into the manhole to keep the rest of society pure.

Ambedkar argues that caste is a closed system which does not permit its members to change their traditional occupation. When dry latrines were banned, the scavengers did not get any other jobs of purity. It left them with no choice but to come back in the same redesigned profession of cleaning sewer and septic tanks. In this way, the manhole became the new basket. As Ambedkar said that caste is not just a state of mind but a disease of the mind. Hence, the mindset needs to be changed in order to change the life of the scavengers.

Ambedkar criticized the legal policy and act made for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers. He believed only law implementation could not ensure the dignified life and rights of the workers. Even if the law bans the act of manual cleaning but the contractor has a mindset to hire a Dalit to clean the septic tank. We need to address the religious and social evil practices. The transition from surface to underground work is proof of Ambedkar’s warning, unless you “annihilate” the idea of caste, the injustice will simply find a new location to hide (the manhole).

Goffman’s Spoiled Identity explains why Rehabilitation fails due to the Purity and Pollution mindset of the “upper” castes. The theory of social stigma states that stigma is an attribute which not only reduces a person from whole to a discounted one but also converts his identity into a spoiled identity due to his hereditary polluted work of dealing with human excreta. He termed it as tribal stigma inherited through their race, lineage or caste. This stigma is like social glue that keeps them stuck to sewer. Goffman explains how this stigma is imposed by non-stigmatized people to prove the inferiority of the stigmatized person. Even if they try to change the occupation, they become still unacceptable for a clean occupation hence it forced them to come back into the manhole again because their identities are spoiled. He argues that the work of sewer is hidden but it does not reduce the stigma imposed. Therefore, a worker lives a life of identity management by hiding his identity from society to avoid the social stigma coming from the label of scavenger. It reflects how the worker is legally rehabilitated but socially isolated.

Gita Ramaswamy’s work on India Stinking focused on why the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993 failed and why the “Basket” era didn’t end by law implementation. Ramaswamy argues that the 1993 Act was a paper tiger. It focused on banning the construction of dry latrines but ignored the scavenger social life. The government did focus on prohibition rather than

rehabilitation. She critiques the government's standard rehabilitation tools like giving sewing machines or buffaloes to former scavengers. Government efforts failed because of Caste Boycotts. If a woman who previously carried a basket tries to sell milk from a government-gifted buffalo, the upper-caste villagers refuse to buy it, citing pollution. The "Transition to Manholes" happened because the 1990s rehabilitation programs were a social failure. Since they couldn't survive in "clean" jobs, the workers had no choice but to follow the waste as it moved into the new underground sewer lines.

Bhasha Singh's book *Unseen* argues that Modern India is obsessed with looking clean and it achieves the clean status by hiding its shame. Singh argues that the transition from Baskets to Manholes is a move from Visibility to Invisibility. A woman carrying a basket on her head is a visible "stain" on a modern city's image. A man inside a manhole is invisible to the cars driving over him. The city looks modern (no dry latrines), but the "shameful" labour is simply happening 10 feet underground. She highlights the irony of Smart Cities and Digital India and argue that India has the technology for Mars Missions but refuses to invest in Sewer Robots for narrow lanes. This is a deliberate choice to keep using cheap, caste-based labour. Singh documents how the transition changed the victim. While the "Basket" era exploited women, the "Manhole" era kills men.

7. The Transition: From Baskets to Manholes

Manual Scavenging is an inhuman and shameful practice that needs to be fully eradicated because every person deserves a dignified profession. Earlier lower caste people especially women clean the dry latrines by their hands and carry it in a basket to throw off. Later this practice converted into getting in manholes/sewers by men without any protections in order to clean it.

So, the traditional basket era was about cleaning the dry latrines, especially by women with their hands and carrying it in a basket to throw off. Whereas the modern manhole era is concerned with underground hazardous sewer, septic tank cleaning by men. The danger involved in basket era was primarily infections and skin diseases whereas in manhole era the dangers of different toxic gases in sewer water resulted in instant death of the person. The basket era was about social stigma; the manhole era is about mortality. This transition has made the profession a death trap. The basket era (surfacing cleaning) led to diseases and infection; the manhole era (underground) led to deaths.

Due to increased sanitation in urban and industrial areas problem of manual scavenging in the form of sewer and septic tank cleaning is still persisting in this modern era. Most of the sanitation workers are of

scheduled caste and adopted this profession as generational transmission. Earlier sanitation belongs to a certain caste of lower strata and who were considered untouchables due to their unclean work while higher caste enjoyed the privileges in the choice of occupation.

