



CHALLENGES FACED BY MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN MODERN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY (A CASE STUDY OF AGRA CITY)

Lajwant Singh

Professor and Head, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed to be University), Dayalbagh, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

Cite This Article: Lajwant Singh, "Challenges Faced by Manual Scavengers in Modern India: A Sociological Study (A Case Study of Agra City)", International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education, Volume 11, Issue 2, July - December, Page Number 46-52, 2025.

Copy Right: © Crystal Pen Publication, 2025 (All Rights Reserved). This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16453997>

Abstract:

After independence, in 1948, the demand to end the practice of manual scavenging was raised for the first time by the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Since then, there have been verbal attempts to end this practice. Many laws were made, but all have been in vain. This practice is not coming to an end. This practice is a stigma in the world's largest democracy. It is a matter of great shame that on one hand, when the world's largest economy is currently facing recession, India has achieved a respectable growth rate and our country has become profitable for foreign investors, it is still very sad to see that people of a particular community are condemned to carry manual scavenging on their heads. Dry toilets are still in use in various states. In these toilets, the work of picking up excreta is done by humans, that too with the help of a broom, bucket and pan, they do not have any special equipment other than broom, bucket and pan. Even today, there is a practice of carrying faeces on the head in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Punjab.

Key Words: Social Inequality, Inaction of Government Efforts, Constitutional Provisions, Lack of Awareness, Etc.

Introduction:

According to Indian culture, Indian Hindu society is divided into four parts. This is called Varna System. These four Varnas are- 1. Brahmin 2. Kshatriya 3. Vaishya 4. Shudra. In Vedas, Varna System was based on work, but over time it became based on birth and now this position is also hierarchical, which is not changed. In this, Brahmin is on the highest and first step, whose work is to teach-train and do religious acts, which is considered to be the most respectable work and Varna in Indian society, on the second step is Kshatriya Varna which does security related work and is considered to be a symbol of courage and bravery, this Varna and their work is also considered respectable in the society. The third Varna is Vaishya who does work related to production, storage, banking, trade, they also have a respectable place in Indian society. On the fourth and last step is Shudra Varna who does service-related work of the above three Varnas. Like the work of other Varnas, the work of Shudra Varna is also very important for the society, but is not seen with respect. Apart from this, there is also an untouchable community outside the Varna system, which is also called Pancham Varna, which is untouchable and is expelled by the Varna system and Indian society. It is believed that 'a person becomes impure by merely touching them'. The community of Valmiki people is also one of these untouchable communities, which is considered untouchable among the untouchables, which has been given the work of cleaning the dirt done by other people by the society. This community is known by many names in Indian society, these are - Bhangi, Mehatar, Jamadar, Harijan, Swachhkar, Safai Karmachari, Hela, Adijambava, Lal Bengi etc.

Valmiki Community:

Valmiki is a caste or sect found in India. The term Valmiki is used by various communities across India, who claim themselves to be descendants of Lord Valmiki, the author of Ramayana. It is a martial ethnic community, traditionally their work has been to fight. They are known by different names in different states of India, such as Nayak, Boya, Mehatar, etc. They are widely found throughout India. They are found in the states of Northern India and South India. In the states of Northern India, they are classified as Scheduled Caste (SC).

Meaning of Manual Scavengers:

A manual scavenger is a person engaged in manually cleaning undecomposed human excreta from open drains, insanitary latrines, pits, railway tracks. This can be done on a contractual or regular basis and can be employed by any person. However, the law excludes those doing this work wearing suitable protective gear.

