Implementational Gaps in Promoting Human Rights and Values: The Indian Experience

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18268351

Abstract

The Indian Constitution, enacted in 1950, has incorporated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) principles. Through Fundamental Rights (Article 12 to 35) and Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 38 to 46), the Constitution ensures equality, dignity, and justice, in general for all and special provisions for safeguarding the rights of the oppressed population. Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 prohibit discrimination, untouchability, and guarantee a dignified life. These constitutional arrangements are mandatory, non-negotiable and legally binding on the State. However, manual scavenging, an undignified and dehumanised practice, persists, violating the spirit of Constitutional safeguards. Despite the 1993 and 2013 legislations on banning manual scavenging, their effect on implementation is dismal. Manual scavenging is an inhuman yet forced occupation of the Dalits, a socially excluded section of society. The paper dives into those factors contributing to the weak enforcement and unclear provision in the legislation, besides the lack of independent oversight, resulting in the implementation gap in upholding human rights and values in the context of the Dalit population involved in manual scavenging. In the age of AI and robotic (IIT Madras's HomoSEP robot) and ever-increasing strength of space technology, India, with the world's largest population, struggles to resolve the issue of manual scavenging. National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (2025) presents data showing that there have been over 700 septic tank/sewer deaths recently, highlighting the urgency to look into this issue. This paper is based on secondary data.

Keywords: Manual Scavenging, Caste System, Human Rights, Constitutional Values, Implementation Gaps

1. Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, is a vibrant subcontinent with a rich historical and cultural legacy. The Indian constitution, enacted in 1950 post-Independence, accommodated the aspirations of the vulnerable population while absorbing the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 by the UN which serve as a global benchmark for human rights, through its Fundamental Rights (Article 14-18 & 21) and Directive Principles (article 46) aiming to ensure equality, dignity, and justice for all, particularly for Dalits and Adivasis (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2002). However, given that the democratic institution has yet to take concrete shape despite constitutional implementation for many decades, India faces implementation gaps in fulfilling its constitutional mandates regarding human rights. One such case is the sporadic existence of manual scavenging. A dehumanising occupation inheriting a social stratification called the caste system, where the dirty job of society is the yardstick for the Dalits (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This undignified treatment of human beings, which includes untouchability, has been constitutionally banned in India. This paper explores the challenges in the promotion of Human rights in India. It focuses on ingrained social inequalities, cause of these inequalities, institutional limitations and failure to address such issues through technological advancements to eradicate evil practices that violate Human Rights and dignity.

1.1. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the inadequacies in the government constitution, law, and policies for human rights in India and the continuing practices of manual scavenging in Dalit communities. The research also aims to determine the impact of caste based structural inequalities, poor implementation of existing legislation, failed institutions, which undermine constitutional values of dignity, equality and justice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Constitutional Framework and Human Rights

The first generation of human rights, namely civil and political rights, is enshrined in Part III of the Indian Constitution as fundamental rights (Articles 12 - 35). As far as the second generation of human rights is concerned, it is placed in the 4th part of the Indian Constitution as DPSP, given the resource

vacuum in India. The actual problem faced by those involved in manual scavenging is not only deprivation of human dignity but also denial to economic equity. The lack of a coercive mandate to implement the DPSP makes the situation of manual scavengers precarious. The imbalance between coercive civil and political rights and non-coercive economic rights creates an implementation gap. The limitation of the constitution has been exploited by vested interests of the social elite who have no empathy towards the marginalised population.