The hardship, humiliation and exploitation these people have faced, are facing is needs to be addressed effectively in order to provide them a better and more dignified life. After independence, the government has taken many initiatives to eradicate this practice by enforcement of legislative act and policy and modernizing sanitation facilities. Modernizing sanitation technology is not a sufficient measure to improve the lives of manual scavengers but their social and economic marginalization needs to be addressed. Government initiatives and efforts should reach every person involved in an unclean profession.

7.1 The Judicial Landmarks: Analyzing the 2003 PIL & the 2014 Supreme Court Judgment on the 10-Lakh Compensation

A PIL was filed in 2003 against the practice of manual scavenging and construction of dry latrines. The petition exposed the persistence of lakhs of dry latrines and forcing of Dalit women to perform manual scavenging. In its judgement on 27-3-2014 supreme court of India declared total prohibition of the practice of manual scavenging and strict implementation of Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013. On the date 27-3-2014 supreme court of India gave its judgement on the horrific conditions of deaths of scavengers occurring every year. It states that manual scavengers are facing the issue of gas poisoning inside the sewer and septic tank due to this a large number of deaths are occurring every year and many go unreported. The sewer is exposed to many harmful chemical gases and a worker entering the manhole is supposed to swim in that dirty sewage and find the blockage in drums which not only resulted in physical diseases but also a mental trauma and social stigma. In most of the cases, authorities hardly take responsibility for these deaths by stating the deceased person is not employed by them resulting in unreported deaths and non-compensated as well.

The supreme court of India directed in its judgement that manual scavenging is more inhuman, unhygienic and dangerous activity and hence should be banned completely. If needed, proper training and safety protection gear should be given to workers and it should be performed under the supervision of specialized engineers. In order to compensate, the supreme court directed all the families of deceased persons since 1993 to provide compensation of 10 lakh for each such death to the family members. Even after supreme court judgement 120+ cases are pending for compensation.

7.2 Grassroots Movements: The role of Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and the “Stop Killing Us” Campaign

The Safai Karamchari Andolan campaign of Stop killing us got highlighted during 2018-22. Its reports show how hundreds of people lost their lives by performing hazardous septic tank and sewer work. With urbanization, practice of manual scavenging has declined but shifted to another form of sewer and septic tank cleaning without any protection. The movement suggested the use of machinery instead of humans to perform sanitation work and argued sanitation work as hate work.

SKA argues that manual cleaning is not just about sanitation but also a human rights issue that not only has degraded the dignity of a person but also affected families.

8. Quantitative Analysis: Decoding NCSK Data (2021-22)

8.1 Trends in Sewer Deaths: Analysis of the Deaths recorded since 1993

It has been a traditional practice persisted since ages in Indian society. Earlier dry latrines were commonly used. These toilets were not provided with the facility of flush. Therefore, lower castes had to clean by the broom and collect all the human feces in the basket carrying on their head to the disposal sites. Primarily this task was performed by lower castes like Valmiki or Mehtar females. This was associated with customary arrangement where families performed cleaning to higher castes in exchange of food/grains.

To end this practice, Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines Prohibition Act 1993 was passed. Despite the ban, dry latrines kept on increasing. The act officially bans to hiring people for manual sanitation work from dry latrines and sewer. It completely prohibits the construction of dry latrines. Due to increased urbanization, cities moved towards flush toilets. Then dry latrines converted into flush toilets attached with septic tanks and sewer lines.

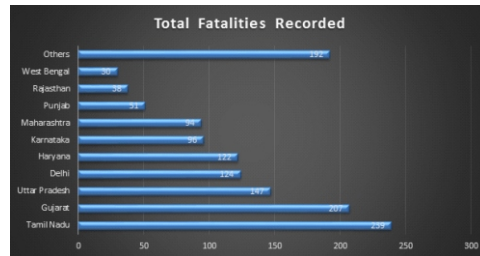
Table-2: State-wise Mortality and Compensation Trends in Sewer Cleaning (1993 - Nov 2025)

Rank	State/Union Territory	Total Fatalities Recorded	Compensation Paid (Full ₹10 Lakh)	Cases Pending/ Under Process
1	Tamil Nadu	239	231	08
2	Gujarat	207	177	30
3	Uttar Pradesh	147	118	29
4	Delhi	124	102	22
5	Haryana	122	95	27
6	Karnataka	96	95	01

7	Maharashtra	94	82	12
8	Punjab	51	49	02
9	Rajasthan	38	33	05
10	West Bengal	30	27	03
11	Others	192	174	18
All India Total		1340	1183	157

Source: Compiled by the author from the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) Database (updated as of 2025).

The figure-1 of 1340 deaths represent only the officially acknowledged fatalities. Out of 157 cases not paid approximately 55 cases have been closed due to no legal heirs could be located. The remaining 102 cases are still pending under process.



