IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

"Is the quality of education enough to liberate children from caste-based occupations like manual scavenging?"

Shobhana Kumari

Freelance Researcher

Master from IGNOU

ABSTRACT

Manual scavenging continues in India, especially among Dalit groups, in spite of constitutional protections and the 2013 prohibition law, exposing a complex interplay between systemic neglect, poverty, and caste stigma. This article looks at how the cycle is maintained by underperforming education in rural government schools, which deprives marginalized children of the opportunities and skills necessary to escape caste-assigned labor. The study emphasizes the discrepancy between official narratives of eradication and lived realities in states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra by using secondary data from government publications, NGO surveys, and reliable media investigations. The results emphasize that legal prohibitions will only be symbolic in the absence of significant rehabilitation efforts, caste awareness in classrooms, and focused reforms in rural school quality.

INTRODUCTION:

In the alleys of Indian towns and underbellies of cities, an unseen labor force sneaks into clogged drains, enters septic tanks, and uses their bare hands to clean human waste in the alleys of Indian towns and the outskirts of its cities before the sun rises. These manual scavengers, who are almost exclusively from Dalit communities, are assigned to their jobs by birth rather than choice, a cruel holdover from the caste system that associates certain bodies with filth and impurity.

Not only is manual scavenging a labor practice, but it is also a centuries-old symbol of caste-based violence that has been normalized by silence and institutionalized by custom. Not because they lack the will to leave, but rather because society does not see them as more than members of their caste, generations of families have been stuck in this dehumanizing occupation. These communities continue to have few educational options and are frequently hampered by poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion. The future is predetermined for children of manual scavengers, who frequently have to leave school early and watch their parents return every day from sewage-filled ditches.

Even though manual scavenging has been outlawed by a number of laws, including the historic Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, it is still practiced all over the nation. Although society has not outlawed the mindset, the law has outlawed the act. This modern-day slavery

continues to exist quietly, shamefully, and violently—due to the state's inability to fully rehabilitate workers, the lack of political will to enforce bans, and the ingrained social stigma that views sanitation workers as "lesser humans."

Objective of the study: This study looks at the continued prevalence of manual scavenging in modern- day India, examining how policy flaws, inherited occupation, caste stigma, and educational deprivation all contribute to an oppressive cycle that the law cannot end on its own. Through a sociological lens, it contends that India's promise of equality will remain painfully unfulfilled until caste hierarchies are challenged and dignity is restored to all forms of labor.

Literature Review

1. **Education and Manual Scavenging-** Access to the government schools do not guarantee meaningful learning and employment for children of manual scavengers. Studies show caste- based discrimination they face in classrooms. They sit separately which leads to discourage them going to school and dropout rates increase (Human Rights Watch, 2014; IDSN, 2017). Even when children complete basic schooling, local labour-market discrimination often limits their occupational mobility (Thorat C Newman, 2010).

2. **Weak Link Between Education and Occupational Mobility -** According to empirical research, children of scavengers do not always have occupational mobility after completing their basic education (Jha, 2016). The potential of education as a means of escaping manual scavenging is undermined by the combination of discrimination, local labor market barriers, and subpar school quality.

3. **Education Quality vs. Mere Access-** Being close to a government school does not ensure that students will learn anything or be protected from prejudice. According to several studies, scavenging communities frequently reside in areas with low levels of educational quality, as evidenced by factors like learning outcomes, remedial instruction, teacher attendance, and safety from discrimination (RGSA, n.d.; Banerjee et al., 2021). Therefore, merely having "access" to a school building might not result in the goals or labor market benefits that make education a clear path out of caste-based jobs.

4. **Perceived and Actual Returns to Schooling-** There is limited rigorous empirical evidence showing that years of schooling achieved by scavengers' children translate into non-stigmatized or better-paying employment. Rehabilitation schemes and skilling programs exist, but evaluation evidence is mixed: some programs provide short-term relief, while many beneficiaries return to precarious work due to local labour-market constraints, credential devaluation, and caste exclusion (Ministry of Social Justice C Empowerment, 2020).

