

Caste, Climate, and Sanitation: Analysing Film and WASH through an Intersectional Lens

Jaya Yadav

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bharati College, University of Delhi

Intersections of Caste, Class, Race, and Gender

- **What:** Analysing the role of caste in labour studies and economics has often been overlooked in India and across South Asia. While much of global governance and intervention focuses on the outcomes of WASH through sustainability and developing newer technology to advance several pertinent issues, such as water scarcity and accessibility, the framework of caste as tangential to studying the sector remains unexplored to an extent in scholarship.
- **Why:** On one hand, disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies do examine the permeability of caste into different fields of work and livelihood, but a deeper connection must be made between the two. Any discourse on developing the WASH sector, especially through local and global governance cannot invisibilise how only 'lower' caste groups in India constitute the largest cleaning workforce in both urban and rural spaces.

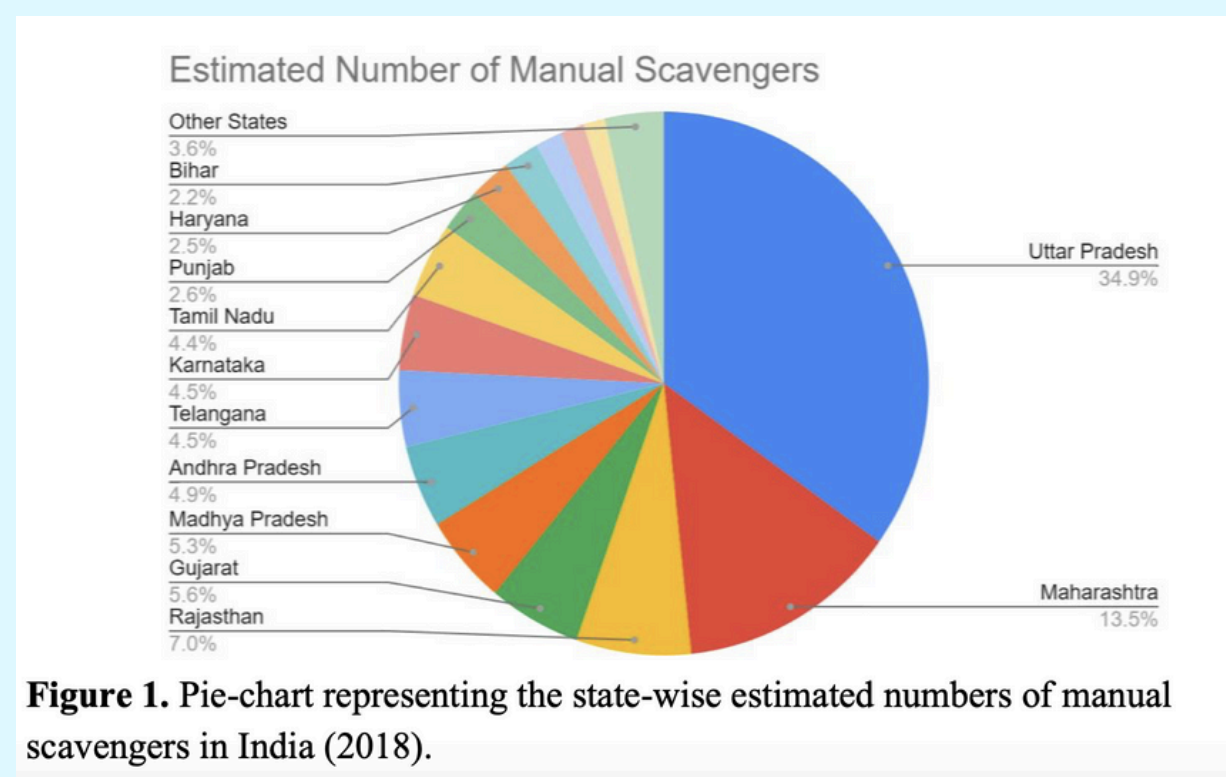
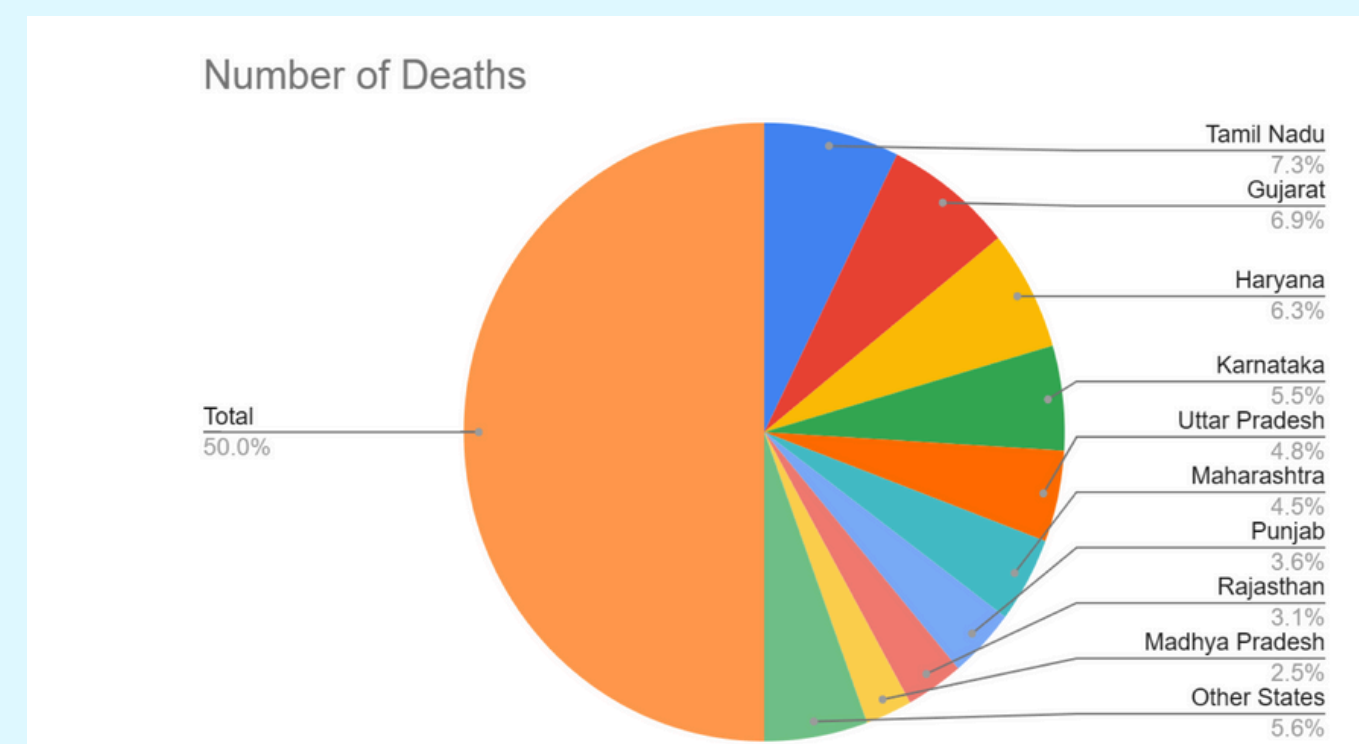