The highest concentration of deaths is found in India's most urbanized and economically advanced states like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Delhi (figure-2). This reveals a disturbing paradox as cities modernize their sanitation infrastructure, they become more reliant on hazardous manual labour to maintain underground pipes. Modernity, in this context has not liberated the labourer but it has merely moved their workplace to an oxygen-deprived, toxic environment where the risk of instant death is a reality.



While the Supreme Court (2014) mandated a mandatory compensation of ₹10 Lakhs for every death since 1993 the data shows that 112 families are still awaiting full redressal. In states like Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, the pendency rate remains high. For a Dalit family that has lost its primary breadwinner to a sewer, the struggle for compensation is a second form of problem. In July 2024, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment provided a written answer in the Lok Sabha the Statistics revealed that 377

people died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in the last five years (2019-2023). The Ministry claimed “Zero deaths due to manual scavenging” but admitted to 377 deaths due to “hazardous cleaning of sewers”. They claim manual scavenging is gone (the Basket Era) but acknowledge the deaths in the Manhole Era.

Government of India has launched **NAMASTE** (National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem) scheme in 2023-24 in order to eliminate manual scavenging by promoting sewer and septic tanks cleaning by machines. It also ensures to provide training, financial assistance and protective gears.

8.2 The NAMASTE Profiling Data (Sewer Employment)

The government has started “profiling” Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) under the NAMASTE Scheme (2023-24). The government has identified and targeted 2.3 Lakh sanitation workers for profiling across India. Out of these, only about 89114 have been officially profiled and verified so far. There is a Recognition Lag. While the government knows there are at least 2.3 lakh people in this hazardous “Manhole” profession, the slow pace of profiling keeps the majority of these workers invisible and without health insurance or safety gear.

The Government of India, under the NAMASTE Scheme targeted for 100% mechanical cleaning of sewers and septic tanks in all 4,800+ Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across India By March 31, 2025. While the government aims for “zero human intervention”, reports from early 2025 suggest that many smaller municipalities (Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities) still lack the necessary “Jetting and Suction” machines. “Manhole Era” seems to be in a race against elimination of manual cleaning but without addressing the Narrow Lane problem (where machines can’t go), the target remains a Technological Myth.

In the Union Budget the allocation for the NAMASTE scheme was significantly increased to approximately ₹116.94 Crore for the 2024-25 financial year. while in 2025-26 budget the government has focused towards Viksit Bharat goals which include making India Manual Scavenging Free. While the budget for machines is increasing, the budget for direct rehabilitation (cash assistance) for individual workers has been slashed, favoring “contractors” over “community liberation”.

As India pursues its ‘Viksit Bharat’ vision for 2025-2026, the state’s approach to sanitation has transitioned into a ‘Technological Paradox’. While the budgetary allocation for the NAMASTE scheme is projected to rise toward ₹125 Crore in the 2025-26 cycle, the funds for direct human rehabilitation have been systematically reduced. This fiscal shift prioritizes the procurement of machinery over the social liberation of the worker. In the 2025-26 period If a worker is not profiled on the digital portal by early

2025, they effectively cease to exist for the state's assistance. They are denied access to Ayushman Bharat (Health Insurance) specific to SSWs, Safety Gear and Training mandated by the 2013 Act, Compensation Claims in the event of an accident.

This "Digital Gap" ensures that as we enter the 2025-2026 financial year, the majority of the "Manhole" workforce remains subterranean and invisible. By focusing the budget on "Viksit Bharat" goals through machines, the state has legally "erased" manual scavenging, while the non-profiled Dalit labourer continues to risk their life in the sewer, unrecognized and unprotected.

8.3 Recent Mortality Extrapolations (2024-2025)

Based on the steady rate of deaths reported to the NCSK and by NGOs like Safai Karamchari Andolan the cumulative death toll from 1993 to early 2025 has officially crossed the 1,050 marks. In the 2024 Winter Session of Parliament, the government maintained that "No deaths have occurred due to manual scavenging", but they now track "Sewer deaths" as a separate category. It reflects the Modernity Mask. In 2025, the state has legally "erased" the term manual scavenging while the actual deaths continue under a different name.

State governments often claim that manual scavenging is finished, but the rising number of sewer deaths proves this is not true. By using narrow legal definitions, officials hide the thousands of workers who still enter manholes every day without protection. The NCSK data reveals a major "Compensation Gap", with over 120 families still waiting for the ₹10 lakh promised by the Supreme Court. Many of these cases are stuck because city authorities blame private contractors to avoid paying for the lives lost in their sewers. This "Politics of Denial" means a worker is only recognized by the state once they become a tragic headline. For these grieving families, the delay in compensation is a second form of injustice that keeps them trapped in poverty.