The Meaning of Protective Gear:

Hazardous cleaning by an employee in respect of sewers or septic tanks means manual cleaning by such employee without the employer fulfilling his obligations to provide protective gear and other cleaning equipment and without ensuring the observance of safety precautions as prescribed in the said or any other law for the time being in force or the rules made thereunder. Hazardous cleaning exposes the employee to incidents such as fall/slip, fire or explosion, oxygen deficiency, gas poisoning, heat stress, drowning and, in some extreme cases, even loss of life. If a person is employed to clean sewers or septic tanks, he must be provided with protective gear by his employer. Among other things, this safety equipment includes chlorine masks, emergency medical oxygen resuscitator kits, full body wader suits, safety goggles and helmets. It is also the duty of the local authority to ensure that the persons cleaning sewers are provided with cleaning equipment such as deep suction combined machines, hydraulic operated trolley mounted grab buckets, hoses and other washing equipment.

Manual Scavengers and Discrimination:

Manual scavenging has always been associated with lower castes, where it is believed that it is their job to manage the waste of the upper castes. Members of the Dalit community have been discriminated against for years in India. Therefore, it is difficult to identify manual scavengers because of the way they will be treated. Safai Karmis and their family members who do this work are often called casteist terms such as "Bhangi" or "neech". Since the majority of manual scavengers are women,

discrimination based on their gender has also increased. These women are also not allowed to change their jobs and are subjected to violence. Women are also less likely to be taken to the hospital when they fall ill because they are seen as a burden at home.

Place of the Scavengers in Society:

Found in North India, people of this community have traditionally worked as sewage cleaners and sanitation workers. Historically, they have faced caste discrimination, social exclusion and harassment. However, taking advantage of modern opportunities for education and employment, they have now started leaving their traditional work and taking up other professions. This has improved their social status.

In the Indian constitutional system, the Valmiki community has been given a place in the list of Scheduled Castes. Socially and historically, they were considered untouchable, which continues in practice even after independence. Article 17 of the Constitution Untouchability has been prohibited by the Constitution, which is a fundamental right. Despite this, this problem still persists.

This community is not only in Hindu society but also in Muslim society, who are called "Lal Bangi". Revolutionary Sardar Bhagat Singh ji had written on the condition of people of Valmiki community in his article "Untouchable Problem"- "No other country has faced such bad conditions as our country. An important question is the untouchable problem. The problem is that in a country with a population of 30 crores, religion will be corrupted by the mere touch of 6 crores people who are called untouchables." Valmiki people are forced to do cleaning work despite being educated. They have very less availability of other employment opportunities.

Review of Literature:

- Shastri (2014): Actually, the royal and glorious history of the Valmiki community was forcefully locked in a room, but it is still visible from the windows and ventilators of the room. The word Depressed Class or Dalit was first used in the 1931 census; thereafter it was commonly used. There are a total of 624 sub-castes in the Dalit category of society such as Valmiki; Sudarshan; Rukhi; Makhiyar; Mazhabi Sikh etc. Due to not accepting Islam even after heavy pressure from foreign Mughals, Turks and Muslim invaders, they were forcefully put to unclean works (cleaning and scavenging) at the point of the sword to destroy the Hindu pride and self-respect of the orthodox Hindus. Those self-respecting people accepted scavenging; but rejected Islam. The present Hindus who sacrifice their self-interest in front of religion and national interest are Valmiki; Sudarshan; The heartrending and touching events of the medieval dark night of the Mazhabi and other castes are the essence of this book. In fact, this book is an example of history written as per the standards of concise history writing.
- Shastri (2012): The Indian social system is not only confused from the political point of view but its direction of thinking is also flawed. We are constantly moving ahead in the political field with the mere concept of votes. Today, the distinction of caste, class, sect etc. is being seen in the country from the point of view of high and low. In such a situation, due to unnecessary political pressure, the writing of history, expression of social issues and the corrupt form of art and literature is emerging. Divided into six and a half thousand castes and more than fifty thousand sub-castes, today's Hindu society is shedding tears over its plight. The Hindu Charmkar caste is one of them. Earlier, the entire Hindu society was well organized in four Varnas, one hundred and seventeen Gotras and thirty-six castes. Before the invasion of foreign Arab invaders, there were no Muslims, Sikhs and Dalits in India.
- Khudshah (2005): It has been taken to write a research paper. Both the first two works explain the origin, history and name and work-related things of the Valmiki society in great detail. Apart from this, information about the Valmiki society is also available from the book Valmiki Caste: Udvad, Vikas aur Vartaman Samasyaayen, Gautam Book Center, Delhi, 2012 edited by M.S. Gautam and Anil Kumar. Along with this, there are many articles on the internet on the conditions of sanitation workers which are directly related to the Valmiki society. The latest book related to the research, "Shabadrikshat Ki Shikaar Bhangi Jaatiyan (Ek Shodishpurna Analyan)" by B.R. Charan has also been referred to.

