

Examining Access to Education and Healthcare in India's Informal Communities -

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[Bezwada Wilson](#), a renowned activist and co-founder of the [Safai Karamchari Andolan \(SKA\)](#), advocates for the rights of manual scavengers and their children. He has been vocal about the intergenerational issues and discrimination faced by these communities, especially emphasizing the need for educational and social support for children of manual scavengers. Wilson has worked extensively to end manual scavenging and rehabilitate those affected, highlighting how the lack of opportunity and caste-based stigma impact not only the workers but also their families.

Another significant voice is [Lenin Raghuvanshi](#), an activist with the [People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights \(PVCHR\)](#), who addresses caste-based discrimination and rights violations, including those affecting manual scavenger families. He promotes inclusive education and social support systems, focusing on breaking the cycle of generational poverty and exclusion faced by the children of manual scavengers.

The subject matter ...

This is a topic that delves into a deeply rooted and sensitive issue in Indian society. Manual scavenging, the practice of manually cleaning human waste, is both dangerous and degrading. Though banned by law, it remains a reality for many families, particularly within marginalized caste communities, who continue to bear the burden of this work due to economic deprivation, social discrimination, and lack of alternative employment opportunities.

The children of manual scavengers face a unique set of challenges that often begin at birth. These children are frequently exposed to unsanitary and hazardous living conditions, which impact their health and well-being from a young age. In addition to the lack of clean water and adequate sanitation, they suffer from limited access to quality healthcare services, making them vulnerable to a host of preventable diseases and health complications. Poor health conditions not only affect their physical development but also their capacity to learn and thrive, creating obstacles to accessing education and building a life outside the confines of caste-imposed roles.

Education, a critical pathway for breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion, remains elusive for many children of manual scavengers. Even when they enter schools, these children often face discrimination, isolation, and neglect, reinforcing social barriers that hinder their academic and personal growth. Lack of resources, inadequate public support, and frequent prejudice in educational institutions further discourage them, perpetuating a sense of inferiority and reducing opportunities for upward mobility.

This topic also highlights the fundamental right to dignity that is often denied to these children. Dignity, as enshrined in India's constitution, encompasses the right to a decent life, freedom from exploitation, and equal opportunity. However, children of manual scavengers frequently inherit a legacy of exclusion that denies them these rights. Examining the intersection of dignity, sanitation, and basic rights, this topic emphasizes the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach: policies that not only eliminate manual scavenging but also provide comprehensive support for the health, education, and overall development of children from these communities.

Addressing these issues is vital for India's progress towards social equality and justice. Ensuring that children of manual scavengers have access to safe, dignified living conditions, quality education, and healthcare is more than a legal obligation, it is a moral imperative.



Background on Manual Scavenging and Its Impact on Children

The practice of manual scavenging, rooted in India's caste-based social hierarchy, has severe and far-reaching impacts on the lives of those forced into this occupation, especially affecting the well-being and futures of their children. These children bear not only the economic and health burdens of manual scavenging but also the social stigma and discrimination that come with their families' marginalized status. This section provides an in-depth look at how the caste system enforces and perpetuates manual scavenging, as well as how these conditions impair the development, education, and self-worth of children in these communities.

Caste System and Manual Scavenging

The Indian caste system, one of the oldest forms of social stratification, assigns roles and social worth based on birth. Historically, Dalit communities, who were labelled "untouchables" in the traditional hierarchy, have been relegated to menial and "unclean" occupations, such as manual scavenging. [Today, around 97% of manual scavengers come from Dalit communities. The assumption that these roles are their "inherited" duty devalues their work and upholds a narrative that places them at the lowest rungs of society.](#) This societal structure perpetuates a

cycle of poverty: families involved in manual scavenging are unable to access better employment opportunities, reinforcing their dependence on this hazardous and dehumanizing labour.

Recent studies indicate that while efforts have been made to abolish manual scavenging through legislation, the socio-cultural roots embedded in the caste system keep many families trapped. This occupation passed down through generations, leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, health risks, and lack of social mobility. Even as India's economy grows, manual scavengers and their families remain excluded from the benefits of development, facing both economic deprivation and profound social isolation.