5. **Entrenched Caste Practices and Educational Exclusion-** For marginalized communities, caste discrimination in schools continues to be a major obstacle to educational inclusion. This is reflected in recent high-profile incidents as well as ethnographic research (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Thorat C Newman, 2010). A nine-year-old Dalit student in Surana village, Rajasthan, passed away in August 2022 after he was allegedly beaten by his teacher for consuming water from a pot meant for "upper-caste" use (NDTV, 2022; The New Indian Express, 2022). These incidents highlight how caste norms are ingrained in regular school operations, supporting research showing that violence, exclusion, and humiliation in classrooms contribute to dropout rates and reduce the perceived benefits of education for communities that rely on manual labor.

6. **Persistence of Manual Scavenging Despite the Ban-** Manual scavenging continues even though it is prohibited. Few studies look at who employs scavengers and the reasons behind these agreements.

There is evidence that illegal hiring, frequently informally, is still practiced by households, private contractors, and municipal entities. People have few viable options due to poverty, caste-based exclusion, a lack of marketable education, and a lack of respectable employment, which creates a coercive environment where people "choose" prohibited work in order to survive (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Bezwada, 2018).

7. Studies on social mobility indicate that education alone does not automatically dismantle caste- linked occupational patterns (*Desai & Dubey, 2011*). For instance, research on Dalit communities in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh has shown that many first-generation school-goers still end up in low-paying informal work, often due to poor quality of instruction and lack of employable skills (*Jeffrey, 2010*).

While these studies provide valuable insight into either **education quality** or **caste discrimination**, there is limited research that explicitly examines whether **government school education in rural areas can meaningfully transform the socio-economic status of marginalized caste students**. This study addresses that gap by connecting the **quality of education** directly with its **potential for social and economic mobility**, especially in the context of entrenched caste-based occupational barriers.

Research Gap

There is little empirical research looking at how systemic flaws in the educational system contribute to the practice's continued existence, even though existing literature emphasizes the poverty, social stigma, and caste-based discrimination that manual scavenger communities face. Most studies concentrate on school enrollment and dropout rates, but they don't sufficiently examine the quality of education, the effects of classroom discrimination, or the tenuous connection between education and respectable career prospects. The demand-side persistence of manual scavenging despite its legal prohibition is also poorly studied; in particular, who still employs manual scavengers and why people accept such labor despite its stigma and illegality. Understanding the structural factors that keep these communities in the occupation is severely hampered by the paucity of research on the combined effects of low educational attainment, labor market exclusion, and the ongoing need for manual scavenging.
Closing this gap is crucial to developing interventions that enhance educational quality and accessibility while also destroying the structural factors that allow manual scavenging to persist.

Research Questions

1. **Education System and Outcomes**
    a. How do the quality and inclusivity of government school education affect the occupational mobility of children from manual scavenging communities?
2. **Caste-Based Discrimination in Education**
    a. In what ways does caste-based discrimination within schools' influence dropout rates, educational aspirations, and perceptions of the value of schooling among these communities?
3. **Weak Link Between Education and Employment**
    a. To what extent do educational qualifications obtained by children of manual scavengers translate into dignified, non-stigmatized employment opportunities?
4. **Persistence of Manual Scavenging Post-Ban**
    a. Who continues to employ manual scavengers despite the legal prohibition, and what social and economic factors compel individuals to accept such work?

5. **Interplay Between Education and Labour Market Constraints**
    a. How do failures in the education system interact with labour market exclusion to perpetuate manual scavenging as a livelihood?

Methodology:

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative secondary research design** with elements of descriptive analysis. The focus is on synthesizing existing literature, government data, NGO reports, and credible media sources to explore the relationship between education and the persistence of manual scavenging in India.

Data Sources

The study draws upon:

- **Peer-reviewed journal articles** on education, caste, and manual scavenging.
- **Government publications** such as reports from the Ministry of Social Justice C Empowerment, National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, and Census data.
- **NGO studies and advocacy reports** from organisations including Human Rights Watch, International Dalit Solidarity Network, and local rights groups.
- **News media coverage** of significant incidents highlighting caste discrimination in schools and workplaces

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they:

1. Addressed manual scavenging in India or caste-related barriers in education.
2. Were published between 2010–2024, ensuring contemporary relevance.
3. Provided either empirical data or documented case studies.
4. Were accessible through academic databases, open-access repositories, or verified organisational websites.