Objectives of the Study:

- To study the social background of manual scavengers in India.
- To study the laws against manual scavenging by manual scavengers.
- To study the challenges faced by manual scavengers during Covid-19 period.

Research Methodology:

Descriptive and explanatory method has been used in the presented research paper. Primary and secondary sources have been used for collecting the facts.

Study Area:

For the present study, sanitation workers of Valmiki community of Agra city have been selected. In which random sampling method has been used under the empirical report and 80 representatives have been selected for the study in the present research.

Socio-Economic Information of the Respondents:

Table 1: Age and Marital Status of Respondents

S.No	Age	Marital Status								Total	
		Married		Unmarried		Divorced		Widow/ Widower			
1.	Below 18 Years	00	00%	08	10%	00	00%	00	00%	08	10%
2.	18-30 Years	07	8.75%	06	7.5%	00	00%	02	2.5%	15	18.75%
3.	30-40 Years	13	16.25%	00	0.0%	00	00%	09	11.25%	22	27.5%
4.	More Than 40 Years	23	28.75%	04	5.0%	00	00%	08	10%	35	43.75%
total		43	53.75%	18	22.5%	00	00%	19	23.75%	80	100%

Primary Source

It is clear from the table that 8.0% of the respondents are below 18 years of age and 18% of the respondents are between 18-30 years of age. 22% of the respondents are between 30-40 years of age and most of the respondents are above 40 years of age. It is clear from the table that 66% of the respondents are married and 16% are unmarried while 00% are divorced and 18% are widows/widowers.

Table 2: Monthly Income of Respondents

S.No	Monthly Income	Frequency	Percent
1.	Less Than 5000	36	45
2.	5000-10000	25	31.25
3.	10000-15000	13	16.25
4.	More Than 15000	06	7.5
Total		80	100

Primary Source



It is clear from the table that maximum 52 percent of respondents' monthly income is less than Rs. 5000 and 30 percent of respondents' monthly income is Rs. 5000-10000 whereas 16 percent of respondents' monthly income is Rs. 10000-15000 and lowest 2.0 percent of respondents' monthly income is found to be more than Rs. 15000.

Social Conditions of Manual Scavengers in India:

Due to modernization and globalization, many changes are taking place in the entire village, some of which are very good, like the villagers have started sending their girls to school for education. Some changes are also bad, like in the marriages and other small functions of any community in the village, there is a lot of pomp and show, noise and commotion, which is deafening, and people are seen wasting money in large quantities very comfortably. All the houses of the Valmiki people are concrete. There are about 25 families of this community in the village, most of whom have started living in cities like Delhi, Noida. These people come back to the village only on family functions, marriages and festivals. Most of these people also do cleaning work in the cities, they are in both government and private organizations. Two members of one family were serving in the army, who have now retired and now graze the goats of their house in the morning and evening. A woman from one family is working as a sweeper in the Prime Minister's Office.

Valmiki families have now stopped cleaning the houses of people from other castes, but women of four families still do cleaning work in other houses. After work, they go to those houses to get food, which includes two rotis and vegetables. This food is either fresh or sometimes stale. It was surprising to see that a woman who is doing cleaning work in other houses, her own house was very clean, which had a big room, stairs to go upstairs and a kitchen below it which was open. There was a gas stove and cylinder there, there was also an earthen stove in the courtyard, she said that she does the work of making tea and other quick work on gas and cooks the rest of the food on the earthen stove. There was a concrete floor in the house, there is a provision of electricity and fan. She also rears goats; there is also a tap in the courtyard of the house. Her husband died early and he also used to do cleaning work while living in Delhi.