Effects on Children

Children born into manual scavenging families inherit the burdens associated with this stigmatized occupation. At a young age, they become aware of the social discrimination associated with their family's work, which impacts their self-esteem, mental health, and ability to integrate into mainstream society. In school, these children are often subjected to bullying, taunts, and isolation by peers and, in some cases, teachers. Studies have shown that such discrimination in educational settings can hinder academic engagement, create feelings of inferiority, and discourage these children from attending school regularly.

Segregation in classrooms and unequal treatment are common. In some schools, children from manual scavenging backgrounds are asked to sit separately, denied participation in school activities, or prevented from sharing common facilities, such as water taps or dining areas, with children from higher-caste families. This discrimination fosters a sense of alienation, erodes their confidence, and disrupts their learning experience. Consequently, they may struggle to perform academically, often leading to higher dropout rates among Dalit children. When they leave school early, it restricts their opportunities for better-paying, dignified jobs, thereby perpetuating the cycle of manual scavenging across generations.

In addition to social exclusion, economic necessity often forces these children to contribute to family income by assisting in manual scavenging. Many children work alongside their parents in dangerous conditions, exposing themselves to health hazards, such as respiratory infections, skin diseases, and even life-threatening conditions due to exposure to toxic waste. This early involvement in manual labour deprives them of the opportunity to focus on their studies, exacerbating educational disparities and limiting their future potential.

The effects of these experiences on a child's self-worth and aspirations are profound. Being viewed as "untouchable" not only affects how society perceives them but also shapes how they perceive themselves. Constant discrimination and bullying can diminish their sense of identity, making them feel "unworthy" of higher education or professional careers.

Addressing these challenges requires a two-pronged approach: systemic policy changes to eradicate manual scavenging, coupled with focused initiatives to support the children affected. Anti-discrimination measures within schools, scholarships, counselling services, and community support can help break down the barriers that prevent these children from fully realizing their potential. Additionally, raising awareness about the rights and contributions of

marginalized communities, and promoting inclusivity at every level, can help dismantle the prejudices and stigmas tied to manual scavenging, ultimately enabling these children to lead healthier, more dignified lives.

Access to Education for Manual Scavengers' Children

Children from manual scavenging families face an array of obstacles in accessing quality education, each layer reinforcing their marginalization and creating a vicious cycle that keeps them entrenched in poverty. [These barriers range from family responsibilities that detract from schooling to societal stigma, poor educational support, and infrastructural inadequacies in schools.](#)

Barriers to Educational Attainment

1. [Family Responsibilities and Forced Participation in Scavenging](#)

For many children of manual scavengers, education takes a backseat to family duties. Due to financial necessity or societal expectations, children are often compelled to assist their parents in manual scavenging activities, which severely disrupts their schooling. In some cases, this starts early on, when children are socialized into their family's occupation. For instance, it's common in certain regions for children to be tasked with cleaning school toilets, further entrenching their association with sanitation work. This forced participation not only limits their time in school but also sets a precedent, conveying to them that manual scavenging is an inevitable part of their future, rather than something they can overcome through education.

1. [Social Stigma and Internalized Inferiority](#)

Children of manual scavengers frequently face the psychological burden of stigma. Society's demeaning view of manual scavenging creates an environment where children feel ashamed or inferior due to their family's occupation. This internalized stigma affects their self-worth and can undermine their academic motivation. Feeling different or "lesser" than their peers, many children lose confidence and motivation, resulting in disengagement from school activities and a hesitance to fully participate in class. These feelings of inadequacy reinforce educational underachievement and often lead to early dropout, as children may feel that academic success is out of reach or irrelevant to their lives.

[Teacher Absenteeism and Lack of Support](#)

The role of teachers is critical in shaping a positive educational experience, especially for marginalized children. However, in many areas, high rates of teacher absenteeism and lack of adequate training limit the support that these children receive. When teachers are absent or disengaged, the quality of instruction suffers, creating a poor learning environment that disproportionately affects children from manual scavenging families who already face difficulties. Additionally, biases and prejudices among some educators toward children from these backgrounds can further diminish these children's confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

1. [Infrastructure Deficiencies in Schools](#)

In rural and under-resourced regions, schools often lack the basic infrastructure necessary for a safe and healthy learning environment. Clean drinking water, adequate sanitation facilities, and proper classrooms are often missing or poorly maintained. For children from manual scavenging families, who may already come from environments with limited access to sanitation, this lack of infrastructure makes school attendance more challenging and even distressing. Without separate, functional sanitation facilities, girls in particular may feel uncomfortable attending school, leading to higher absenteeism rates.

