

Caste, Stigma, and Occupational Identity among Sanitation Workers in Punjab: A Sociological Review

Abstract

Sanitation workers constitute one of the most marginalized occupational groups in India. Despite constitutional safeguards, legal protections, and welfare schemes, sanitation work continues to be closely associated with historically disadvantaged caste communities. This paper examines the interrelationship between caste, social stigma, and occupational identity among sanitation workers in Punjab through a review of sociological literature, government reports, and policy documents. Drawing upon the theoretical contributions of B. R. Ambedkar, Erving Goffman, Louis Dumont, Everett Hughes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Max Weber, the study argues that caste-based occupational segregation continues to influence the social experiences of sanitation workers. While modernization, urbanization, and educational expansion have created opportunities for social mobility, occupational stigma and social exclusion remain significant challenges. The paper highlights the need for policy interventions aimed at improving both material conditions and social recognition of sanitation labour.

Keywords: Caste, Occupational Identity, Punjab, Sanitation Workers, Social Exclusion, Stigma, Social Exclusion

Date of Submission: 11-06-2026

Date of Acceptance: 21-06-2026

I. Introduction

Sanitation workers play a crucial role in maintaining public health and clean and hygienic environment. Despite their inevitable contribution, sanitation labour in India has historically been associated with specific caste groups, particularly Scheduled Castes. This association has resulted in growing patterns of occupational segregation, social exclusion, and stigma.

Punjab presents an important context for examining such issues. Although the state of Punjab has witnessed considerable economic development and social transformation, but caste continues to influence occupational structures and social relations. The persistence of caste-based sanitation labour raises important sociological questions regarding dignity of labour, occupational identity, and social mobility.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between caste, stigma, and occupational identity among sanitation workers in Punjab through a review of existing sociological literature and policy frameworks.

Research Gaps

Although significant literature already exists on sanitation workers, manual scavenging, labour rights, and occupational health in India, but limited attention has been devoted in examining the interrelationship between caste, stigma, and occupational identity within the specific socio-cultural context of Punjab. Existing studies have often examined these issues separately, focusing either on caste discrimination, labour rights, or occupational health. This research paper seeks to integrate these dimensions and its dynamics within a single sociological framework to better understand the experiences of sanitation workers in Punjab.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical relationship between caste and sanitation work in Punjab.
2. To analyze sociological explanations of caste and occupational stigma among sanitation workers.
3. To understand the formation of occupational identity among sanitation workers.
4. To review existing policy measures aimed at improving the conditions of sanitation workers.

II. Review Methodology

This study is based on a narrative review of secondary sources including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, Government reports, Census data, commission reports, publications of international organizations, and reports. The reviewed literature was selected based on its relevance to caste, occupational segregation, stigma, occupational identity, sanitation labour, and social exclusion. The collected material was analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and sociological explanations related to

sanitation workers in India and Punjab. The review adopts an interpretive sociological approach, focusing on how caste, stigma, and occupational identity are conceptualized and discussed across different bodies of literature.

As a secondary review study, the paper also uncovers existing literature and reports related to sanitation workers of Punjab.

Caste and Occupational Segregation

The caste system has historically structured occupational roles within Indian society. Certain occupations, particularly those associated with waste disposal, sanitation, and manual scavenging, have always been linked to specific caste groups. Occupational roles were often inherited across generations, resulting in a close relationship between caste identity and labour. B. R. Ambedkar (1936) argued that caste functions not merely as a system of social hierarchy but also as a mechanism for regulating labour and occupational inheritance. Ambedkar further argued that caste restricts occupational mobility by assigning occupations on the basis of birth rather than individual ability. He described caste as a system of "graded inequality" in which social groups are arranged within a hierarchy of unequal status and privilege. Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality provides an important framework for understanding the structural location of sanitation workers within India's caste hierarchy. Historically, sanitation work became associated with Dalit communities and occupations considered impure within the caste order. As a result, sanitation workers have historically occupied one of the most stigmatized positions within the caste hierarchy because their work became associated with notions of impurity, pollution, and untouchability.

The work of Louis Dumont (1966) further helps explain caste-based occupational segregation. In his theory of purity and pollution, Dumont argued that caste hierarchy is maintained through cultural beliefs regarding ritual purity. Occupations involving waste handling and sanitation became associated with notions of pollution, contributing to their low social status.

