



Ending Manual Scavenging

For Prelims: [Manual Scavenging](#), [NAMASTE Scheme](#), [Article 17](#), [Article 21](#), [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013](#), [Hepatitis](#), [Tetanus](#), [Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan](#), [Swachh Bharat Mission](#), [PM-DAKSH](#), [MGNREGA](#).

For Mains: Key challenges faced by manual scavengers and steps taken to address them. Additional measures needed to end manual scavenging.

[Source: TH](#)

Why in News?

A **Ministry of Social Justice study** analyzed **54 hazardous cleaning deaths** linked to [manual scavenging](#) (out of 150 nationwide) across **8 States/UTs** during **2022-2023**.

What are the Key Findings of the Study?

- **Lack of Safety Gear:** In **90% of cases** (49 out of 54), **no safety equipment** was provided. The rest had minimal protection—**gloves** in 5 cases and **gloves with gumboots** in 1.
 - Most deaths occurred in the absence of **mechanized equipment** such as **suction pumps** or **robotic cleaners**.
- **Institutional Negligence:** In most cases, **agencies lacked equipment readiness**, and **awareness drives** were either **absent** or **incomplete**, even in places where they were conducted.
- **No Informed Consent:** Many workers **entered sewers without consent**, and even when **written consent** was taken, they were **not informed of associated risks**.
- **Exploitative Hiring Practices:** Most workers were **hired informally** on **individual contracts**, with only a few as **direct government** or **outsourced PSU employees**.

What is Manual Scavenging and the Legal Framework Addressing It?

- **About:** **Manual scavenging** refers to the practice of **manually handling or cleaning human excreta**, often from **insanitary toilets, open drains, pits, or railway tracks**.
- **Current Status:** According to the government, **manual scavenging has officially ended**, and the current challenge lies in addressing the issue of **hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks**.
 - The [NAMASTE scheme](#) has identified **84,902 sewer and septic tank workers** across **36 States and Union Territories** in India.
- **Violation of Fundamental Rights:** **Manual scavenging** violates **fundamental rights**, particularly [Article 17](#) (abolition of untouchability) and [Article 21](#) (right to life with dignity).
- **Legal Framework:**
 - **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act**,

2013 (PEMSR): India **banned** it under the [PEMSR Act, 2013](#), which **prohibits any individual** from **manually handling human excreta** in any form until its **final disposal**.

- The Act identifies manual scavenging as a **dehumanizing practice**.
- **SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989:** It criminalizes the **employment of Scheduled Castes** in manual scavenging.
- **Supreme Court (SC) Guidelines:** In [Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India \(2023\)](#), the **SC** directed the **Union and State governments** to **eliminate manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning** across the country. **SC guidelines** included:
 - **Rehabilitation:** Rs 30 lakh for deaths, Rs 10–20 lakh for disabilities, plus **jobs for kin** and **education for dependents**.
 - **Accountability:** **Penalties and contract cancellations** for negligence.
 - **NALSA:** To oversee **compensation disbursement** and create standard models.
 - **Transparency:** Launch of a **portal** to track **deaths, compensation, and rehabilitation**.

What are the Key Challenges Faced by Manual Scavengers?

- **Health Risks:** Exposure to human waste and toxic gases like **hydrogen sulphide** makes manual scavengers vulnerable to [Hepatitis](#), [Tetanus](#), [Cholera](#), and [asphyxiation](#).
- **Social Stigma:** Seen as **untouchables**, they face **caste-based discrimination**, reinforcing **social exclusion** and the **caste system**.
- **Economic Challenges:** Paid **below minimum wage**, often on **contractual/daily-wage** basis, with no **job security** or **social protection**, trapping them in **poverty**.
- **Double Discrimination:** **Women** face **gender-based exploitation**, including **sexual harassment, abuse, and economic inequality**.
- **Psychological Issues:** **Social stigma** and poor work conditions cause **anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem**.
- **Substance Abuse:** Many turn to **drug use** to cope with **stress, humiliation, and physical hardship**, worsening their **health**.

India's Initiatives to Curb Manual Scavenging

- [NAMASTE \(National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem\)](#)
- [Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge](#)
- [Swachhta Abhiyan App](#)
- [National Commission for Safai Karamchari](#)
- **Technological Initiatives:**
 - [Bandicoot Robot](#): Remotely or **autonomously cleans and unclogs** sewer lines.
 - [Endobot & Swasth AI](#): Detect and prevent pipeline issues like **contamination and overflows**.
 - [Vacuum Trucks](#): Remove sewage using **powerful suction**, avoiding manual entry.

What Effective Measures can be Taken to End Manual Scavenging in India?

- **Strict Enforcement of Laws:** Strictly enforce the **PEMSR Act, 2013** with **stringent penalties** for violators, **treat sewer deaths as culpable homicide**, and **ensure compensation** in line with **Supreme Court directives**.
- **Complete Mechanization:** **Ensure 100% mechanized cleaning** with **suction pumps, jetting machines, and robots** by funding **equipment procurement** under [Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0](#) and equipping all [urban local bodies](#).
- **Rehabilitation & Alternative Livelihoods:** Train manual scavengers under [PM-DAKSH](#) for roles in **waste management**, and **machine operation**, with **preferential hiring** in **urban bodies** under [MGNREGA](#).
- **Health Screenings:** Conduct regular health screenings for sanitation workers in all **Urban Local**

Bodies (ULBs), focusing on **respiratory** and **skin-related ailments**, along with defined **treatment** and **prevention protocols**.

Conclusion

Manual scavenging persists despite **legal bans**, exposing systemic failures in **enforcement, mechanization, and rehabilitation**. Strict **implementation of laws**, complete **mechanization**, and **dignified alternative livelihoods** are crucial to eradicate this **dehumanizing practice**. **Political will, technology adoption, and societal change** must converge to uphold **sanitation workers' rights** and **dignity** under India's **constitutional framework**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Analyze the social and economic challenges faced by manual scavengers and suggest a sustainable rehabilitation roadmap.

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)

Mains

Q. What are the impediments in disposing of the huge quantities of discarded solid waste which are continuously being generated? How do we safely remove the toxic wastes that have been accumulating in our habitable environment? (2018)

Q. "To ensure effective implementation of policies addressing the water, sanitation and hygiene needs the identification of the beneficiary segments is to be synchronized with anticipated outcomes." Examine the statement in the context of the WASH scheme. (2017)