She said that the family is big, so to run the house, she is still cleaning other houses. There was another house adjacent to this house, which also had one room and courtyard, which had only brick floor, but the house was not clean, goats had made the gate outside dirty. Some other houses had many rooms and big courtyards. Information was received from two women of the village that the upper castes treat them with untouchability, like when they feel thirsty while cleaning the upper caste house, their family members do not let them touch the tap and they themselves turn on the tap, only then they can drink water, whereas in other houses they are not stopped from drinking water from the tap. Although they do not work there. Regarding untouchability,

an old man of the Valmiki community told that- "Everything is fine but even a dog goes and sits on their (upper caste) cot, but we still stand there. Our locality is looked down upon."

But in some cases, the mentality of untouchability is not seen, like the women of the village, keeping in mind the relationship of elders and youngers, say "paav lagana" for greeting. This "paav lagana" is respectful, in reality, only the women of their own family and society show respect by touching each other's feet, which is called paav lagana. But all the women of the village, keeping in mind the relationship of elders and youngers, age, also show respect by saying "I touch your feet verbally", even if that woman is a cleaner.

Generally, the members of the Valmiki community are not invited by other villagers on the occasion of marriages in their homes, but we got information about an upper caste family that they used to invite all the villagers on the occasion of marriages in their homes. The dress of all the villagers is the same, only one or two very old people wear dhoti-kurta. Men wear pant-shirt, kurta-pyjama, jeans-t-shirt etc., women wear saree, kurti salwar, girls wear all modern clothes. Earlier, women of the Valmiki community used to help other women of the village in childbirth (which the villagers used to call "Bhangan"), but now this work has completely stopped and the new generation does not have any knowledge about this subject. Due to the effects of modernization and globalization, the food habits, lifestyle, festivals, marriages, ways of celebrating ceremonies have become similar in the village, but in Valmiki families, even today, pork is served on the occasion of marriages, which is very respectable.