Caste and Sanitation Labour in Punjab

Punjab presents a unique context for examining caste and occupational segregation because it has one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Caste populations in India (Census of India, 2011). Despite significant economic development and the egalitarian principles emphasized within Sikh religious teachings, sociological studies have documented the continuing influence of caste in social, economic, and occupational life. Research suggests that sanitation work in municipal bodies and urban local institutions remains disproportionately concentrated among historically marginalized communities. Consequently, caste continues to influence occupational opportunities and social status, even where formal recruitment processes are governed by legal and administrative regulations rather than hereditary principles. Several studies indicate that sanitation work continues to be disproportionately performed by Scheduled Caste communities despite legal prohibitions against caste-based discrimination. This occupational continuity demonstrates the enduring influence of historical social structures on contemporary labour markets.

In Punjab, caste-based occupational patterns remain visible in municipal sanitation services and other forms of sanitation labour. Although recruitment procedures are formally governed by employment regulations rather than caste, historical disadvantages continue to shape occupational outcomes.

Contemporary evidence supports the continuing relationship between caste and sanitation labour. Reports by the World Bank, WHO, ILO, and WaterAid have noted that sanitation work in India remains disproportionately concentrated among historically marginalized caste communities. Similarly, Human Rights Watch documented that manual scavenging and other forms of sanitation labour continue to be strongly associated with caste-based occupational inheritance, indicating the persistence of caste-linked occupational segregation despite legal reforms.

Contemporary developments in Punjab further indicate the persistence of labour-related challenges among sanitation workers. Worker organizations and unions have repeatedly raised concerns regarding contractual employment, job insecurity, delayed regularization, and welfare provisions. These concerns suggest that sanitation workers continue to experience structural disadvantages despite legal protections. Furthermore, recent efforts to undertake caste-linked socio-economic surveys in Punjab reflect growing recognition of continuing inequalities and the need for evidence-based policy interventions.

Stigma and Social Exclusion

Occupational stigma refers to negative social perceptions attached to particular forms of work. The experiences of sanitation workers can be understood through the sociological concept of stigma developed by Erving Goffman. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Goffman argued that stigma is an attribute that deeply discredits an individual and reduces them from a whole person to a discounted person in the eyes of society.

From Goffman's perspective, caste-based occupational segregation produces stigmatized identities that extend beyond the workplace. Sanitation workers are often judged not only on the basis of their occupation but also through historically entrenched perceptions of caste and pollution.

Research indicates that sanitation workers frequently encounter prejudice, social distancing, discriminatory attitudes, and symbolic forms of exclusion. Occupational stigma may influence social interactions, marriage opportunities, residential patterns, and community participation. In many cases, stigma extends beyond individual workers and affects family members through what Goffman described as courtesy stigma.

The impact of stigma extends beyond individual workers to their families and communities. According to WaterAid, family members of sanitation workers frequently experience the consequences of occupational stigma, social exclusion, and the loss of livelihood resulting from occupational injuries and deaths. This demonstrates how stigma operates not only at the individual level but also at the community level (WaterAid India, 2019). The persistence of stigma highlights the gap between formal legal equality and everyday social practices. While constitutional provisions prohibit discrimination, social attitudes often continue to reproduce occupational hierarchies.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic violence further explains how social hierarchies become normalized and accepted within everyday life. Through repeated social practices and cultural beliefs, inequalities associated with caste and occupation may come to appear natural and legitimate.

Max Weber's concept of status groups also contributes to understanding occupational stigma. Weber argued that social prestige and honour are important dimensions of inequality. Thus, even when sanitation workers possess stable employment and income, they may continue to experience low social status and limited recognition.

Empirical studies and NGO reports further demonstrate the persistence of occupational stigma. WaterAid's report *The Hidden World of Sanitation Workers in India* found that sanitation workers frequently experience discrimination, exclusion, and limited social recognition despite providing essential public services. The report observed that caste-based perceptions continue to influence how sanitation workers are treated in society. Likewise, the World Bank–WHO–ILO–WaterAid assessment identified social stigma as one of the major challenges faced by sanitation workers alongside occupational hazards and inadequate working conditions.

Occupational Identity and Dignity of Labour

Occupational identity refers to the meanings individuals attach to their work and the ways in which occupations contribute to self-understanding and social identity. Studies suggest that sanitation workers frequently negotiate competing perceptions regarding their occupation. On one hand, sanitation work is often socially stigmatized. On the other hand, workers recognize the importance of their contribution to public health, environmental hygiene, and community welfare.

