

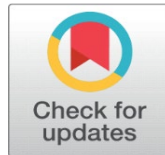
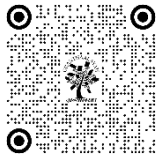
UNSEEN AND UNTOUCHED: NARRATIVES OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Unnoticed in the larger political narrative over Kashmir is the fact that manual scavengers still perform this work because of their caste, even though it has been banned by law. This study looks at what it is like for manual scavengers in the Sheikh and Wattal communities in Srinagar, whose job, which is called tchh paajun, is influenced by age-old caste systems. Nine in-depth interviews reveal that people face social ostracism, name-calling and the negative effects handed down through several generations. Participants explain that the way people speak and the culture's influence subjugate them into caste-based hierarchies, and their gender further adds to their vulnerability. Regardless of the problems they face, many parents believe education can give their children freedom and honour. The result from the research suggests that there is a large disconnect between the laws abolishing caste work and the reality on the ground, so more sensitive and well-suited local efforts to tackle this issue are needed in Kashmir.

Keywords: Manual Scavenging, Caste Discrimination, Kashmir, Unseen, Social Inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

People are still forced into manual scavenging in India, a practice considered both disgraceful and unsafe, despite many laws and policies over years. In many cases, this occupation requires the manual handling of others' excrement and is usually assigned to Dalits and marginalized groups (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Singh, 2014). Manual scavenging comes from the long history of India's caste system, where all aspects of life, including caste, labour and state actions, continue to oppress certain members of society under the guise of public sanitation (Ambedkar, 1936; Guru, 2009).

Despite the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act issued as early as 1993, the government has not been able to eradicate manual scavenging (Government of India, 2013). Further, the Supreme Court ruled in 2014 in the *Safai Karamchari Andolan vs. Union of India*, made it illegal to practice Manual Scavenging, it is still found happening both secretly and openly all across the country (Wankhede, 2021; Gorringer, 2017).

The case of Kashmir is distinctive and under-discussed within the national discussion. While caste is rarely discussed in the region, Dalit Valmiki and Watal (Sheikh) communities experience invisible casteism and job segregation

daily (Ahmad Bhat, 2024; Sayeed, 2023). During the 1950s, many people from Punjab were brought to Kashmir as sweepers, hoping to receive citizenship and security, but these hopes have gone unfulfilled for most (Singh, 2019). They are not just caught in intergenerational cycles of 'dirty work' or *tchh paajun* but always being viewed as untouchable and cast aside (Narayan 2018; Kazi 2016).

In spite of their important role in public hygiene, these workers often face issues in the form of social exclusion, verbal abuse, physical abuse without adequate compensation, and experience many risks. Still, the issue of gender creates more problems: women working as scavengers face both the risk of toxic exposure and sexual vulnerabilities that further limits their mobility and access to healthcare.

The study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of manual scavengers living in Srinagar, Kashmir, mainly in the Sheikh and Wattal communities. The study focuses on how caste, labor, and discrimination are closely related in people's daily lives, using cultural, local expressions such as *Wattal khaslat* (Wattal Nature) and *chhu na insaan* (not a human). The study makes a valuable contribution by studying social justice and labour rights issues in Kashmir based on the unique overlap of caste, occupation, and gender.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

While manual scavenging is officially prohibited in India, it remains a problem due to routine neglect, traditional caste ideas and little interest from society and politics, especially in Kashmir where caste discrimination is often overshadowed by other discourses. The purpose of this study is to explain the personal experiences of the manual scavengers living in Srinagar within the Sheikh and Wattal communities. The main aim is to highlight the experiences of individuals engaged in *tchh paajun* (Cleaning filth) to see how their situation, identity and the concept of exclusion relates to caste and gender.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore the lived experiences of manual scavengers in Srinagar with a focus on caste-based discrimination, occupational stigma, and social exclusion.
- 2) To examine the linguistic and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate untouchability and marginalization in the context of manual scavenging.
- 3) To understand the aspirations, resistances and coping strategies of manual scavengers within the intersecting frameworks of caste, labour, and gender.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How do members of the Sheikh and Wattal communities engaged in manual scavenging describe their everyday experiences of caste-based discrimination in Srinagar?
- 2) What linguistic and cultural expressions reflect the social exclusion and occupational marginalization of manual scavengers in Kashmir?
- 3) How do manual scavengers negotiate their identities, aspirations, and familial futures in the face of generational caste-based labour?

5. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm to investigate what it is like for manual scavengers living in Srinagar, Kashmir. Rather than making generalizations, the researchers sought to interpret and explain the social realities of caste and exclusion shared by the participants.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

Nine participants from Sheikh and Wattal communities who used to or still practice manual scavenging were purposefully chosen from various areas of Srinagar. Since the respondents were diverse in both age and gender, it was

easier to understand how caste and occupation shape the experiences of men and women. Participants were approached for the study using the snowball sampling technique initiated within the local community.

7. DATA COLLECTION

Data for the study were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Kashmiri and Urdu, with each interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews were held at places chosen by the participants to ensure they felt comfortable and safe. A culturally sensitive approach was followed, particularly in navigating stigmatised topics and emotionally distressing narratives.

The interview guide was prepared to include open-ended questions to understand participants' personal histories, work routines, interactions with society, experiences of discrimination and aspirations for their children. Local expressions like *Wattal khaslat* (Wattal nature), *chhu na insaan* (not a human), and *gand tchh* (filth bound) were explored in the context of Kashmiri society to understand how they contribute to justifying caste-based hierarchies.

8. DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were audio-recorded after seeking consent, then they were transcribed verbatim and finally translated into English. The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis. Codes were generated from the data and categorised into broader themes such as occupational humiliation and caste-based labour, linguistic markers of stigma, gendered vulnerabilities and exploitation, and aspirations for dignity through education and resistance. To organize and manage the data, the NVivo 12 software was used during the coding phase.

9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

An approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the host university was secured. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets and informed consent forms which emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, names of all the participants were replaced by pseudonyms and all the identifying details were anonymized. Emotional support was offered to participants if distress arose during or after conducting the interviews.

10. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Four main themes were identified through analyzing the interviews with nine Sheikh and Wattal community members that explore how casteed labour affects people in many ways in Kashmir who do manual scavenger work in many ways.

- (1) Occupational Humiliation and Casteed Labour,
- (2) Linguistic Markers of Stigma,
- (3) Gendered Vulnerabilities and Exploitation, and
- (4) Aspirations for Dignity through Education and Resistance.

Gathering these themes reflects how caste influences daily life and activities in Kashmir in the form of occupation, language and socio-cultural structures, even though the existence of caste hierarchies is denied by most people in the region.

1. Occupational Humiliation and Caste-based Labour

This theme highlights that being a manual scavenger or *tchh paajun* (cleaning excreta and filth) is especially linked to caste identity, which leads manual scavengers to feel regarded as social outcasts and accept internal stigma. It is clear from the narratives that many feel that being in this line of work is cursed and considered the destiny of each generation, encouraged by the community.

Besides playing a key role in keeping cities clean, people in this field are usually unappreciated and not treated with dignity. For the most part, people do not pay much attention to their actions unless they serve to exclude a specific group.

Rafiqa (48, female) expressed it in these words:

"yi chu seanis kismatas manz lekhith..... tchh paajun chu soun rozgaar. Yali kahn Wattal wuchhaan chu, lukh chuna wanaan kehn magar chi sonchaan yi cha yiman khaslat...."
 ("This work is written into our fate... cleaning filth is our job. When they see a Wattal, people don't say anything, but they think: 'It's in their nature.'")

The constant link between outcasts and filth ties into the concept of "ritual pollution within the theory of caste where being impurity relates not to hygiene, but to the position held by someone in the hierarchy (Dumont, 1980). In this situation, caste controls jobs, removing the sense of self-worth and personal capability.

Bilal (33, male) similarly expressed:

"yali ba keam chus karaan chahay sonth aesin ya reatkol aesin, lukh chi nass karaan bandh ta bey chi wanaan yi chu gandh keam karaan...mea chu tem weezi basaan ba chus na insaan...."
 ("When I work in spring or summer, people cover their noses and say, 'He does dirty work.' I feel like I am not human.")

Such demeaning nature of social interactions makes people feel humiliated, something Ambedkar (1936) described as "graded inequality" based on caste, with labour being the main means of control.

2. Linguistic Markers of Stigma

Through language, discrimination against certain castes was carried out discreetly but had a strong effect. Many participants mentioned *Wattal khaslat* (Wattal nature), *Wattal nasl* (Wattal lineage) and *chhu na insaan* (not human) are common phrases they hear regularly in their everyday social interactions. By speaking these words, people did more than insult others; these utterances were performative in nature and gave legitimacy to separating themselves from others.