The Indian Constitution is a landmark that dismantles centuries-old social hierarchies while embracing UDHR principles. Articles 14, 15, and 17 of the Indian Constitution guarantee equality, prohibit discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, and abolish untouchability, respectively. The fundamentals of Human Rights lie in living with dignity, regardless of a person's personal identity. This foremost component of Human Rights is contained in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which ensures the right to life and individual liberty, as well as the right to live with dignity (Indian Kanoon, 1950). When it comes to the emphasis of the first generation of human rights, the Indian Constitution is non-negotiable. The state automatically guarantees them. But, when it comes to the question of the second generation of human rights, viz., the socio-economic rights, the constitution relies upon a negotiable aspect of an arrangement called as the " Directive Principles of State Policy", which mandates the erstwhile provinces to take care of protecting those rights, given the reality that the economic dimension of living is mainly confined to the distribution and appropriation of resources, which are at the disposal of the State Governments. Hence, it is for the state governments to promote social justice and uplift marginalised communities, which include the scheduled castes or the Dalits (those categorised as Untouchables) and the indigenous population called the Schedule Tribes. This paper illustrates that, in situations where a section of the population has historically been oppressed, the enabling instruments of the state should not only guarantee their civil rights but also their socio-economic rights, which complement each other. This argument is validated by the fact that, nearly seven decades after the constitution of the democratic republic, the Dalits, who are economically very much deprived, are still compelled to continue "Manual Scavenging", which means the manual cleaning of human excrement from sewers, septic tanks and open drains. The very reality that a section of Dalits undertakes this for more than one generation contradicts the spirit of the Constitution that guarantees each of its citizens a dignified life. Manual scavenging, apart from posing life risks and exposure to toxic gases, also perpetuates mental trauma and a social

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

stigmatisation of those involved (Karamchedu, 2025).

Legislative efforts, such as the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of Parliament – India (1993), declare that the hiring of manual scavengers and the construction of dry toilets are punishable offences (Parliament of India, 1993). This act focused more on sanitation and environmental protection than on human dignity, and until 2006, no grievances had been filed under it. The government of India, at the federal level, has been enforcing legislation post the 1993 Act, such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Acts of Parliament India, (2013), which expanded the definition of manual scavenging, prohibited hazardous cleaning of human excrement, and introduced strict penalties for defaulters. The 2013 Act also emphasises the dignity and rehabilitation of people involved in manual scavenging, in an effort to correct the historical injustice inflicted on the affected people. But its implementation aspect is far from expectations (Government of India, 2013).

2.2. The Potential Dangers of Manual Scavenging as an Occupation

In urban centres across India, workers engaged in manual scavenging face extreme dangers without any protective equipment. Sinking into sewer lines or septic tanks, dressed only in minimal clothing and without any protective equipment, and secured by a basic rope tie around the waist, held by coworkers standing above ground, exposes them to toxic environments. Till in 2025 such inhuman practice persists and it happening in the everyday life, where human traversing darkness filled with sewage, while facing immediate threats like poisonous gases and infectious materials. This labour, often unacknowledged, underscores a systemic failure in sanitation infrastructure. Looking into India's economic growth as a multi-trillion-dollar economy and its status on the world stage, thousands of its citizens are forced into one of the most dangerous and degrading jobs every day. Furthermore, there is a profound disparity between national progress and the exploitation of marginalised groups. Why and how did cleaning human filth become the inherited fate of an entire community? The answer, like so many of India's deepest underlying problems, begins with caste, rightly argued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

There is a tendency to glorify colonialism as an instrument of urbanisation, connectivity and modernity, which may prove good in other spheres but not

with the Dalits, especially those involved with this precarious task of manual scavenging. One may think that during the British period, their Victorian ideas of sanitation and engineering would have modernised the system. The answer is no: the colonial rule under the British exacerbated this. Rather than introducing advanced sanitation methods, the British constructed vast unplanned urban centres with underground sewer lines and dry latrines, but they did not bring the technology or the will to maintain them properly; instead, they formalised and institutionalised the caste-based practice of manual scavenging. They created municipal bodies that officially employed scavengers from the Dalit community to clean these new, more complex sanitation systems (Chawla, 2024). Essentially, the English rulers exploited a pre-existing social evil, gave it a government stamp of approval and embedded it into the administrative structure of the modern Indian city.

These people, identified as manual scavengers, are enrolled for payment by civic bodies. Their routine begins from dawn to dusk with no rest (Kumar, 2018). Their tools are often a bucket, a shovel and a length of rope. There is no social security, life insurance for risk cover, nor dignified treatment, given their nature of work, which excludes them from entering places of public utility like restaurants or earning outlets, even if they have the required minimal purchasing power. They expose themselves to all forms of toxicity by handling human waste in their bare hands, drowning themselves to hip depth or neck depth in the sewer for cleaning, for which the wage is often attractive and unregulated by middlemen. They are unaware of the dreadful water- and air-borne infections they might contract, the list of which would exceed the length of this paper.

