



Menace of Manual Scavenging

This editorial is based on [“Murder in the sewer: on deaths during manual cleaning of sewage”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 27/08/2022. It talks about the menace of Manual Scavenging in India and related challenges.

For Prelims: Manual Scavenging, Prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013, National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989, Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge, Swachhta Abhiyan App, Bio-composting, Bandicoot

For Mains: Prevalence Of Manual Scavenging in India, Steps taken to tackle the Menace of Manual Scavenging

The **occupation of sanitation work in India is intrinsically linked with the system of hierarchy and exclusion: [The Caste System](#)**. As [B R Ambedkar](#) pointed out, caste leads not only to the division of labour but of labourers as well.

All cleaning jobs are viewed as lowly and are assigned to people from the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. **Dalits** are mainly employed as sanitation workers – [manual scavengers](#), drain cleaners, garbage collectors, and road sweepers.

As per recent data by the government, **97 percent of manual scavengers in India are Dalits**.

Although the practice of manual scavenging is banned under the [Prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013](#), the inhumane exercise continues.

Why is Manual Scavenging Still Prevalent in India?

- **Inefficient Sewage Management System:** In India, **most [municipalities](#) do not have the latest machines for cleaning the sewage systems** and thus sewage workers are required to enter the underground sewerage lines through manholes.
 - The [unskilled labourers](#), meanwhile, are much **cheaper to hire** and contractors illegally employ them at a daily wage.
- **Ineffective Implementation of Policies:** Government programmes have majorly **emphasised the financial aspect of [rehabilitation](#)** and failed to address the **caste-based oppression** and related social conditions that have perpetuated this practice for centuries.
 - Also, there are **no proper strategies put forward that liberate manual scavengers psychologically**. This pushes those in the practice to get even deeper into the practice of manual scavenging.
- **Lack of Social Mobility:** Due to **lack of basic amenities, [education](#), and employment opportunities**, manual scavengers are compelled to their job, and even society does not accept

them for community activities.

- No one offers them a job and landlords forbid them from renting their houses. This leaves them vulnerable and **prevents them from moving upward in the strata.**

What are the Effects of Manual Scavenging?

- **Social Discrimination:** Most manual scavengers are stigmatised by the community due to the nature of their job.
 - They are **regarded as [untouchable](#)** and they are forced to accept their condition.
 - This problem is much deeper as **their children are also discriminated** against and forced to occupy the same work as their parents.
- **Caste Based Inequalities:** The caste is still regarded as a lower class and is excluded from moving to a better occupation.
 - As a result, the **scavenging work is seen as part of their natural occupation.**
 - Also, the marginal caste from rural areas moving to urban areas to seek a better livelihood always end up in the same occupation.
- **Health-Related Problems:** The scavengers are exposed to gases such as **carbon dioxide, ammonia and methane.** Long exposure to these gases may lead to serious health diseases or even death.
 - They are also **exposed to various infections** in the sewer, which is also common due to the numerous bacteria residing in the sewers.
 - As per the [National Commission for Safai Karamcharis \(NCSK\)](#) database, 608 manual scavengers have died between 2013 and 2017 while cleaning septic tanks.

What are the Steps taken to tackle the Menace of Manual Scavenging?

- [The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation \(Amendment\) Bill 2020](#)
- [The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013](#)
- [The Building and Maintenance of Insanitary Latrines Act of 2013](#)
- [Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989](#)
- [Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge](#)
- [Swachhta Abhiyan App](#)

How can India Curb Manual Scavenging?

- **Proper Identification:** Manual scavenging is both a **violation of [human rights](#)** and a **[disgrace to humanity at large](#)**. State governments should therefore identify the workers who clean toxic sludge on a priority basis to ensure effective policy implementation.
- **Proactive Involvement of Stakeholders:** In order to tackle this problem it would be necessary to involve all the major stakeholders involved.
 - They include the **District Administrative Officers, Chief Medical Officer, NGOs and Municipal Corporation** among other relevant officials.
 - The **inclusion** of the community around the areas that are most affected into the program is also of equal importance.
 - Seeking information from officials and the community will help in coming up with an informed decision on the best way to proceed with the initiative.
- **Mass Awareness:** Conducting a workshop with locals would assist the officials in spreading awareness regarding the legal implications that are related to engaging in scavenging and having dry toilets as well as **understanding the cause of the practice.**
 - The **awareness campaigns should not only address the dangers of scavenging** but also **give the community affected an alternative method of making money.**
 - Locals can also be allowed to suggest solutions they feel comfortable with.
- **Rehabilitation and Compensation of Manual Scavengers:** Creation of more employment is one of the most important rehabilitation processes.
 - The jobs created would aim to offer equal opportunities to the locals. The jobs created also

act as a means to assimilate manual scavengers into the community.

- In 2014, a **Supreme Court** order made it mandatory for the government to identify all those who died in sewage work since 1993 and provide **Rs. 10 lakh each as compensation to their families.**

▪ **Investing in Proper Human Waste Management: Solving [solid and liquid waste segregation](#) problems, as well as [bio composting](#) at Municipal level,** are some of the ways through which we can utilise waste for the **benefit of humanity.**

- By **treating waste as an asset, rather than a liability,** manual scavenging will be reduced in the future making a way to **[Swacch Bharat and Swasth Bharat.](#)**

▪ **Robotic Scavenging:** With the help of robotics and artificial intelligence, machines can be devised that can replace humans in manual labour.

- **Bandicoot** is one such robotic machine that is engineered for cleaning any type of sewer manholes

▪ **Towards Social Integration:** The scavenging work generates little money that is not enough to educate a child. The child ends up **dropping** out and joining their parents in the same line of work.

- Implementation of schemes that would help these children finish their studies would be an effective strategy in discarding the theories and myths associated with manual scavenging.

Drishti Mains Question

Although the practice of manual scavenging is banned in India, the inhumane exercise continues. Critically analyse.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Q. 'Rashtriya Garima Abhiyaan' is a national campaign to (2016)

- (a)** rehabilitate the homeless and destitute persons and provide them with suitable sources of livelihood
- (b)** release the sex workers from their practice and provide them with alternative sources of livelihood
- (c)** eradicate the practice of manual scavenging and rehabilitate the manual scavengers
- (d)** release the bonded labourers from their bondage and rehabilitate them

Ans: (c)