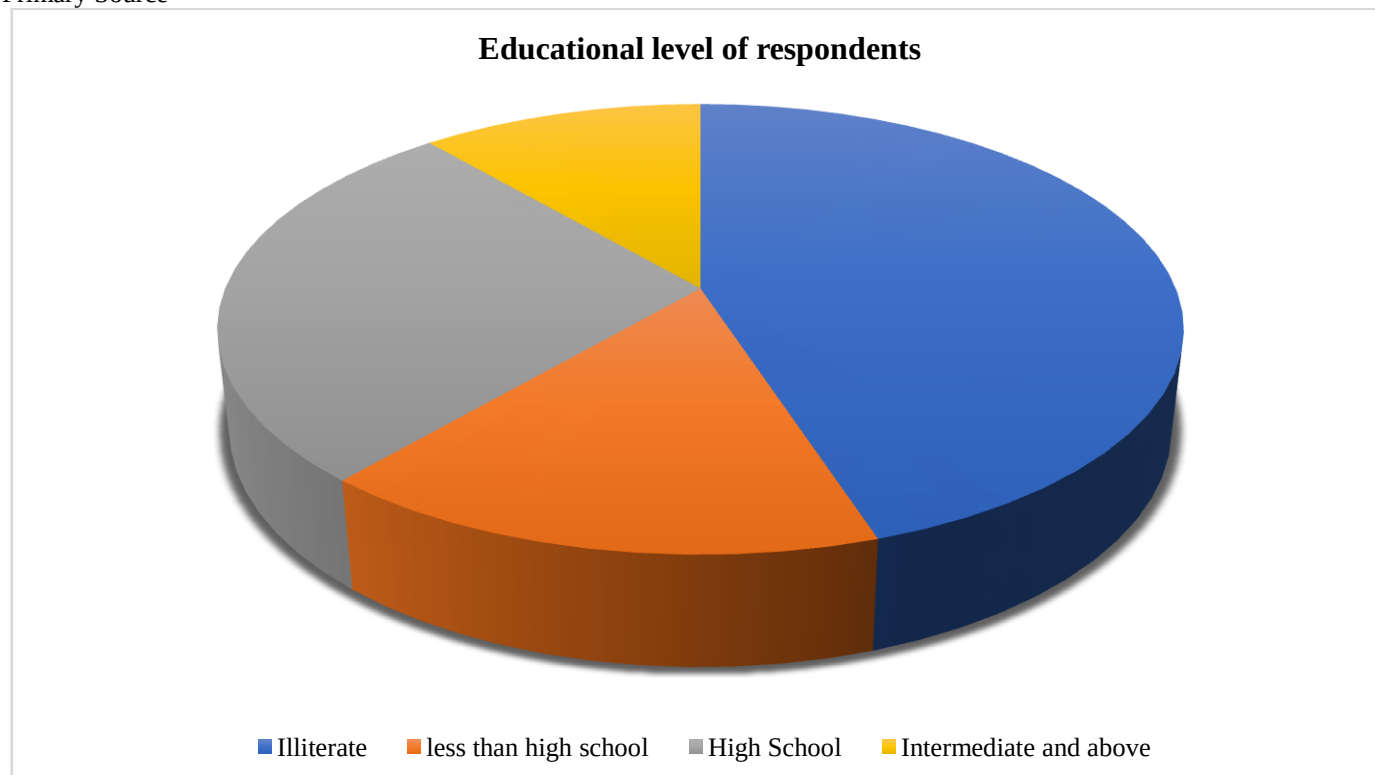
Education:

The level of education has improved in all communities in the village, awareness for getting education has increased. All the children of Valmiki families are currently getting primary education. But the number of people of Valmiki society in secondary and higher education is very less. A student was also found who got graduation education through correspondence. The percentage of education among girls is less than that of boys. But it can be said with full confidence that the society is continuously moving towards education.

Table 3: Educational level of respondents

S.No	Educational Level of the Respondents	Frequency	Percent
1.	Illiterate	36	45
2.	Less Than High School	13	16.25
3.	High School	22	27.5
4.	Intermediate And Above	9	11.25
	Total	80	100

