



NAMASTE Scheme

For Prelims: [NAMASTE Scheme](#), [Urban Local Bodies](#), [Scheduled Caste \(SC\)](#), [Scheduled Tribe \(ST\)](#), [AB-PMJAY](#), Sanipreneurs, [Untouchability](#), [Swachh Bharat Mission](#), [Self-help groups \(SHGs\)](#)

For Mains: Manual Scavenging in India, Government Initiatives to Curb Manual Scavenging, Rehabilitation and Employment

[Source: TH](#)

Why in News?

Recent government data as part of the [NAMASTE scheme](#), from over 3,000 [Urban Local Bodies \(ULBs\)](#), reveals that **92% of the 38,000 manual scavengers and workers** involved in hazardous sewer and septic tank cleaning across India's cities belong to [Scheduled Caste \(SC\)](#), [Scheduled Tribe \(ST\)](#), or [other backward class \(OBC\)](#) communities.

- This highlights [caste-based occupational segregation](#) and the dangers these manual scavengers face.

Definitions

- **Manual Scavenger:** A manual scavenger is anyone employed to manually clean, carry, or handle human excreta from insanitary latrines, open drains, pits, or railway tracks, before it fully decomposes, as per the [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act \(PEMSR\), 2013](#).
- **Hazardous Cleaning:** Refers to the manual cleaning of sewers or septic tanks without adequate protective gear.
- **Sanitation Workers/Safai Karamcharis:** Individuals employed in sanitation work, including waste pickers and those cleaning sewers/septic tanks, but excluding domestic workers.
- **Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs):** Workers engaged in the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.
- **Sewer Entry Professionals (SEPs):** Trained sanitation workers who clean sewers/septic tanks with **permission and proper safety equipment** are identified as SEPs.

What is the NAMASTE Scheme?

- **About:** The **National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme**, a joint initiative of the **Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE)** and the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)**, focusing on eliminating manual scavenging and promoting sanitation worker safety.
 - NAMASTE, with an outlay of Rs. 349.70 crore, aims to cover all 4800+ ULBs by 2025-26,

replacing the earlier **Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS)**.

- As per the new modified scheme, **profiling of Sewer/Septic Tanks Workers (SSWs)** engaged by ULB would be undertaken.
- These SSWs are proposed to receive occupational safety training, personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, and health insurance [Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana \(AB-PMJAY\)](#).
- **Goal of NAMASTE:** The goal is to profile SSWs engaged by ULB, provide safety training and equipment, and offer capital subsidies to turn them into "**sanipreneurs**" or **sanitation entrepreneurs**, promoting self-employment and formal employment opportunities.
 - A key objective is to **eliminate fatalities in sanitation work** and improve the living conditions and health of sanitation workers.
 - Between **2019 and 2023, at least 377 people** across the country have **died from hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks**, according to government data tabled in Parliament.
- **Progress of Profiling:** As of September 2024, 3,326 ULBs have profiled approximately 38,000 SSWs. 283 ULBs reported zero SSWs, while 2,364 reported fewer than 10 SSWs.
 - **State-Level Efforts:** 12 states and Union Territories, including Kerala and Rajasthan, have completed the profiling process.
 - 17 states, such as Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, are still in the process.
 - Some states like Tamil Nadu and Odisha are running their own separate programmes and not reporting to the Centre.
 - The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs estimates around **100,000 SSWs are currently employed in India's urban areas** based on urban population statistics and decadal growth rates.

What is Manual Scavenging?

- **About:** Manual scavenging (MS) refers to the practice of removing human excreta by hand from sewers or septic tanks. Although banned in India under the **PEMSR Act, 2013** the practice persists.
 - The Act prohibits employing anyone for **cleaning or handling human excreta and broadens** the definition to include cleaning septic tanks, ditches, or railway tracks.
 - It recognizes the practice as "**dehumanising**" and seeks to address the historical injustices faced by manual scavengers.
- **Efforts to Reduce MS:**
 - **Constitutional Safeguards:**
 - **Article 14:** Guarantees [equal protection of the law](#) for all citizens, ensuring **manual scavengers are not subjected to discriminatory practices** based on caste or occupation.
 - **Article 16:** Ensures [equal employment opportunities](#) for all, **prohibiting caste-based discrimination** in government jobs, promoting the economic upliftment of manual scavengers.
 - **Article 17:** Abolishes [untouchability](#) and punishes those enforcing it. This protects **manual scavengers from caste-based exclusion** and stigmatisation.
 - **Article 21:** Ensures the [right to live with dignity](#), offering manual scavengers the legal grounds to demand protection from dehumanising work.
 - **Article 23:** Protects against [forced labour](#), ensuring manual scavengers cannot be coerced into working under harsh conditions without proper wages or safety standards.
 - **Legal Framework:**
 - **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:** The Act prohibits manual scavenging, including the construction of insanitary latrines, and mandates the demolition or conversion of such latrines into sanitary ones.
 - It also provides for the identification and rehabilitation of manual scavengers through skill development, financial assistance, and alternative employment.
 - **SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989:** It criminalises the employment of

scheduled castes in manual scavenging.

- **Government Initiatives and Schemes:**

- **Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SESRM):** This scheme provides assistance to identified manual scavengers to help them transition into self-employment.
- **National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC):** NSKFDC provides concessional loans and financial support for the socio-economic upliftment of Safai Karamcharis and their families.
- **Rashtriya Garima Abhiyaan:** It is a national campaign to **eradicate the practice of manual scavenging and** rehabilitate the manual scavengers.
- **Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0:** Encourages ULBs to ensure the safety of sanitation workers, focusing on mechanisation and the promotion of protective measures.
 - **SafaiMitra Suraksha Challenge (SSC)** launched as part of the [Swachh Bharat Mission](#), this initiative encourages cities to mechanise sewer cleaning and prevent fatalities by reducing manual intervention.
- **The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM):** Guideline suggests that at least 10% of [self-help groups \(SHGs\)](#) formed should be of persons engaged in vulnerable occupations, including sanitation workers.
 - These SHGs would then be empowered to run their own enterprises.