In some cases, inadequate facilities exacerbate caste-based discrimination, as children from marginalized backgrounds may be expected to clean school premises or toilets, reinforcing their association with menial labour and lowering their social standing among peers. When school infrastructure is insufficient, the lack of dignity and safety in the educational experience deters regular attendance and reduces academic engagement, worsening the educational gap for these children.

Overcoming These Barriers

Addressing these issues requires both legislative action and community engagement. Targeted policies, such as scholarships for children of manual scavengers, anti-discrimination training for educators, and infrastructure improvements in schools, are essential. Social campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with manual scavenging can also play a significant role in building self-esteem among these children. Furthermore, programs aimed at reducing child labour and offering economic support to manual scavenger families can help alleviate the pressure on children to work, enabling them to prioritize education.

Government Policies and NGO Initiatives

The government and numerous NGOs have undertaken significant efforts to address the issue of manual scavenging, yet challenges in implementation and structural barriers persist, limiting the impact on the lives of those involved. Legislation aimed at eradicating manual scavenging and initiatives by NGOs to support affected communities are critical steps toward eliminating the practice and improving the welfare of manual scavengers' children. However, practical gaps and societal pressures continue to hinder the efficacy of these initiatives.

- [Legislation and Its Limitations](#)
- [Legislative Framework and Goals](#)

The Indian government has made several attempts to legally abolish manual scavenging and promote the rehabilitation of those engaged in it. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 is one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks aimed at eradicating this practice. It prohibits the employment of individuals in manual scavenging and mandates measures for their rehabilitation, including financial assistance, alternative employment, and educational support. The Act seeks to provide dignity and social mobility to manual scavengers by offering them opportunities to transition into other livelihoods.

1. [Challenges in Implementation](#)

Despite the presence of this legislative framework, implementing these laws on the ground has proven to be challenging. Corruption within local government bodies, limited oversight, and a lack of transparency in monitoring have all contributed to a slow rollout of support services. Furthermore, awareness about the rights provided under this legislation is low, especially within rural and marginalized communities where manual scavenging is more common. Without widespread knowledge of these protections, many affected individuals are unaware that they have the right to refuse such employment and seek rehabilitation.

Local authorities, who are often responsible for the enforcement of these laws, sometimes condone or overlook cases of manual scavenging, undermining the legislation's objectives. Reports have highlighted instances where individuals attempting to leave manual scavenging occupations face intimidation or social pressure from within their communities and local officials, who may view these individuals as essential for maintaining sanitation. This lack of accountability has resulted in the persistence of the practice, despite legal prohibitions, and limits the ability of families to break free from this cycle.

NGO Efforts

1. [Educational Support and Advocacy](#)

Numerous NGOs have taken on the mission of advocating for the rights of manual scavengers and offering essential services to support their children's education and well-being. Organizations like CRY India and the Safai Karamchari Andolan have developed targeted programs to support children from these families, reconnecting them to educational opportunities and fostering a nurturing environment that helps counteract the disadvantages they face. CRY India, for instance, works with communities to ensure that children from manual scavenger families are enrolled in school, attend regularly, and receive the support they need to succeed.

Through scholarships, tutoring, and mentorship programs, NGOs create pathways for these children to pursue their education, which is a critical component in breaking the cycle of poverty and manual labour. By educating children about their rights and providing resources to combat discrimination, these organizations help empower them to overcome social stigma and advocate for themselves.

1. Community Engagement and Awareness Programs

NGOs also play an essential role in raising awareness about the harmful impacts of manual scavenging and the legal rights of those involved. Community workshops and awareness campaigns are conducted to educate both manual scavenger families and the broader community on the negative effects of discrimination on children's physical and mental health. These programs address the social stigma surrounding manual scavenging and encourage community members to support individuals seeking alternative employment opportunities.

This form of engagement is essential because it helps shift public perception and reduce the social pressures that reinforce manual scavenging. Involving the community in these discussions not only helps protect the rights of manual scavenger families but also fosters a

more inclusive and supportive environment for children.

Skill Development and Vocational Training

To address the economic challenges associated with leaving manual scavenging, many NGOs offer skill development and vocational training programs for both individuals engaged in manual scavenging and their family members. By equipping people with skills in other trades, these programs create pathways toward alternative employment and provide families with the financial stability necessary to avoid returning to manual scavenging.