Figure 1. Pie-chart representing the state-wise estimated numbers of manual scavengers in India (2018).

What Does Data Leave Behind?

This paper seeks to highlight the need to closely examine intersections of caste, class, race, and gender in an overarching theoretical framework that borrows from the school of subaltern studies. In India, 'scientific' and empirical research often shies away from addressing questions of caste, claiming it to be an issue of a past and bygone India. Sadly, the reality of millions of sanitation workers, cleaners, and labourers continues to shape the lives of citizens, whose trajectory in life continues to be circumscribed by their caste identity.

How can we relocate WASH linkages to climate changes and the push towards a more sustainable and inclusive world, when the intersection of caste in this sector is heavily overlooked? What forms of expression such as literature or film allow for an alternative perspective on investigating the path forward for issues of WASH?



Where do Films address this gap?

Manhole (2016) directed by Vidhu Vincent and *Kakkoos* (2017) directed by Divya Bharathi seek to address the visual representation of the ground realities of the many aspects of manual scavenging. Though banned in India in 1993, with an amendment in law in 2013, through The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, it has been reported that 58,098 manual scavengers in the country through surveys, but official records have added that there was "no report of practice of manual scavenging currently in the country". The Safai Karmachari Andolan estimates that there are 770,000 such workers.

In *Kakkoos*, the narrates states, "in India it is a fact that we cannot draw a line between general scavengers and manual scavengers." One important distinction to draw is that of caste. Sanitation is a space where caste reinvents itself through livelihood. *Kakkoos* also sheds light on the role of caste in schools, as many in the film testify to being served left over food and asked to eat it at home, apart from continually being forced to only work as cleaners. The film ends with a bold song, proclaiming, "We will rise up and raise our voice oh stinking society/life or death everyday, that's our life says everyone/ we sweep the death and life above our heads/ If an animal poops, no other animal cleans/Oh fool with six senses why did this not reach your brain."

Manhole centres around the complex and subjugated life of Shalini, whose father works a manual scavenger, and mother, a housemaid. Shalini attempts to hide her caste background at school to avoid being ostracised and wants her father to quit his job, but caste identity doesn't allow him the social sanction for another livelihood. He dies in an accident while working in a manhole, which leads to her caste identity being revealed that marks her as the 'other'.

Her friend Marimuth, who also works in manual scavenging to support his studies, faces a similar fate as her father during his final year. The points to the perpetuating cycle of caste that cannot be overcome through education. This shakes her faith in the system and her own choices, leading her to decide to fight against the systemic issues that continue to dehumanise people in manual scavenging role, especially through the lens of caste.