The concept of dignity of labour emphasizes that all forms of work possess social value and deserve respect. However, the experiences of sanitation workers reveal a gap between this principle and social reality. Everett Hughes' (1958) concept of "dirty work" provides an important framework for understanding this contradiction. Hughes argued that certain occupations are viewed as physically, socially, or morally undesirable despite being essential for the functioning of society. Sanitation work is frequently classified as dirty work because it involves contact with waste and activities considered unpleasant or polluting.

Although society depends upon sanitation labour, those who perform it often receive limited social recognition. This contradiction significantly shapes occupational identity. Weber's concept of occupational prestige further suggests that social respect is not always distributed according to social usefulness. Consequently, sanitation workers may perform indispensable functions while receiving relatively low social prestige.

Ambedkar's critique of caste-based occupational inheritance is also relevant to discussions of dignity. For Ambedkar, human dignity requires freedom of occupational choice. When occupations become linked to hereditary caste status, both equality and dignity are undermined.

The contradiction between social necessity and social recognition became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports and survey-based studies described sanitation workers as frontline workers essential to public health and urban sanitation. However, many workers continued to face inadequate safety measures, limited recognition, and persistent social stigma. These findings reinforce Hughes' argument that society depends upon "dirty work" while frequently undervaluing those who perform it.

Studies on sanitation workers indicate that many workers simultaneously experience occupational pride and occupational stigma. While workers frequently emphasize the importance of their contribution to public health, environmental hygiene, and urban cleanliness, they must also navigate social stereotypes associated with their occupation. Occupational identity therefore emerges as a continuous process of negotiating dignity,

recognition, and social acceptance within a society where sanitation labour continues to carry significant social stigma. Recent initiatives in the Punjab-Chandigarh region emphasizing the dignity of labour and public recognition of Safai Mitras indicate growing awareness of the need to challenge occupational stigma and acknowledge the essential contribution of sanitation workers to urban life.

WaterAid's report *The Hidden World of Sanitation Workers in India* argues that the stigmatized caste system remains a key determinant of the lives of sanitation workers. The report notes that sanitation workers are often compelled to accept the burden of inherited occupation, social stigma, and exploitation as normal features of life. Consequently, occupational identity becomes closely tied to sanitation work, limiting opportunities for social recognition and occupational mobility. (WaterAid India, 2019)

Policy Framework

The Government of India and state governments have introduced several measures aimed at improving the conditions of sanitation workers. These include legislation prohibiting manual scavenging, welfare programs, safety regulations, reservation policies, and employment protections.

Policies have increasingly emphasized occupational safety, social security, mechanization of sanitation work, and rehabilitation of workers engaged in hazardous forms of sanitation labour.

Despite these initiatives, scholars and policy reports frequently identify implementation gaps as a major challenge. Effective policy implementation requires coordination among government agencies, local bodies, civil society organizations, and labour unions.

Reports of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) have repeatedly highlighted deficiencies in occupational safety, protective equipment, and rehabilitation programs for sanitation workers. Although legislation such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act seeks to eliminate hazardous sanitation labour, implementation challenges continue to be reported by government agencies, researchers, and civil society organizations.

WaterAid has also highlighted the problem of inadequate data regarding sanitation workers in India. The report argues that the absence of reliable information regarding the number, conditions, and employment status of sanitation workers makes policy formulation and implementation more difficult. It emphasizes the need for systematic identification and monitoring of sanitation workers to ensure effective welfare and rehabilitation measures. (WaterAid India, 2019)

In Punjab, sanitation worker organizations have frequently highlighted concerns regarding contractual employment, delayed regularization, occupational safety, and access to welfare benefits. These concerns suggest that policy challenges are not limited to legislation alone but also involve effective implementation and monitoring at the local level. The continuing demands raised by sanitation worker unions demonstrate the gap that often exists between policy objectives and workers' lived experiences.

Social Mobility and Education

Educational attainment has been identified as a significant factor influencing social mobility among sanitation worker households. Many studies suggest that sanitation workers view education as the primary pathway through which future generations can avoid occupational inheritance.

WaterAid further emphasizes that quality education for the children of sanitation workers is essential for breaking cycles of occupational inheritance. Educational opportunities can facilitate access to alternative livelihoods and reduce the likelihood of future generations entering stigmatized sanitation occupations. (WaterAid India, 2019)

Urbanization, affirmative action policies, educational expansion, and public sector employment opportunities have facilitated upward mobility for some families. Nevertheless, structural barriers continue to limit access to economic and social opportunities for many marginalized communities.

The persistence of occupational stigma demonstrates that social mobility involves not only economic advancement but also changes in social attitudes and recognition.

