

Examining the Lived Experiences and Caste-Based Occupational Health Outcomes of Manual Scavengers in India

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Introduction

- Manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation in which individuals manually clean human excreta from open drains, dry latrines, and septic tanks. ²
- This occupation is predominantly performed by Dalits ³, a historically marginalized caste group, formerly known as the ‘Untouchables’ in India.
- Dalits have been generationally condemned to such stigmatized and dangerous labor— subjecting them to extreme social discrimination, occupational hazards, and disparaging health inequities.
- This study examines the intersection of caste-based exclusion and the health among male manual scavengers in India— primarily highlighting their experiences of psychological distress, social isolation ¹, and physical health consequences.



Methodology

Sample

- 32 male and female Dalit manual scavengers in Dharavi.
- Recruited using snowball and purposive sampling.

Data Collection

- Semi-structured ethnographic interviews.
- Interviews examined demographics, family background, occupational experiences, and barriers to mobility.

Data Analysis

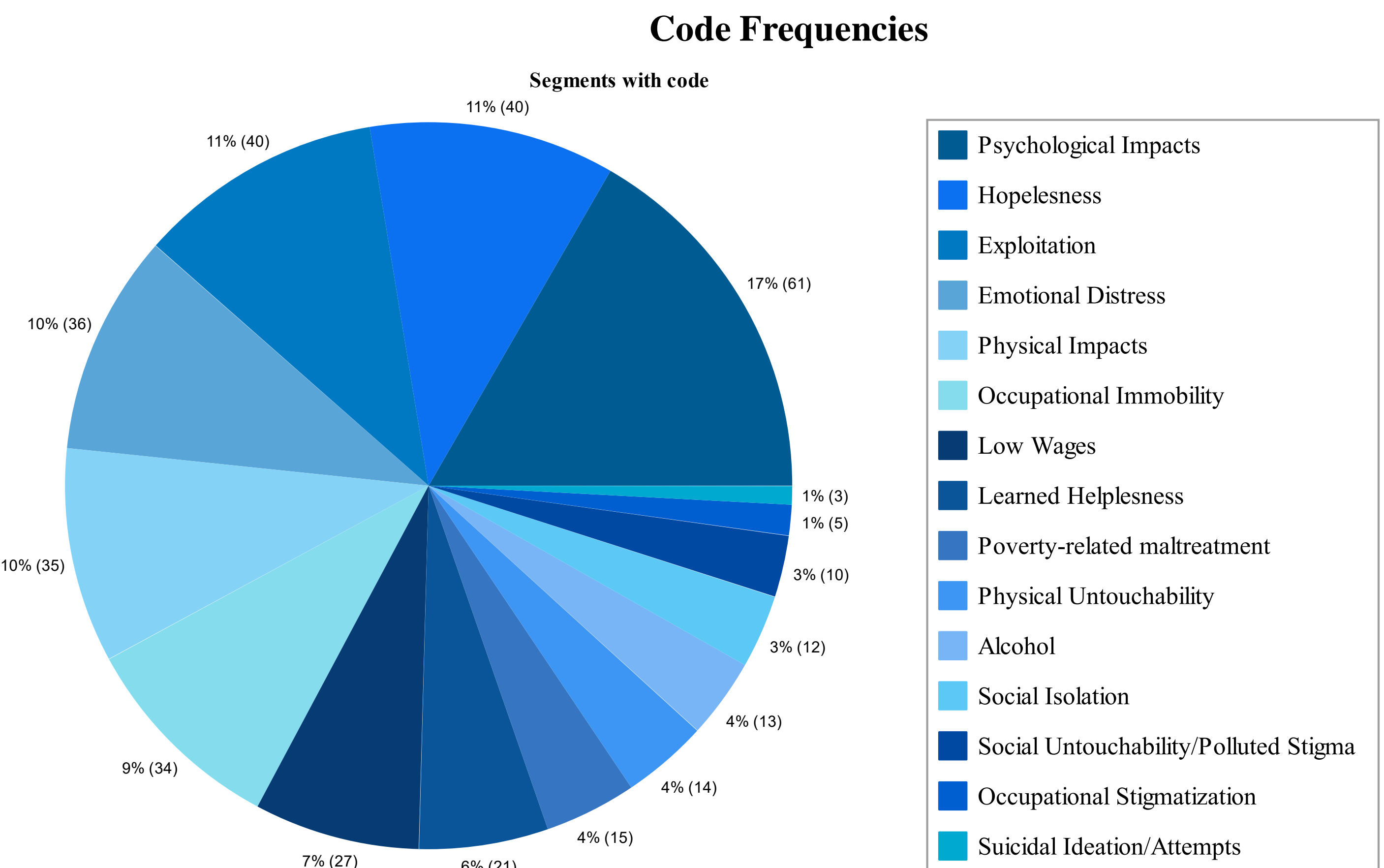
- 3 interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis.
- Qualitative coding identified recurring themes related to discrimination, health impacts, and occupational difficulties.

Research was approved by the FSU Institutional Review Board

Preliminary Results

Preliminary thematic analysis of ethnographic interviews identified various recurring themes related to the social and health impacts of manual scavenging.