Analytical Approach

A **thematic content analysis** was employed to identify recurring patterns across studies, including:

- Educational access and quality.
- Caste-based discrimination in schools.
- Link between education and occupational mobility.
- Socio-economic conditions sustaining manual scavenging despite legal bans.

Ethical Considerations

Although no primary data collection was conducted, care was taken to use reliable and verifiable sources, particularly when citing sensitive caste-related incidents. All secondary material is cited to acknowledge authorship and avoid plagiarism.

Limitations

- Dependence on existing literature means findings are constrained by the scope and quality of available studies.
- Limited longitudinal and causal data in the reviewed literature restricts the ability to make definitive cause–effect conclusions.
- Potential biases in NGO or media reports are acknowledged.

Findings s Discussion

Prevalence of Manual Scavenging Despite Legal Ban

Despite being prohibited by law, manual scavenging continues to persist across India. Government surveys have officially identified around 58,000 individuals engaged in this occupation, but the actual numbers are believed to be much higher. The Socio-Economic Caste Census (2011) reported over 1.8 lakh households involved in manual scavenging, while independent organisations, such as the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA), estimate the figure to be closer to 7.7 lakh across the country. Furthermore, only about two-thirds of Indian districts have officially declared themselves free from the practice, indicating significant geographic and administrative gaps in enforcement.

Education as a Limited Escape Route

(a) Infrastructure s Digital Deficits

While government school enrollment rates appear high, the quality of education remains deeply uneven. The ASER (2011) survey revealed that more than half of students in grade five were unable to read at a grade two level, reflecting severe foundational learning gaps. Data from UDISE+ (2021–22) further highlights the extent of infrastructural challenges: only about 55% of government schools have reliable electricity, around 20% have internet connectivity, and less than 30% are equipped with computer labs. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, only 0.9% of schools have access to digital libraries. Infrastructure- related issues also extend to safety—Rajasthan reports over 5,500 schools (about 9%) in a dilapidated condition, raising serious concerns about the suitability of the learning environment.

(b) Dropout s Learning Outcomes

High dropout rates significantly weaken education's potential as a pathway out of caste-based occupations. According to UDISE+ data, the national dropout rate at the secondary level is around 12.7%. However, in socially and economically marginalized regions such as Odisha, this figure rises sharply to 27.3%. Such disparities underscore the limited capacity of the current schooling system to retain and adequately educate children from lower-caste backgrounds, perpetuating the cycle of restricted opportunities.

3. Caste-Based Discrimination and its Effects

Caste remains a deeply entrenched factor in educational environments. Reports such as Human Rights Watch (2014) document degrading practices including forced cleaning, segregated seating, and exclusion from midday meals for Dalit children. These discriminatory experiences erode self-esteem, diminish academic confidence, and contribute to early dropout — thereby weakening education's potential to break the link between caste and occupation.

4. Limited Rehabilitation s Economic Mobility

Post-school economic mobility for former manual scavenging families remains constrained. Provisions under the 2013 Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act — such as compensation and skill-development schemes — have had limited reach and impact. Only a small proportion of identified scavengers receive the promised assistance, and training programs often suffer from poor oversight. In practice, inadequate skill upgrades and weak economic support leave many with no viable alternative but to return to manual scavenging.

Case in Point: Maharashtra s Skewed Narratives

Recent legislative disclosures in Maharashtra show how "on-paper elimination" diverges from ground realities. In July–August 2025, the state's Deputy Chief Minister informed the Assembly that **~7,500– 8,000 workers are still engaged in manual scavenging**, acknowledging **18 recorded deaths (2021– 2024)** and admitting that **local body reports often falsely claim the practice doesn't occur**; the minister also announced **₹405 crore** earmarked for mechanisation (Times of India, 2025). These admissions illustrate how official narratives of eradication can obscure continued, dangerous manual work driven by poverty, informality, and caste-structured labour markets.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that the existing quality of government schooling in rural and marginalized regions is insufficient to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of caste-bound occupations such as manual scavenging. The evidence points to systemic deficits: inadequate physical infrastructure, limited digital resources, high dropout rates, and the persistence of caste-based discriminatory practices within school environments. These factors collectively restrict the transformative potential of education for children from historically oppressed communities.