Primary Source

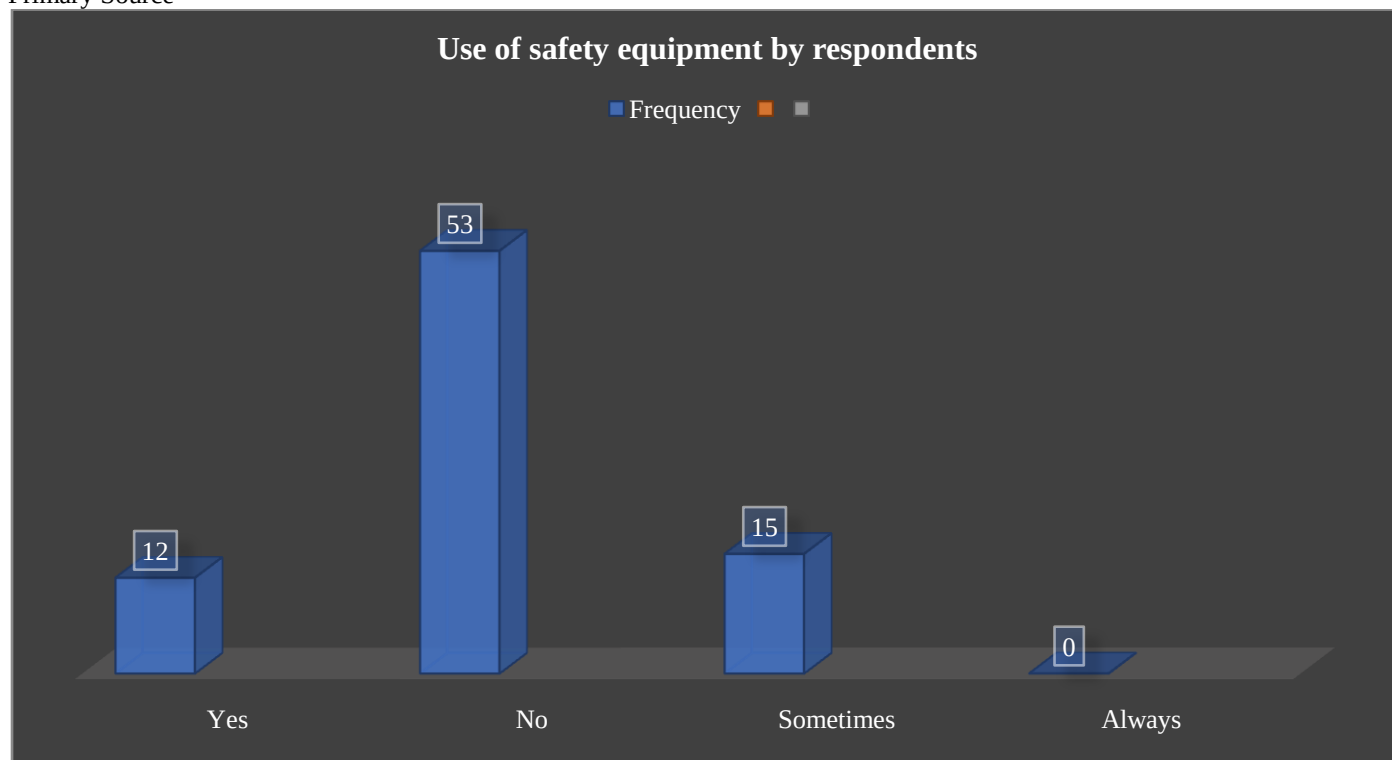


It is clear from the table presented that maximum 52% of the respondents were found to be illiterate and 16% were found to have less than high school education whereas 24% were found to have studied up to high school and 4% of the respondents were found to have intermediate and above educational level.

Table 4: Use of safety equipment by respondents

S.No	Use of Safety Equipment	Frequency	Percent
1.	Yes	12	15
2.	No	53	66.25
3.	Sometimes	15	18.75
4.	Always	00	0.0
	Total	80	100

Primary Source



It is clear from the table presented that 4% of the respondents use safety equipment's during cleaning work and maximum 86% of the respondents do not use safety equipment's whereas 10% of the respondents use safety equipment's sometimes and 00% of the respondents use safety equipment always.

Laws against Manual Scavenging:

- Employing manual scavengers: Under the Act, it is considered illegal to employ a manual scavenger or any person for hazardous cleaning of sewers without any protective gear.
- Why create an unsanitary toilet? It is illegal for anyone to maintain an insanitary latrine that requires a manual scavenger to remove undecomposed human excreta.
- Owning an unhygienic toilet: If someone occupies a property with an insanitary toilet they will have to convert it into a sanitary toilet or demolish it.

Constitutional Provisions and Sanitation Worker Safety:

Manual cleaning of sewers or septic tanks is not permitted even with protective gear and safety equipment. However, the law provides exceptions under Section 3 of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Rules, 2013. These include situations where manhole doors are damaged and thus mechanical equipment cannot be put into operation. If manual sewage cleaning is extremely necessary, it must be reported to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the local authority who may grant permission after recording reasons in writing.