Caste-Based Stigmatization	Participants reported being labeled as “polluted,” leading to physical segregation and social exclusion.
Occupational Exploitation	Low wages and extreme working conditions create barriers to occupational mobility, reinforcing poverty cycles.
Psychological Distress	Widespread hopelessness, isolation, and suicidal ideation indicate severe mental health consequences
Physical Health Impacts	Commonly reported issues include chronic pain, skin infections, dizziness, and respiratory illnesses due to direct exposure to human waste.
Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms	Many scavengers rely on alcohol dependency as a means to cope with occupational and social stigma.



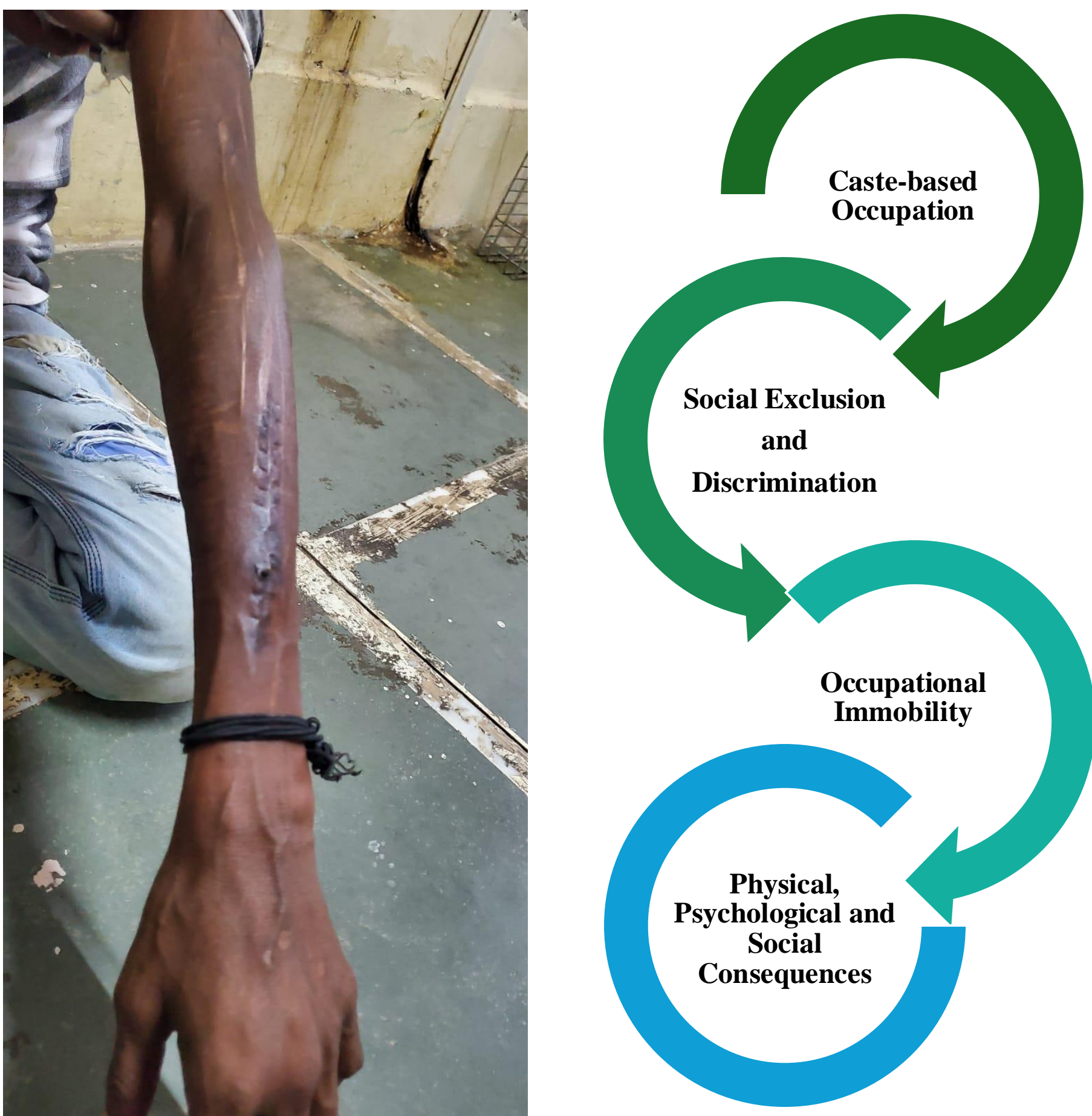
Thematic Frequencies: Incidences of various vulnerabilities associated with caste-based occupation as reported by participants through interviews.

Discussion

- Preliminary findings indicate that manual scavenging persists as not only an occupational hazard, but a deep-rooted social practice of caste-based control.
- The high levels of exploitation, social discrimination, and psychological distress experienced by participants highlight the caste-based, perpetuating cycle of systemic discrimination and social immobility.
- The intersection of caste and labor exploitation poses extreme health disparities among manual scavengers— particularly experiences of mental illness as a result of learned helplessness, substance-abuse, and suicidal ideation.
- These findings align with existing literature on caste-based labor stratification in India, emphasizing the urgent need for policy intervention and the dismantling of caste-based exclusion.



Physical Health Impacts: Occupational-related injuries on a participant's arm.



References

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