2.3. Health Risks and Fear of Survival:

A typical working day starts for these workers in the early hours, when they are summoned to clear blockages in underground pipes with rudimentary tools like shovels and buckets. They are lacking protective equipment such as- respirators, purifier gas mask, or detectors. They go in enclosed spaces where visibility is poor and footing is difficult due to slime rust. They wade inside the contaminated water for dislodging the blockage of plastic and organic debris, and medical disposal manually. Due to the presence of hazardous gases, and methane leads to insufficient oxygen, while hydrogen sulphide numbs the senses, making it lethal There is no guarantee of life or return back safely from the manhole, if they entered once in to it. There is constant fear of survival and they suffer from anxiety and PTSD, depression,

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

where they do not have any access to such mental health facility. Due to frequent exposure to toxic gas and contaminated water these workers face skin issues as- rashes, itching, respiratory problem, and many other health hazards (Mala et al., 2023).

2.4. A Predicament of Denial and Oversight

Many workers, having entered the field in youth due to family tradition, grapple with anxiety and trauma from near-fatal incidents, such as co-workers dying due to asphyxiation and toxic gases. According to data collected by activists, at least one sanitation worker has died every five days in India since 2017 (Dhawan, 2021). The cause of death is almost always asphyxiation. These deaths are not accidents; they are the predictable, inevitable result of sending unprotected human beings into a known hazardous environment. The Supreme Court's has mandate 10 lakh rupees of compensation to the family of the die worker, but the official's response to this is cold-hearted denial and navigating such bureaucratic process to claim the money is hardship. The process forced them to go one office to another office while producing endless documents and fighting to receive it for months and years. This official blindness is a political choice and acknowledging the problem itself is the big failure of its own law and policies (Mallick, 2025). Families endure compounded grief: widows and children often inherit the role out of necessity, facing barriers to alternative employment due to societal prejudice. Children from these household's experience isolation in schools and public spaces, where their parents' occupation becomes a source of stigma, eroding confidence and limiting educational opportunities. Even attempting for small businesses for economic upliftment, stumble under boycott or rejection rooted in caste perceptions, which traps the generations in a web of exclusion.

2.5. Emerging Resistance and Pathway to Change

In the face of this systematic oppression there is resistance taking shape. It is a grassroot movement by the people who have been facing this humiliating life of existence. At the forefront of this fight is Bezwada Wilson, a national convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan (2025), or the Sanitation Workers' movement, mobilising affected communities through demonstrations, legal support, and efforts to secure compensation. The campaign focus on true freedom, to encourage the workers to walk away from the profession for their liberation and publicly burn they basket they used to carry the human excreta

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

- a powerful symbolic act of breaking their old chain. There are many case studies of the people who managed to break this occupation and currently working as independent business, working in welfare initiatives, shows that targeted support can break the cycle of discrimination and poverty. This movement emphasise education for young students and fostering dream beyond labour. However, it must be understood that confrontational postures do not produce results; only a concerted public policy intervention and the cooperation of all concerned can eradicate this evil practice.

2.6. Entrenched Social Inequality

In India, the caste system, a deeply rooted social stratification, remains a formidable barrier to human rights protection. For thousands of years, the rigid Hindu caste system has dictated social hierarchy. At the very bottom are the "Dalits", formerly known as "Untouchables". In the Hindu Chatur Varna system, the four-fold caste system, the Dalits' position is lowest in the caste strata. Beneath this caste structure, there is one more layer called the outcaste or untouchable, who are treated as polluted by the caste ladder (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Basya, Sudra) (Naskar, 2025). Within that, some members of the community were condemned to the most impure tasks, including the manual removal of human excrement. This is not just a job description; it is a life sentence passed down through generations. Their birth determined their destiny, and that destiny was to handle the waste of those higher up the social ladder manual scavenging. This practice persists despite the constitutional abolition of untouchables under Article 17. It must be stated that Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the champion of Dalits, vociferously fought against this structural cruelty (Naskar, 2022).

