



## Manual Scavenging in India

**For Prelims:** [Supreme Court of India](#), [NAMASTE](#), [Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge](#), [Swachhta Abhiyan App](#), [National Commission for Safai Karamchari](#)

**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?

The [Supreme Court \(SC\) of India](#) has fined Delhi's Public Works Department (PWD) Rs 5 lakh after labourers were found cleaning sewers outside its premises without protective gear.

- The Court held this to be a violation of directives issued by the Supreme Court in its landmark 2023 judgment ([Dr. Balram Singh v/s Union of India](#)), aimed at eradicating the **inhuman and caste-based practice of manual scavenging and hazardous sewer cleaning**.

### What are the SC's Directives in Dr. Balram Singh v/s Union of India, 2023 Case?

- **Fresh, Reliable Survey:** Conduct a comprehensive national survey to identify manual scavengers across states and union territories.
- **Eradication Measures:** Ordered for **complete mechanisation of sewer and septic tank cleaning**. Human entry into sewers only in exceptional cases where mechanical cleaning is not possible.
- **Protective Gear & Safety:** No worker to be sent into drains, septic tanks, or sewers without proper protective equipment. Absence of protective gear will be treated as a violation of [Articles 21 and 23](#).
- **Rehabilitation & Compensation:** Rehabilitation of families of persons who die in sewer or septic tank work to be treated as a **constitutional right**.
  - Compensation to dependents of deceased or disabled workers must be enhanced and disbursed promptly.
  - Integrate rehabilitation with wider social security measures under schemes like [NAMASTE \(National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem\)](#). Provide scholarships and educational opportunities for children of manual scavengers.
- **Awareness & Reporting:** Launch public awareness campaigns against the practice. Create a **centralized online portal** to track deaths, rehabilitation status, and disbursement of compensation.
- **Implementation of Welfare Laws:** Ensure full enforcement of the [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation \(PEMSR\) Act, 2013](#).

### What is Manual Scavenging?

- **About:** According to the **PEMSR Act, 2013**, it is the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing, or handling human excreta from insanitary latrines, open drains, pits, railway tracks or any other notified space.
- **Legal Framework:** It is officially banned in India since the **Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993**.
  - **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013** bans employment of manual scavengers, ensures their rehabilitation, and makes **every offence cognizable and non-bailable**.
- **Current Status ( 2024):** Out of 766 districts, 732 have declared themselves manual scavenging-free, yet as of 2024, around 58,000 manual scavengers remain identified in India.
- **Reasons for the Persistence of Manual Scavenging in India:**
  - **Caste-based discrimination:** Historically associated with **Dalit communities**, making it a hereditary occupation.
    - Deep-rooted **untouchability and caste bias** force communities to remain trapped in this occupation.
  - **Poverty and Lack of Alternatives:** Many workers have no other source of livelihood.
  - **Incomplete Mechanisation:** Machines for sewer and septic tank cleaning are still not widely available or accessible, especially in smaller towns.
  - **Poor enforcement of laws:** Despite the 1993 and 2013 Acts, implementation on the ground is weak.
  - **Contractor System:** Workers are often hired informally through contractors, bypassing accountability.
  - **Gaps in surveys and Data:** Inconsistent and under-reported surveys lead to underestimation of the problem, masking its true scale.

## What are India's Initiatives to Curb Manual Scavenging?

- [Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge](#)
- [Swachhta Abhiyan App](#)
- [Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan](#)
- [National Commission for Safai Karamchari](#)
- [Swachhta Udyami Yojana \(SUY\)](#)
- [Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)
- [NAMASTE \(National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem\)](#)
- **Technological Initiatives:**
  - **Bandicoot Robot:** Autonomously or remotely cleans, inspects, and removes blockages in sewer lines.
  - **Endobot & Swasth AI:** Diagnose pipelines to detect and mitigate water contamination, wastage, and sewer overflows.
  - **Robo-Drain System:** Automated robotic technology for cleaning underground sewers.
  - **Vacuum Trucks:** Use powerful pumps to remove sewage waste without human entry.

## What are the Major Challenges Faced by Manual Scavengers?

- **Health Risks:** Exposure to human waste and toxic gases like hydrogen sulphide makes manual scavengers highly vulnerable to diseases such as **Hepatitis, Tetanus, Cholera, and asphyxiation**.
- **Social Stigma:** Labeled as “**untouchables**,” they face deep-rooted caste-based discrimination, reinforcing social exclusion and systemic marginalization.
- **Economic Challenges:** **Paid below minimum wage** and often employed on daily-wage or contractual terms, they **lack job security, social protection, and alternative livelihood options**, keeping them trapped in poverty.
- **Double Discrimination:** Women face both **caste- and gender-based exploitation**, including sexual harassment, abuse, and economic inequality.
- **Psychological Issues:** Continuous social stigma, harsh work conditions, and marginalization lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.
- **Substance Abuse:** Many resort to alcohol or drugs to cope with stress, humiliation, and physical

hardship, further impacting their health and well-being.

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

- **Mechanisation of Sanitation Work: Promote 100% mechanized cleaning of sewers, septic tanks, drains, garbage lifting, sludge handling, and solid & medical waste disposal.**
  - Equip Sanitation Response Units (SRUs) with machines, vehicles, and devices for mechanized cleaning. Train professionally skilled manpower for mechanized operations.
- **Institutional Framework:** Appoint a Responsible Sanitation Authority in every district to oversee sanitation and mechanization. Set up SRUs in each municipality with a 24x7 helpline to report blockages in sewers and septic tanks.
- **Strict Enforcement of Laws:** Strictly enforce the PEMSAR Act, 2013 with stringent penalties for violators, treat sewer deaths as culpable homicide, and ensure compensation in line with Supreme Court directives.
  - The [National Human Rights Commission](#) recommends maintaining the distinction between sanitation workers and manual scavengers under the 2013 Act. It also recommends empanelling and regulating the **de-sledging market**.
- **Financial Support & Incentives: Provide Concessional loans under Swachhta Udyami Yojana (SUY) for sanitation workers, dependents, and urban bodies to procure sanitation equipment and vehicles.**
  - **Expand the reach of the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS)** for sanitation-related projects to support sustainable livelihoods.
- **Sustainable 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.

### ***Drishti Mains Question:***

**Q.** Critically examine the challenges in eliminating manual scavenging in India despite the existence of legal safeguards.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

### **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)

PDF Refernece URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/manual-scavenging-in-india-3>