Identification and Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers:

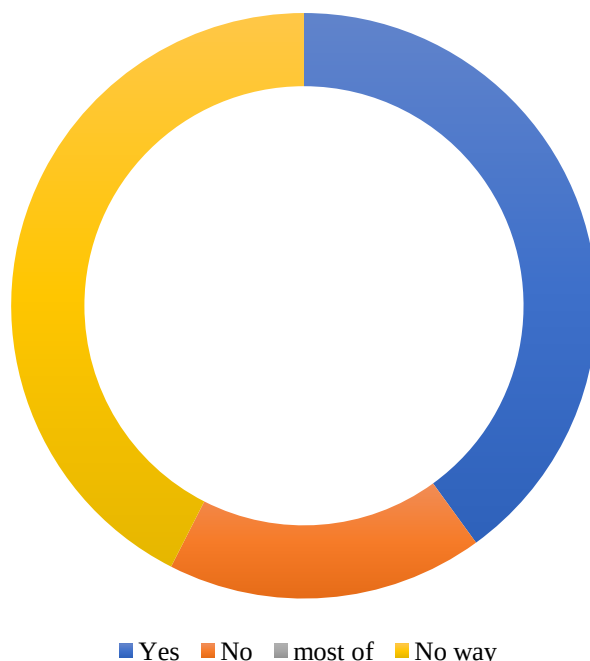
If a Municipality or Panchayat has any reason to believe that certain persons within its jurisdiction are engaged or employed in manual scavenging, the CEO of such Municipality or Panchayat is required to conduct a survey to identify such persons. After completion of the survey, the final list of manual scavengers is published and the persons mentioned in this list shall be relieved from any liability of working as manual scavengers. During or after such survey, any person working as a manual scavenger may apply to the CEO to be identified as a manual scavenger. The CEO conducts an enquiry to ascertain whether the applicant is a manual scavenger and can be added to the list and rehabilitated. Once it is confirmed that a person is working as a manual scavenger, they can avail rehabilitation benefits under the law.

Table 5: Information on laws against manual scavenging

S.No	Information on Laws Against Manual Scavenging	Frequency	Percent
1.	Yes	32	40
2.	No	14	17.5
3.	Most of	00	00
4.	No Way	34	42.5
Total		80	100

Primary Source

Information on laws against manual scavenging



It is clear from the table presented that 44% of the respondents were found to be aware of the laws against manual scavenging and 8% of the respondents were found to be unaware of the laws while 0% were found to be mostly aware of the laws and the highest number of 48% were found to be completely unaware of the laws.

Challenges Faced by Sanitation Workers during the Covid-19 Period:

The relationship between COVID-19 and sanitation workers' conditions can be divided into three levels. These three levels can be the relationship between COVID-19 infection and their conditions; second, the development of acute long-term illness due to COVID-19 and their conditions; and third, COVID-19 spread and their conditions. COVID-19 Infection and Sanitation Workers: As mentioned, when they work, they come in contact with various surfaces and waste products, which is highly risky. As per the nature of COVID-19, it can survive on various surfaces for a few to several hours (Sohrabi et al., 2020), so when sanitation workers come in contact with such surfaces, the virus can enter their body. Waste products and used tissues and masks have a high chance of carrying the virus, and when they deal with such waste, they come in contact with it, and through that it can enter their body. It can go to their nose, eyes or mouth through their hands and enter the body through that and get infected. They have a two-hour lunch break and then three hours of duty. During the two-hour break, nearby workers go to their homes for lunch and the remaining have their lunch at the workplace and rest under the shade of a tree. Anyone who goes home may or may not take a bath before having food. Bathing reduces the risk of infection, but not bathing increases the risk of infection to the individual as well as family members. Anyone who does not go home has their lunch without changing clothes and without bathing, which increases their risk of COVID-19 infection. While resting in the same clothes, they touch their nose and eyes many times, which also increases their risk. As we know protection is the only way to prevent COVID-19 from spreading in a large community (Sohrabi et al., 2020). More than 98% of the participants said that they do not get any protective gear. In the current situation I can see that they are using masks but on asking them I got to know some interesting facts. They told me that they have been given only masks and no other safety measures which are single-use, after lunch break, they have to use the same mask. Which can increase the risk of COVID-19 infection. They have not been provided any soap or sanitizer so while having tea, breakfast and lunch they clean hands with plain water which does not clean the virus from hands.

