

Manual Scavenging: The World's Most Ignored Violation of Human Rights

Poverty is disturbingly widespread—this is an unquestionable fact, a truth that we all acknowledge in the back of our minds as we indulge in our daily luxuries and privileges. Though mankind has been able to reach the moon, build self-driving cars, and achieve other extraordinary feats, the plight faced by billions across the planet has yet to be eradicated. Humanitarian organizations have done much to aid victims of poverty—the donation of food, shelter, and medical services has undoubtedly lessened the struggles faced by our fellow human beings—but the number of individuals who have received enough aid to be completely lifted out of their situations is minuscule.

Moreover, the number of people whose plights have drawn the international attention required to amass large aid efforts constitutes a fraction of all the people who need them. We are well aware of cases of poverty that make headline news: starvation among families in Asia, AIDS-infected babies in Africa, and homelessness in the United States are pressing issues that hundreds of large-scale organizations and first-world civilians are working to resolve. However, the biggest victims of poverty—those who endure the suffering we associate with poverty and more—may not be those whose issues have been brought to light.

There exist individuals who are bound by the chains of destitution in the shadows, being stripped of their dignity, self-worth, and health on a daily basis.

There exist individuals who are viewed as subhuman by their own governments, forced into labor so unimaginably degrading that they themselves believe they are undeserving of liberation.

They are the manual scavengers of India.

Manual scavenging is a practice almost exclusive to India. It is the act of manually cleaning human waste out of pits and tanks, a soul-draining occupation reserved for India's lowest caste: the Dalits, or untouchables. The caste system is widely outdated, and its influence over Indian society has declined with the procession of time—still, it is the root cause of the dehumanization and mistreatment of hundreds of thousands of innocent humans. A staggering proportion of India's population uses dry

latrines instead of toilets with sewage pipes, which are often pits in the ground that can only be cleaned manually. The burden of emptying the latrines of virtually every Indian household is thus cast upon the lowest members of society, those who are literally perceived as untouchable by Indian citizens. They often work from dawn till dusk scooping feces out of holes, loading it into baskets on their heads, and dumping it into ditches. None are given gloves, masks, or sanitation equipment, and are resultantly stricken by disease and deformation. The pay for the job is abysmal, barely affording them enough meals to fuel their hard labor—let alone quality education for their children or other basic necessities.

Inhumanity aside, Dalits cannot simply walk away from this occupation. Their low societal status prevents them from being able to find any other work, as citizens view them as destined to perform manual scavenging alone. They are literally forced to choose between scavenging for meager pay and starving to death due to no income. Additionally, Indians view Dalits as “tainted” individuals; many untouchables have endured a lifetime of manual scavenging, cleaning toilets for as long as four decades, which brands each of them with an invisible mark of filth and contamination. The fact that so many of them bear the permanent stench of their occupation contributes to their dehumanization, feeding the cycle of Dalit mistreatment: manual scavenging is stigmatized as dirty, resulting in Dalits being forced into it.

Dalits’ low social status and marginalization leads to their mistreatment and suffering in terrible conditions, which reinforces the idea that their services are “dirty” and could never be taken on by a “respectable” Indian citizen. This vicious cycle, fueled by the toxic mob mentality of the majority of India’s population, only drives India further from the truth the longer it goes on: that Dalits are as human as everyone else. Even Dalits themselves believe they are worth less than others; many begin scavenging during childhood, being taught that they were born to do the task. This cycle is virtually unbreakable in its present state—after all, if both Indian citizens and Dalits themselves are too blinded by outdated social classification systems to recognize the glaring violation of human rights that is manual scavenging, what can be done to eradicate it?

The Indian government is another obstacle to the liberation of Dalits from this cruel fate. Instead of taking action against scavenging, high-level government officials try to conceal the issue altogether by falsely stating that the practice barely exists

anymore. Their false reports, along with the Indian public's apathy, blind the rest of the world from the issue. Additionally, the Indian government has taken no initiatives towards removing dry latrines and installing sewage systems in India's poorer districts. The existence of dry latrines is the sole reason manual scavenging exists—by doing nothing to replace them, the government forces Dalits into filling the roles of scavengers. Because the government refuses to publicly acknowledge the issue at all, they provide zero assistance to the workers, giving them no protective gloves or cleaning supplies that would at least enable them to perform their labor with dignity. It is virtually slavery—Dalits are left with no other option but to do what they are told. If one attempts to protest their unsafe conditions or demeaning work, he or she is simply fired, left to starve, and replaced by another.

Unlike other poverty-related issues around the world, the issue of manual scavenging in India has no clear solution. There are multiple problems at play: the Indian public's dehumanization of Dalits, the government's apathy concerning the issue, and the sheer inescapability of the torture Dalits experience. Because the Indian mind has been rooted in the caste system for centuries, it will be difficult to make the Indian public view manual scavenging as a violation of human rights—including the rights to safety and dignity—instead of a tainted occupation that tainted individuals deserve to perform for their entire lives. What Dalits experience transcends the struggles of poverty—poverty is relatively escapable, whereas forced labor in unsafe, damaging conditions cannot be escaped without mass public interference. The removal of their plight solely depends on the removal of the Indian caste-system mindset, because if that isn't achieved, they will always be perceived as Dalits—untouchable, tainted, and dirty—and will continue to be subjected to dirty, unsanitary work conditions. They will live their lives lacking the opportunity to be respected as human beings. Dalit children will continue to grow up believing they are worth less than everyone else simply because an arbitrary system of social categorization dictates every aspect of their lives, from birth to death.

Frankly, it's horrifying that the caste system has rooted itself so deeply into Indian society that barely anyone opposes the blatant stripping of humanity experienced by Dalit workers.

Though decasticizing the Indian mind will be no easy task, it is the only way for Dalits to be truly liberated. The first step towards doing so is raising awareness and destroying the apathy that is directed towards the matter; the clouds that have been obscuring this widespread issue must be parted, and international attention must be drawn to the invisible hell that millions of our fellow humans have endured for centuries. India-based anti-scavenging organizations such as Safai Karmachari Andolan have already begun to raise awareness in India, but this is nowhere near enough action—a violation of human rights this blatant should be brought to the attention of people all across the globe. Recognition of the problem is the first step towards solving it; after all, a problem has to be acknowledged before it can truly be addressed.

By doing so, we'll be one step closer to providing one of the world's most alienated groups of people with what they deserve most: safety, dignity, self-worth, and freedom.