In this modern society, although not everyone follows their caste occupation, and inter-caste marriage is happening. However, the outcaste still usually face discrimination because they are still engaged in low-paid jobs, such as Safai Karma Chari, municipality cleaning person, railway cantonment cleaning person, burning dead animals, and engaged in manual scavenging. After 75th years of Independence, the scavenging community did not get independence from caste-base slavery under the Hindu social caste-based structure. The discussion of manual scavenging may remain incomplete if we do not bring the Gandhi-Ambedkar argument. Gandhiji upheld Chatur Varna and portrayed manual scavenging as dignified, likening it to a mother cleaning her child. At the same time, Dr B.R Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, strongly condemned it as the symbol of slavery and called for

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

its complete eradication (Guru, 2017). He was an opponent of caste-based discrimination, tracing the origins of manual scavenging to 600 BC. Citing texts like the Narada Samhita, which lists one of the duties of a slave among 15 duties (Georg, 2014), in the Bajasanei Samhita, the Chandals and Paulkasa have been referred to as slaves for the disposal of night-soil or human faeces. In addition, the Manu Smriti mandated that untouchables serve higher castes without having the right to voice complaints. This religious textbook is particularly opposed to the notions of equality, liberty, and freedom. For that, the father of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, burnt the Manu Smriti to smash inequality, unfreedom, and injustice, which are entrenched in the Manu Smriti. The practice continued through the Mauryan Empire and was institutionalised during Muslim rule, when purdah practices led to waste disposal by war captives, who later formed the "Bhangi" caste, which was later renamed "Mehetar." Furthermore, they called it "Bhangi," with the Sanskrit meaning 'broken' and the Hindi name 'trash'. In the present time, the government uses the term " Scheduled Caste and the community people prefer "Dalit", which means 'oppressed'. While the Dalit population upholds and supports the Indian constitution for human rights, in contrast, the Manuwadi (supporters of Manu Smriti) oppose the constitution and have burnt the Indian constitution several times. Here, the questions arise: Is this fanatic religious textbook above the Constitution? Dr Jadumani Mahananda's article on "Only Manuwadi Hindutva gang can burn Indian Constitution" shows how the social elites are discriminating, violating the rights of Dalits and, in turn, the Indian Constitution, which provides safeguards to millions of people in the country (Mahananda, 2018).

3. Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative and analytical research methodology and uses only secondary data for its analysis. The data source includes constitutional provisions; legislation passed by Parliament; judicial rulings; government reports; research literature by academics; and reports published by civil society groups and human rights organizations. The study adopts a thematic approach to analyse the research looking for patterns related to caste discrimination, barriers to implementing legislation, and Institutional failure resulting in human rights violations for people engaged in manual scavenging. The study brings together the legal, sociopolitical, and human rights perspectives to provide an integrated view of the harsh experiences of marginalized communities.

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ISSN (O): 3105-3769

4. Discussion

4.1. The Lifelong Shadow of Caste

The horror of manual scavenging doesn't end when a worker climbs out of the suit. It follows them home, Clings to their children, and poisons their every social interaction. This inheritance of shame begins in childhood; the children of Manual's scavengers face relentless discrimination in school (Parmaar, 2025). They are often forced to sit separately, ridiculed by their peers, and sometimes even neglected by their teachers. Their parents' profession becomes a slur used against them. Families of scavengers are often forced to live in segregated colonies on the outskirts, where they are denied access to community water taps and temples. Local shopkeepers might serve them from a distance, placing their goods on the ground rather than handing them over directly. Even if a scavenger manages to save enough money to start a small tea stall or a vegetable cart, their past can come back to haunt them once people find out about their family background in previous work. They may be boycotted who would buy food from a man who used to work in the gutter is a common sentiment. Their identity traps them. The shame is not theirs. It belongs to a society that judges a person not by their character but by a cast-based occupation forced upon them by centuries of injustice. The sewer is a physical trap but caste is a mental and social prison from which there is almost no escape (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

4.2. Institutional Limitations and Implementation Gaps

The 1993 Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrine (Prohibition) Act fell under the state subject of health and sanitation and, under Article 252(1), applied only to states that adopted it through a legislative resolution. The legal provision is unclear; for instance, the punishment clauses do not specify whether the employer or the scavenger is liable for punishment or penalty. It is also a conflict of interest. At the same time, a scavenger wants to file a case against the executive authority, the same authority that also grants permission to file cases against itself (Gochhayat, 2018). Since it is a state subject, adoption and enforcement vary across states, leading to uneven implementation. There is no independent body with enough powers to address complaints quickly. There is a lack of political will among states to implement it; some states acted only after the Supreme Court's intervention. Due to social stigma and fear of losing their livelihoods, manual scavengers often avoid reporting, leading to poor monitoring data. In 2014,

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

the Indian government, under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi, was installing toilets in rural villages to promote ‘open defecation free’ status and to eradicate manual scavenging in the country, as part of the flagship project, the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). But who is going to clean the septic tanks in the absence of a suction pump (Mallick, 2025)? Weak enforcement of existing laws by officials, and labourers' hunger for extra money to support their livelihoods, by doing these jobs.