Suggestions:

- From time to time, laws were made against this practice in the country, government schemes were announced but these were not implemented properly. Our casteism and discrimination mentality has not changed.
- Unless the mentality of the society changes, neither this practice can be abolished nor will they be able to avail the benefits of the law and various government schemes.
- Political parties and leaders take advantage of this social mentality of casteism. Due to this mentality, they are engaged in brightening their present and future. Leaders not only gain power on the basis of Dalit politics, but after gaining power, they start installing their statues.
- How can this benefit Dalits? To remove this stain on humanity, there is a need to work honestly on this issue at the grassroots level.

Conclusion:

The presented study Challenges faced by manual scavengers in modern India: A sociological study (a case study of Agra city) "It shows that 43.75% of the manual scavengers residing in Agra city are found to be above 40 years of age and 53.75% of the respondents are married. 45% of the manual scavengers have a monthly income of less than Rs 5000 and 45% of the respondents are found to be illiterate. 66.25% of manual scavengers do not use safety equipment during cleaning work and 42.5% of the respondents are found to be aware of the laws against manual scavenging. COVID-19 can survive on any surface, when sanitation workers work, they come in contact with various types of garbage and surfaces. From there they can carry the virus and

get infected. Their other occupational, educational, social, health, standard of living and living conditions make them vulnerable to developing severe acute illness, which can lead to high mortality and community spread. Safai Karamcharis are one of the important pillars in maintaining public health, but what if they become a threat to their own health as well as public health? The facts presented in this article show that, sanitation workers are playing a very important role in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. But along with this, this article also analyzes the factors related to sanitation workers that can take this pandemic to the community level. They are at a higher risk of getting infected and developing severe critical illness from COVID-19 infection. And their living conditions are highly risky for spreading the infection. So it is very important to work on the factor presented in this article.

References:

1. Ambedkar, Dr. Bhimrao, Translator Bhadatt Anand Kaushalyan, Who is untouchable and how? Gautam Book Depo, Delhi, Page No.-05
2. Banerjee Abhijit, Marianne Bertrand, Saugato Dutta and Senthil Mullainathan (2009): "Labour Market Discrimination in Delhi: Evidence from a Field Experiment", Journal of Comparative Economics 37 (2009) 14-27.
3. DY, and Yan Y. (2020). Origin, transmission, and clinical treatment of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak - an update on the status. Military Medical Research, 7(1), 1-10.
4. Gang Ira, Kunal Sen and Myong Su Yun, (2012): "Is Caste Destiny? Occupational Diversification among Dalits in Rural India", Working Papers ID: 4769, eSocial Sciences.
5. Guo, Y. R., Cao Q. D., Hong, Z. S., Tan Y. Y., Chen S. D., Jin H. J., Tan K. S., Wang Jammanna A., and Sudhakar P. (2015). Manual scavenging and human rights violations in India - a critique. Editorial Board, 4(4), 167.
6. Gupta, M. L. (2013). "Society in India", Rajasthan Hindi Granth Academy, page no. 59
7. Nigam D Dhamma (2014): "I, a manual scavenger, not your vote bank", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol - XLIX No. 41, 11 October.
8. Singh Bhagat, "The Untouchable Problem" <https://parisar.fils.wordpress.com/...pdf>
9. National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Annual Report 2010-11
10. National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Annual Report 2010-11
11. Tiwari, R. R. (2008). Occupational health hazards of sewage and sanitation workers. Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 12(3), 112.
12. Tripathi, T. (2012). "Uttar Pradesh caste dominance continues to be dominated by sanitation workers scheme", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol - XLVII No. 37, September 15.
13. Thorat, Sukhdev, Umakant (2004): "Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context", Rawat Publications, New Delhi.