Mehraj (40, male) stated:

"yim chi wanaan yi cha yiman khaslat....kya khaslat?...yi cha gandhgiii ta zalaalat."
 ("They say this is the 'nature of Wattals.' What nature? It's just filth and humiliation.")

Here, using language, the community's identity is shaped so that any desires for change are invalidated. These expressions are considered micro-aggressions because they allow caste hierarchy to be accepted in the name Indian culture. This is what Gopal Guru (2009) terms "epistemic violence," meaning it strips dignity from people by what is said regularly.

Tabassum (28, female) sharing an instance stated:

"shaadiyun mai log kaana phuusi karte hai... kehte hai ye insaan hi nahi hai...mera dil toot jata hai.....yi chu sarasar zulm..."

("At weddings, people whisper: 'She's not even human... my heart breaks, this is severe oppression.'")

Excluding someone from humanity by saying *chhu na insaan*, meaning "not human" is among the most barbaric descriptions for dehumanization based on caste. Just as Dalits are referred to in other parts of India, this word points to the presence of parallel caste structure in Kashmir, implying that Kashmir too has its own caste system which politicians often ignore (Ahmad Bhat, 2024).

3. Gendered Vulnerabilities and Exploitation

The caste-based exploitation of manual scavengers is often worse for women as they suffer from double discrimination due to both gender and caste. Women reported undergoing physical and verbal abuse, facing hazardous workplace situations and lacking proper support, either from the government or the community. It became clear in their stories that the combination of caste and patriarchy leads to an unusual form of exposure.

Khalida recounted:

"yali ba keam chas karni gachaan...lukh chi wanaan bey kya heaki yi karith....ghari chum na sakoon kihin...doctoras nish gachnas ta chas ba khochaan...tim cha asi badal nazar karaan."
 ("While working, people say 'what else can she do.' At home, I have no peace. I fear going to the doctor; they look at us differently.")

This account of our female participant shows how caste oppression infiltrates not just workplaces but also health services and domestic spaces. Women from these communities are often denied access to basic reproductive and psychological healthcare and their work is frequently sexualized or dismissed as the result of moral inferiority.

Shameema described an incident where her daughter was rejected just because mother's occupation:

"myeani kori chi rishta yiwaan magar yali tim bozaan cha aemis cha moaj yi keam karaan...kahn ta chuna ankaar karaan...tim chi na wichaan ki koor cha parmich leachmich magar sirf chi khaslat wichaan ta manah karaan...aem seeth tor mea samjh ki aes haeko na panni kori bey kuni jayi bayith...aem seeth gow mea kori ta waryah problem."
 ("When the marriage proposal comes for daughter, they reject her immediately when they get to know about my profession...They don't see that she is educated...all they see is her caste and reject her...it made me realise that we cannot marry our daughters outside our community...this created a lot of problems for my daughter.")

It shows that despite advancements in education, caste-based prejudice continues to affect women from communities where manual scavenging occurs. The rejection of marriage proposals reflects how caste identity continues to overshadow individual merit, thus reinforcing social exclusion across generations. It stresses the fact that education alone is insufficient to break caste barriers in deeply stratified societies like Kashmir (Guru, 2009; Narayan, 2018).

Such narratives reveal the intergenerational nature of caste exclusion which means the stigma is not only embodied but also inherited. This is emphasized by Dalit feminist scholarship which states that gendered caste violence must be understood through a structural lens that includes family, education and state institutions (Rege, 1998; Bhattacharjee, 2014).

4. Aspirations for Dignity through Education and Resistance

Despite the difficulties that came with caste-based work and discrimination, narratives of **hope, resistance and aspiration** emerged. The vast majority of participants wanted their children to overcome the burden of caste labor in life by getting educated. Attending school was valued by them not merely for academic achievement but a political act of dignity reclamation and showing their upstandings.

Ghulam Mohd articulated this aspiration clearly:

"mea kear waryah korbeani taaki ba sozan panun neachuw school...tim chi tati wanaan chi chukh gandhgii saaf karaan...magar chusakh wapas wanaan yi banaiy panin azaad wath panaiy."
 ("I made sacrifices to send my son to school. They say to me, 'You clean filth.' I tell them, 'He will make his own free path.'")