For instance, training programs might focus on skills in tailoring, carpentry, or small-scale entrepreneurship, enabling participants to find employment or start their businesses. This approach not only helps individuals gain self-sufficiency but also reduces dependency on manual scavenging, breaking the generational cycle. As families attain financial independence, children can stay in school without the pressure of contributing to family income through labour.

The Need for Coordinated Action

While government legislation and NGO initiatives represent significant steps forward, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on a coordinated approach. Increased accountability in implementing the laws, broader awareness campaigns to inform individuals of their rights, and greater community support are all essential components. Additionally, the collaboration between government bodies and NGOs could amplify resources, improving access to education and healthcare for children from manual scavenger families and creating a more resilient support system.

Only through continuous advocacy, effective policy implementation, and societal change can manual scavengers' children attain the dignity, health, and educational opportunities they deserve, free from the limitations and discrimination their families have endured.

Future Directions

The conclusion emphasizes that fulfilling the rights to dignity and sanitation for manual scavengers' children is not just a social responsibility but a fundamental human right that remains largely overlooked. Tackling the complex challenges faced by these children will require systematic, multifaceted approaches across several key areas, each of which addresses different aspects of the caste-based discrimination and socioeconomic marginalization they face.

Policy Implementation

Strengthening the enforcement of existing laws, such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, is essential to dismantling the oppressive caste-based hierarchy that fuels this form of exploitation. However, legislation alone is not enough; continuous community outreach and education are needed to raise awareness among manual scavenger families about their rights, the legal protections available to them,

and ways to seek help when facing discrimination. Programs that focus on reshaping societal attitudes through education and awareness initiatives can significantly contribute to changing perceptions and challenging the status quo.

Healthcare Access

The hazardous conditions of manual scavenging directly impact the health of these families, particularly their children. There is an urgent need for accessible healthcare services, free from discrimination and bias, that specifically cater to the health issues faced by these communities. Initiatives to improve healthcare access should involve increasing funding for community health clinics, training healthcare providers on inclusive and respectful care practices, and actively working to eliminate discriminatory attitudes within healthcare institutions. This would allow families to seek medical assistance without fear of stigma or denial of services, thereby improving both physical and mental health outcomes for children.

Educational Opportunities

Educational reform is a crucial part of providing children of manual scavengers with a future that transcends the limitations of their circumstances. Schools must adopt inclusive practices that promote respect for all students, irrespective of their caste or family background. This could include anti-bullying programs, teacher training on non-discriminatory practices, and the provision of scholarships to help children from marginalized backgrounds stay in school. Inclusive educational practices not only encourage academic achievement but also build self-esteem, resilience, and hope among these children, which are essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and stigma.

Engaging Stakeholders

Collaboration across sectors—including government, NGOs, local communities, and international human rights organizations—is critical for achieving sustainable progress. Government bodies can provide legislative support and funding, while NGOs can offer specialized services and on-the-ground support. Local communities play a vital role in challenging ingrained social norms, while international organizations can bring global attention and resources to the issue. Engaging stakeholders across these levels allows for the development of comprehensive and robust strategies that address the root causes of caste discrimination and support the social and economic mobility of manual scavenger families.

A Path to a More Equitable Future

The proposed approach is both humanitarian and essential for building a more equitable India, where every child, regardless of their caste or family occupation, can grow up with dignity, and access to education, and health resources. By challenging societal attitudes, reforming institutions, and listening to the needs and voices of marginalized communities, we can move towards a society that values and prioritizes justice, equity, and human dignity for all.

This conclusion serves as a call to action, highlighting that creating substantial and lasting change for manual scavengers' children is not only feasible but necessary for fostering a more inclusive and fair society.

About the author



Hey! Dear Reader,

My name is Sakcham Singh Parmaar. I began my academic journey at Litera Valley School in Patna, Bihar, India, where I excelled in various activities, earning numerous accolades and forming lasting connections with inspiring teachers and friends. Currently, I am pursuing a B.A.LL.B (HONS.) at Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, Delhi NCR, India, one of India's top private law colleges. Actively involved in multiple societies, I am deeply passionate about legal research, recognizing its importance in a legal career. As a sophomore, I am eager to learn and achieve even greater heights. My work ethic is highly praised by seniors and colleagues, who describe me as hardworking, eager for knowledge, dedicated, and able to maintain a disciplined yet friendly demeanour.

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