

# Manual Scavenging: Issues of Caste, Culture and Violence

Social Change  
45(2) 242-255  
© CSD 2015  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0049085715574187  
http://sch.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

Manual scavenging—a despised vocation of manually sweeping household dry latrines and carrying human excreta—still exists in many parts of India. This inhuman practice has traditionally been enforced on a specific group of people labelled manual scavengers. More painful is the audacity and the deliberate dereliction of duty by the state machinery that blatantly denies the existence of inhuman practice of manual scavenging. The position of the *Jajmans* (patrons), rather comfortable with the fact that fellow human beings clean their excreta, is not very different. While the worst are the cultural constructions that legitimise this inhuman practice by changing what Galtung called *moral colour* from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/acceptable. In the rural Indian social matrix, the task of manual scavenging has been mostly enforced on women. This article aims to map how the practice of manual scavenging sustains on the hegemonic relationship built around gender, caste and culture. Johan Galtung's typology of violence—direct, structural and cultural—is used to demystify the issues of violence in manual scavenging.

## Keywords

Manual scavenging, Balmiki women, cultural violence, Johan Galtung

## Manual Scavenging: Context and Quantum

The practice of manual scavenging negates anything remotely related with the ideas of freedom, justice or even of the humanity per se. Manual scavenging exists at many sites, including in railways and municipalities, but in this article, it exclusively refers to the cleaning of household dry latrines and carrying away

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