Similarly, **kousar** stated:

"myean koor kari na tchh paajun. Sou cha school gasaan, ta sou banni doctor banawan. mea cha yakeen ki sou banaiy zindagi panaiy..."

("My daughter should not clean filth. She goes to school; she will become a doctor. I believe she can create her own life.")

Such ambitions go against the ideas of fate that come with being born into a caste. They echo Ambedkar's (1936) emphasis on education as the first step toward annihilation of caste and reflect a form of resistance embedded within everyday life.

In addition to educational aspirations, the participants also practiced everyday resistance by maintaining their dignity and resisting casteism.

Riyaz, a participant in his 30s, recounted:
"tim chi wanaan az ki yi cha wattal khaslat...ba chusakh wanaan insaniyat chi saarni hinz khaslat..bey tim cha na timan ta asi manz kahn farak,,tim ta chi insaan aes ta insaan." (Today they say it's a Wattal's nature...I told them, humanity is everyone's nature, and there is no difference between them and us...they are humans so are we).

Although these verbal retorts seem simple, however, they stand as a challenge to the caste system that tries to justify existing social divisions. Through these responses, people resist and oppose the past mistreatment which resulted from casteism (Guru, 2009).

At the same time, participants noted that structural barriers such as difficulties faced by students, such as inequality in schools, lack of funds and rejection in the community, can stop them from achieving their dreams. Thus, while gaining an education is a route away from caste, it is not always enough to break free.

11. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study helps highlight the problems faced by manual scavengers in Srinagar, as seen from the Sheikh and Wattal communities, despite how widespread the problem is in Kashmir. Participants' accounts even now show that even after the ban on manual scavenging through *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act* (by the Government of India in 2013), caste-based discrimination and job stigma continue to affect them each day.

The study shows that a link exists between caste, labour and marginalization among manual scavengers. According to the account given by many participants, they are considered as lacking humanity (*chhu na insaan*) because living with the impurity associated with manual scavenging is expected of them (Ambedkar, 1936; Guru, 2009). The thoughts and expressions through everyday interactions and local phrases such as *Wattal khaslat* (Wattal nature) play a role in keeping social divisions strong by leaving some individuals excluded from the group (Bhat, 2022). Here, caste remains active and decides the tasks performed by different groups of people and the circumstances surrounding their work (Wankhede & Kahle, 2023).

The theme of intergenerational stigma was especially insightful. Many participants worried that, because of their parenting status, their children might be labelled with the "*gand tchh*" (filth-bound) identity. This also matches Gorringer's belief (2017) that being inside a caste-based workplace often leads to transmitting the same role from parent to child, encouraging low social mobility and disregard for their work. Whilst many shared a hope for educational emancipation, they also admitted that the current system is too strong to be overcome. This resonates with Narayan's (2018) observation that caste determines aspirations, opportunities for transforming the self and accessibility of education particularly when it comes to Dalits and other marginalized caste members.

It also became clear that some individuals are especially at risk due to their gender. A number of women working as scavengers expressed that they experienced great exhaustion and felt more likely to fall sick due to the harmful conditions they encountered. Bhattacharjee (2014) and Singh (2014) agree that Dalit women who work in sanitation experience oppression because of their gender, caste and status in society. Their narratives reflected the big picture by pointing out that a lack of support from institutions or medical care makes it worse for women lacking power within such labour environments.

The type of linguistic and symbolic expressions that refer to manual scavengers in Kashmir show how they are kept marginal and making their condition worse. *Wattal nasl* (Wattal lineage) and *byaeth hyek na* (cannot marry outside) are used to keep people of different castes apart and to ensure that purity is maintained. This aligns with Guru's (2009) thought that humiliation in the context of inequality is supported by daily expressions and communication.

Even though the situation was tough for many, a few participants remained resilient and offered acts of resistance. They ensured children received an education, took part and stood against casteism with respect. Because resistance happens in many places and by individuals, people might unite and convince others to also resist. At the same time, it is influenced by the system's own rules, so new changes are needed on a broader scale (Gorringer, 2017).

The results suggest that we should focus on more than abolishing or making only minimal efforts at rehabilitation. More interventions should take into account the culture, economy and image involved in manual scavenging. Incongruously, these laws don't respect the fact that caste discrimination appears throughout people's work. Interestingly, these laws are not aware that caste discrimination happens constantly at work. Since policy forums usually overlook their concerns, the dignity and rights of these workers should be emphasized in Kashmir and similar places, as their caste is often subsumed with other issues.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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