Table-3: Comparison of Anti-Scavenging Laws: A History of Legal Failures

Feature	The 1993 Act (Dry Latrine Act)	The 2013 Act (PEMSR Act)	The 2020/ NAMASTE Move (Mechanization)
Main Focus	The "Basket" Era: Focused only on dry latrines.	The "Manhole" Era: Included sewers and septic tanks.	The "Machine" Era: Focuses on 100% mechanization.
The Goal	Stop people from cleaning dry latrines by hand.	Rehabilitate workers and stop "hazardous" sewer cleaning.	Replace humans with machines and "Sanipreneurs".

Why it Failed	Ignored Sewers: It completely forgot that people were also dying in underground pipes.	The “Safety Gear” Loophole: It allowed cleaning if gear was provided. Contractors used this to avoid blame.	The “Narrow Lane” Problem: Machines don’t fit in small streets where humans are still sent in.
Rehabilitation	Almost none.	Provided ₹40,000 and “skill training” (like sewing).	Focuses on giving loans for machines instead of direct help.
Punishment	Zero. Not a single person was ever convicted in 20 years.	Very low. Most deaths are called “accidents,” not crimes.	Focus is on “incentives”, not punishing the contractors.

The 1993 Act: It officially banned “Dry Latrines” (toilets without flushes) and the carrying of waste in baskets. It completely ignored sewers. Because the law only looked at the “Basket Era,” it was blind to the fact that people were starting to die underground in pipes.

The 2013 Act (PEMSR): It admitted that entering a sewer is Manual Scavenging. It promised to give workers new jobs (rehabilitation). It directed that cleaning a sewer is okay if the boss provides safety gear like masks or gloves.

The 2020 NAMASTE Scheme: It aims to replace humans with machines. It tries to turn workers into “Sanipreneurs” (small business owners who own cleaning machines). It ignores the “Narrow Lane” reality. In many old Indian cities, streets are too small for big machines. This means humans are still sent into manholes in secret. A machine can fix a pipe, but it cannot fix stigma. Even if a Dalit worker buys a machine, many people still won’t hire them because of their caste. It seems to be hard to change the 2,000-year-old mindset just by purchasing a new robot.

All three legal attempts share one mistake. They tried to fix the “Toilet”, but they never attempted to fix the Caste System. The 1993 Act tried to fix the Basket. The 2013 Act tried to fix the Manhole and the NAMASTE Scheme tries to fix the Machine. None of these laws successfully helped the “Person”. Because society still looks at these workers with “stigma”, they are always pushed back into the waste, whether it is on the surface or underground. This is why the “Manhole” has become the invisible grave for the same people who once carried the “Basket.”

9. Conclusion

The primary finding of this study is that manual scavenging in India has not been eradicated; it has simply been “re-located”. The transition from the “Basket Era” to the “Manhole Era” is not a sign of urban progress,

but a modern adaptation of an ancient system of subjugation. While the visible “shame” of carrying waste on the head has decreased, it has been replaced by a much more lethal, invisible hazard beneath our streets. The 2025 data confirms that despite billions spent on “Clean India” campaigns, the Dalit body remains the final, expendable tool for maintaining urban infrastructure. The manhole has become the modern grave for the same community that society has exploited for centuries.

10. Strategic Recommendations: Moving Beyond the Machine

To move toward real change, the government must move beyond technological masks and take the following steps:

- ▶ **100% Mandatory Mechanization:** The March 2025 deadline for mechanization must be strictly enforced. However, this shouldn’t just be for big roads but also for the “Narrow Lanes” where humans are still sent in secret.
- ▶ **Direct Accountability for Deaths:** Currently, officials blame private contractors to avoid responsibility. This must stop. The Municipal Commissioner of the city should be held personally and legally accountable for every sewer death occurring under their watch.
- ▶ **Stigma-free Rehabilitation:** Giving a worker a sewing machine is useless if the local community refuses to buy their products due to their caste. Rehabilitation programs must include “Social Sensitization” to ensure that former scavengers can enter new professions without being boycotted.
- ▶ **Closing the Digital Identification Gap:** The government must fast-track the “profiling” of all 2.3 lakh workers by 2026. Without a digital ID, these workers remain “invisible” and are denied the health insurance and safety gear they desperately need.

The most important lesson from this research is that a flush toilet or a sewer robot cannot fix a broken social structure. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned, as long as the caste-logic remains in our minds, the injustice will always find a new place to hide. Demolishing a dry latrine is easy, but demolishing the “stigma of touch” is the real challenge. True eradication will only happen when we stop seeing sanitation as a job for a specific caste and start seeing it as a professional service for the whole of society. We must realize that until we annihilate the idea of caste, we are merely changing the tools of oppression moving from the basket to the manhole while the victim remains the same.

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