In Punjab, educational advancement among Scheduled Caste communities has contributed to increasing aspirations for occupational mobility. However, sociological research suggests that occupational mobility is often constrained by continuing social stigma and structural inequalities. As a result, improvements in education and economic conditions do not automatically eliminate the effects of caste-based occupational segregation.

Theoretical Synthesis

The experiences of sanitation workers can be understood through the combined insights of multiple sociological perspectives.

Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality explains the structural foundations of caste-based occupational segregation. Dumont's theory of purity and pollution explains the cultural beliefs that sustain occupational hierarchy. Goffman's theory of stigma illuminates the everyday experiences of exclusion and

identity management among sanitation workers. Hughes' concept of dirty work highlights the contradiction between the social necessity of sanitation labour and its low social prestige. Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence explains how occupational inequalities become normalized, while Weber's theory of status groups demonstrates how low social prestige can persist despite economic advancement.

Together, these perspectives reveal that sanitation workers experience exclusion through interconnected structural, cultural, symbolic, and occupational mechanisms. Collectively, these theories suggest that the challenges faced by sanitation workers cannot be reduced to economic disadvantage alone; rather, they represent the intersection of caste hierarchy, cultural beliefs, occupational stigma, and unequal social recognition. Understanding sanitation labour therefore requires a multidimensional sociological approach that incorporates both material and symbolic forms of inequality.

III. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that sanitation work in Punjab continues to be shaped by historical patterns of caste-based occupational segregation. Drawing upon the theoretical contributions of Ambedkar, Dumont, Goffman, Hughes, Bourdieu, and Weber, the paper has shown that sanitation workers experience multiple forms of disadvantage rooted in caste hierarchy, occupational stigma, cultural perceptions of pollution, and unequal social recognition. Although legal reforms, economic development, and educational opportunities have created possibilities for advancement, significant challenges remain in achieving substantive social inclusion and dignity for sanitation workers.

Punjab provides a particularly important setting for such analysis because of its large Scheduled Caste population and the continuing significance of caste in shaping social and occupational opportunities. Understanding sanitation labour in Punjab therefore contributes to broader sociological debates concerning caste, social exclusion, dignity, and occupational mobility in contemporary India.

The sociological significance of sanitation work extends beyond labour issues and reflects broader questions regarding caste, dignity, social justice, and recognition. Existing literature has examined sanitation workers from the perspectives of labour rights, occupational health, and manual scavenging. However, relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding the interrelationship between caste, stigma, and occupational identity within the specific socio-cultural context of Punjab.

Future research should examine how changing educational opportunities, urbanization, technological transformation, and labour market restructuring influence the occupational identities and social mobility of sanitation workers and their families. Addressing the challenges faced by sanitation workers requires not only improvements in working conditions but also broader efforts to challenge social attitudes that perpetuate occupational stigma and caste-based exclusion.

Evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that sanitation work remains shaped not only by economic necessity but also by inherited social identities, caste-based expectations, and institutional inequalities. Academic research, government reports, international organizations, and civil society groups consistently demonstrate that sanitation workers remain vulnerable to multiple forms of disadvantage. The persistence of caste-based occupational concentration, social stigma, and inadequate recognition suggests that these challenges cannot be addressed solely through labour reforms. Broader social transformation aimed at reducing caste-based discrimination and enhancing the dignity of labour remains essential.

References

- [1]. Alves, B. (2022). *Sanitation and the caste system in India: A tribute to B. R. Ambedkar*.
- [2]. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Jat-Pat Todak Mandal.
- [3]. Beteille, A. (1965). *Caste, class and power: Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village*. University of California Press.
- [4]. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- [5]. Dalberg Advisors, & WaterAid. (2021). *Sanitation workers in India: Who they are and how they work*.
- [6]. Dumont, L. (1966). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. University of Chicago Press.
- [7]. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
- [8]. Guru, G. (2009). *Humiliation: Claims and context*. Oxford University Press.
- [9]. Hughes, E. C. (1958). *Men and their work*. Free Press.
- [10]. Human Rights Watch. (2014). *Cleaning human waste: Manual scavenging, caste, and discrimination in India*.
- [11]. National Commission for Safai Karamcharis. (Various years). *Annual reports*. Government of India.
- [12]. Shah, G. (2006). *Untouchability in rural India*. Sage Publications.
- [13]. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- [14]. WaterAid India. (2019). *The hidden world of sanitation workers in India*. WaterAid India.
- [15]. World Bank, World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, & WaterAid. (2019). *Health, safety and dignity of sanitation workers: An initial assessment*. World Bank.