



Mains Practice Question

Q. “The shadow of untouchability still lingers in the alleys of progress.” Analyze the challenges in enforcing laws against manual scavenging and evaluate the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. (250 words)

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Approach:

- Start with a brief introduction to the issue of manual scavenging in India.
- Analyze the challenges in enforcing laws against manual scavenging.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs.
- Conclude with a suitable way forward.

Introduction

Although the Constitution abolished untouchability under **Article 17** and laws such as the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013** criminalize the practice, the persistence of 58,098 identified manual scavengers (2021)—with 75% being women—reflects the shadow of untouchability continues in new forms

Body

Challenges in Enforcing Laws Against Manual Scavenging

- **Structural Challenges:**
 - **Caste-based stigma:** The practice is still linked to Dalit communities, making it hard to eradicate due to entrenched social hierarchies.
 - **Dependence on informal systems:** Local bodies often rely on manual workers to clean septic tanks, drains, and sewers despite mechanization claims.
 - **Weak monitoring mechanisms:** Implementation lies with municipalities, but oversight remains weak.
- **Financial Constraints:**
 - **Insufficient allocation:** Budgetary provisions under schemes like the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) are meagre.
 - **Delayed compensation:** Despite Supreme Court directions in *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014) mandating ₹10 lakh compensation for sewer deaths, delays and under-reporting are rampant.
- **Regulatory Weaknesses:**
 - **Under-reporting of cases:** Government data claims “zero manual scavengers” in many states, while NGOs like Safai Karamchari Andolan highlight thousands.
 - **Accountability deficit:** Rare prosecution of officials or contractors responsible for engaging manual scavengers.
 - **Fragmented policy framework:** Sanitation, labour, and social justice ministries overlap without clear responsibility.

Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Programs

▪ **Success:**

- **Legal framework** (2013 Act) has criminalized the practice, creating deterrence.
- **NAMASTE Scheme (2022) & Safaimitra Suraksha** Challenge encouraged mechanization, reducing direct human entry.
- **Technological innovations** like Bandicoot Robot and Vacuum Trucks have been deployed in several cities.
- **Skill training & livelihood schemes** like Swachhta Udyami Yojana (SUY), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) enabled alternate employment.
- **Awareness campaigns (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan)** reduced stigma and promoted dignity.
- **Institutional mechanisms** like the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis strengthened monitoring and grievance redressal.

▪ **Limitations:**

- **Poor coverage:** As per 2021 data, only about 58,000 manual scavengers identified, while independent estimates are far higher.
- **Lack of livelihood diversification:** Many trained workers fail to secure sustainable jobs due to social stigma and lack of demand for their new skills.
- **Inadequate rehabilitation support:** Rehabilitation benefits often fail to translate into practice due to bureaucratic and administrative hurdles.

Way Forward

- **Technological substitution:** Scaling up mechanised cleaning equipment with accountability for ULBs.
- **Stringent enforcement:** Criminal liability for officials/contractors engaging manual scavengers.
- **Holistic rehabilitation:** Beyond skill training, ensure social integration, credit support, and education for families.
- **Awareness campaigns:** Change mindsets through caste-sensitivity training and community participation.
- **Independent monitoring:** Empower civil society and NHRC for effective oversight.

Conclusion:

As **Ambedkar** asserted, “Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy.” The persistence of manual scavenging indicates the limitations of social democracy despite legal safeguards. True progress demands not only laws and schemes but also dignity, mechanisation, and social reform to finally erase this inhuman practice.