How does Caste-Based Occupation Perpetuate Manual Scavenging in India?

- **Caste Hierarchy and Social Discrimination:** Dalits are at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the Indian varna system. They are often associated with tasks deemed **"polluting," such as handling human excrement.**
 - This caste-based discrimination not only ostracises them from mainstream society but also **subjects them to exploitative labour practices.**
 - The stigma attached to their work exacerbates their marginalisation, as they face discrimination from both upper castes and, at times, within their communities.
- **Jajmani System and Inherited Occupations:** The traditional **jajmani system, which reinforces inherited caste-based roles,** plays a vital role in perpetuating manual scavenging.
 - This inheritance **normalises manual scavenging** within their communities, making it difficult to escape these occupations.
- **Lack of Alternatives:** Many Dalits in manual scavenging continue this degrading work due to a lack of **viable alternatives.** Families depend on meagre food handouts, as **caste discrimination limits job opportunities,** perpetuating poverty and exclusion.
- **Structural Barriers and Discrimination:** Legal frameworks like the [Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955](#), aim to prohibit caste-based discrimination, but enforcement is weak. Despite the introduction of the **PEMSR Act, 2013, the conviction rate remains very low, further exacerbating the problem.**
 - **Manual scavengers often lack access to basic rights** and services such as water, education, and healthcare, reinforcing the caste nature of this occupation and hindering their ability to pursue alternative livelihoods.
- **Discrimination in Education:** Children from manual scavenging families face discrimination in schools, leading to **high dropout rates.** They are often treated as **outcasts, subjected to bullying, and forced into labour themselves.**
 - This cycle of discrimination limits educational opportunities, further ensuring that the next generation remains trapped in caste-based occupations.

What are the Challenges of Abolition and Rehabilitation of Manual Scavenging in India?

- **Lack of Understanding and Awareness:** The PEMSR Act, 2013 clearly defines manual scavenging. However, many government officials are **unaware of who qualifies as a manual scavenger.**
 - Often, these individuals work under the titles of scavengers or sweepers, leading to concealed and inaccurate data collection.

- **Inefficiency in Demolishing Insanitary Latrines:** The root cause of manual scavenging are **insanitary latrines that remain unaddressed** due to slow and ineffective administrative actions.
 - According to [Socio Economic and Caste Census \(SECC\) 2011](#), India has **over a million of insanitary latrines**, many of which still dispose of **night soil** (term for human waste that was collected from areas without sewer systems or septic tanks) into **open drains and are manually serviced**.
 - The mandated conversion or demolition of these latrines has not been effectively implemented across states.
- **Inadequate Sewage and Drainage Systems:** Despite advancements in other sectors, **wastewater management** and drainage systems **in India remain underdeveloped**. Poor planning and insufficient investment in modern sewage systems perpetuate the need for manual scavenging.
- **Failure to Enforce Legal Prohibitions:** The Indian government has been ineffective in penalising those who continue to employ manual scavengers illegally.
 - Laws like the **Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993**, and PMSR Act, 2013, are routinely ignored, allowing the practice to persist.
- **Barriers in Accessing the Criminal Justice System:** Dalits and marginalised communities face significant barriers to justice, as police often ignore or refuse to investigate crimes against manual scavengers, particularly when perpetrators are from dominant castes.
 - **This systemic bias undermines legal protections** and discourages victims from seeking redress.
- **Harassment from Employers and Community:** Manual scavengers seeking to leave the occupation often **encounter threats, physical violence, and social exclusion**.
 - Community pressure and retaliation from dominant caste groups keep individuals trapped in exploitative conditions, making it difficult for them to abandon manual scavenging.
- **Scarcity of Alternative Employment Opportunities:** Manual scavengers rely on daily donations for survival, making it difficult to leave the occupation without **immediate access to alternative livelihoods**.
 - Social and economic barriers, including caste and gender discrimination, limit **their ability to secure new employment**. **Corruption further exacerbates these challenges**, with bribes often required to obtain reserved government positions.
- **Inadequate Data:** Government surveys have been ineffective in accurately identifying and documenting the number of manual scavengers.
 - Discrepancies in reports from various sources highlight a significant underestimation of the problem. Without comprehensive and regular surveys, targeted interventions remain challenging.

Way Forward

- **Link Rehabilitation to Social Security Schemes:** Link rehabilitation programs with the [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(MNREGA\)](#) and other social security laws. This will facilitate access to employment for scavenging communities, helping to eliminate the practice.
- **Enhance Coordination:** Establish a coordination committee involving key ministries to facilitate a unified approach to **abolishing manual scavenging**. Strengthening the role of NGOs and community organisations can help enforce the Act at the local level.
- **Address Railway Practices:** The Indian Railways, as a **significant contributor to manual scavenging**, must transition to **bio-toilets** and provide regular progress reports to Parliament to ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Auditing Mechanisms:** Form a national-level monitoring committee to regularly oversee the implementation of the NAMASTE scheme and conduct comprehensive social audits to identify and address systemic issues.
- **Revise Legislative Framework:** Amend existing laws to ensure consistency and enhance protections for manual scavengers. Encourage accountability among monitoring agencies.
- **Invest in Technology and Resources:** Allocate sufficient funds to local authorities for procuring advanced cleaning technologies, thereby reducing manual intervention and improving working conditions for sanitation workers.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. What are the systemic barriers that hinder the effective implementation of laws prohibiting manual scavenging in India? Discuss possible solutions.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

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)

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