Completion of schooling, while necessary, does not guarantee economic mobility. Graduates from such schools often face constrained vocational pathways, weak social networks, and entrenched caste- based biases in hiring practices. As a result, schooling—rather than serving as a genuine pathway to upward mobility—risks reproducing existing social stratification when learning outcomes fail to meet the demands of a competitive labour market.

The continued prevalence of manual scavenging, despite its legal prohibition, reflects a combination of structural and economic factors. Field-based accounts and secondary data show that poverty, the absence of viable alternative livelihoods, and ongoing caste stigma compel families to remain in or return to the occupation. In this context, the prohibition functions more as a legal deterrent on paper than as a structural intervention capable of eliminating the practice.

To achieve meaningful change, policy measures must go beyond nominal enrolment and prohibition laws. Improving the quality of education—through infrastructure development, digital inclusion, teacher capacity-building, and anti-discrimination enforcement—must be paired with the creation of dignified employment opportunities that actively dismantle caste-linked occupational confinement.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Infrastructure and Teacher Training Upgrades** – Allocate targeted funding for rural government schools to improve basic infrastructure (classrooms, sanitation, digital access) and to train teachers on inclusive pedagogy that actively addresses caste bias.
2. **Monitoring Anti-Discrimination Measures** – Establish independent monitoring bodies, including civil society representatives, to enforce anti-discrimination provisions in schools, with mechanisms for confidential reporting and swift redressal.
3. **Vocational and Skill-Based Learning Integration** – Introduce market-relevant vocational education from secondary levels to bridge the gap between schooling and dignified employment.
4. **Rehabilitation and Economic Alternatives** – Strengthen rehabilitation schemes under the 2013 Act by linking skill development programs with assured employment opportunities and long-term economic support.
5. **Community Engagement** – Collaborate with local NGOs and community leaders to challenge caste stigma and raise awareness of legal rights and occupational alternatives.

Scope for Future Research

Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to track students from marginalised caste backgrounds over time, assessing the interplay of schooling quality, skill acquisition, and actual occupational outcomes. Comparative research between regions with higher-quality government schools and those with weaker educational infrastructure could offer sharper insights into the role of schooling in breaking caste-based occupational inheritance.

References

Banerjee, A., Banerji, R., Berry, J., Duflo, E., C Shotland, M. (2021). *The long-term impacts of improving teachers' pedagogical skills: Experimental evidence from India*. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 13(4), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20190547

Bezwada, W. (2018). *Still a long way to go: The unfinished struggle against manual scavenging*. Safai Karmachari Andolan.

Desai, S., C Dubey, A. (2011). *Caste in 21st century India: Competing narratives*. Economic and Political Weekly, 46(11), 40–49.

Government of India. (2013). *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*. Ministry of Law and Justice.

Human Rights Watch. (2014). *Cleaning human waste: "Manual scavenging," caste, and discrimination in India*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india

International Dalit Solidarity Network. (2017). *Caste discrimination and human rights in India: A status report*. IDSN. https://idsn.org

Jeffrey, C. (2010). *Timepass: Youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India*. Stanford University Press.

Jha, M. (2016). *Education and social mobility among Dalits in India*. Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 2(1), 27–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481116643714

Ministry of Social Justice C Empowerment. (2020). *Annual report 201S–20*. Government of India.

NDTV. (2022, August 14). *S-year-old Dalit boy dies after teacher beats him for touching drinking water pot*. NDTV. https://www.ndtv.com

RGSA. (n.d.). *Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan: Education infrastructure status report*. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

Socio-Economic and Caste Census. (2011). *SECC 2011 data*. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

The Hindu. (Various years). Coverage on manual scavenging and caste discrimination in India. https://www.thehindu.com

The New Indian Express. (2022, August 15). *Dalit boy dies after being beaten by teacher in Rajasthan*. The New Indian Express. https://www.newindianexpress.com

The Times of India. (2025, August). *Maharashtra admits manual scavenging persists; announces ₹405 crore mechanisation plan*. The Times of India. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com

Thorat, S., C Newman, K. S. (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

UDISE+. (2022). *Unified District Information System for Education Plus: 2021–22 report*. Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India.