India’s legislative response includes the 2013 Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, which criminalises the practice, requires mechanical alternatives, and outlines rehabilitation measures like financial aid, training, and surveys. It does not just ban manual scavenging; it makes it a cognizable offence, meaning the police can make arrests without prior notice. It mandates that every municipality must use modern technology for sewer cleaning. Yet, Execution remains severely lacking. The problem is that the law is basically on mute; the enforcement of this act has been a catastrophic failure. First, there’s the issue of official denial for years; many states claim they had no manual scavengers—a blatant lie that made it impossible even to begin the process of identification and rehabilitation. This denial allows municipalities to continue employing manual cleaning workers through a web of informal subcontractors. They hire private contractors who, in turn, hire the workers, creating a layer of plausible deniability. Despite thousands of documented deaths and sewers and septic tanks since the law was passed, the number of convictions can be counted on two hands (Chhara, 2023). The law was designed to be a bridge to a new life, but without proper funding, political will, and social support, it is a bridge to nowhere. The local authorities and district magistrate should be responsible for ensuring that no person in their jurisdiction is engaged in the manual scavenging work.

4.3. Failure of Technological Implementation to Address the Problem in the Age of AI

In this technologically advanced era, there is a continued reliance on human labour for hazardous tasks such as manual scavenging. Indian can develop cryogenic engines and launch lunar missions, yet we hesitate to invest in technology that eliminates the need for manual toilet cleaning even though there are currently thousands of cases of septic tank and sewer-related deaths in India. Bezwada Willison, the Magsaysay awardee and national Safai Karmachari Andolan convenor, mentioned “even higher 7000 plus reported

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

in Bengaluru city only, in 2025 till date more than 72 people die in India." It is surprising why the government is not able to stop the practice (Yacoob & Karthik, 2025).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

We end where we start the brutal paradox of the modern India. This nation can launch missions to Mars, but it still cannot provide a machine to clean a sewer. A society that celebrates its diversity and democratic values continues to condemn a segment of its population to a life of subhuman servitude based on the ancient cruelty of caste. The path of break such inhuman operation needs a massive investment in technology, jetting suction machines, and Bandicoot robot for swear cleaning for every municipality in the country. Given the advances in AI and technology, mechanisation is feasible. A committee should be formed to plan the implementation of machinery, with sufficient budget allocated to ensure a smooth transition. For example, IIT Madras's "HomoSEP" robot uses a rotary blade to break down tough septic tank sludge efficiently. The government needs to focus more on machine-based or robot-based (Bandicoot robot) cleaning of septic tanks and sewers. The Indian government can adopt the other country's model as - the countries like Mexico, Malaysia's smart way to manage the swear for sustainable sewage disposal system. The government need to establish a robust grievance reporting system, making sure timely and effective redressal. It should also strengthen the Safai Karmachari group to take action against manual scavenging and violators of its rules with real penalties. Although the Indian Constitution provides fundamental protections to its citizens, but the persistent social discrimination undermines these safeguards. Manual scavengers face daily social exclusion and untouchability, violating the fundamental root of constitutional guarantees. It demands the strict implementation of the 2013 law, with swift and severe punishment for any official or contractor who violates it. True progress of a society depends on the progress of its all humankind. There should be guarantee of implementation of Mahatma Gandi National Rural Employment for their daily wage. The government should create alternative employment and training programme for skill work for this community after identifying them those are engaged in the manual scavenging practice. There should be a proactiveness to allocate land to these people and make them aware of it. By creating an online database that all people are enrolled in it and connect it with their Aadhar number and to make sure they getting all government facilities. Government must ensure scholarships, and alternative livelihood

support for the children of these affected community. State government can initiate health awareness programme in their locality. Recognizing caste-based violence is an ongoing human rights violation by the government and civil society will be helpful. The commitment to uplift this affected community through responsible citizen by rejecting caste driven division may help to evolve them and to live a dignified life in the mainstream society. We must build a nation where everyone should treat with dignity and we should treat the value of dignity more than the cost of a machine.

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ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769