

A Glimpse of Manual Scavenging in India

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Abstract

Across India, manual scavenging and its allied forms—the manual cleaning of dry latrines, sewers, manholes and septic tanks, abstraction of debris from sewage canals and any interaction with excreta—are openly prevalent, defined as a “cultural vocation”. “In India, every five days, a manual scavenger dies in a sewer, septic tank or a manhole,” the report verbally expressed. However, its scope was constrained as its primary source of data was statistics from NCSK, which has disarrayed information organised arbitrarily. The few key features of the Act Prohibits the expression or maintenance of insanitary toilets, Prohibits the engagement or employment of anyone as a manual scavenger, Violations could result in a years’ imprisonment or a fine of INR 50,000 or both. The press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has verbally expressed that a Task Force was constituted for carrying out a National Survey of manual scavengers in 2018 in 170 identified districts of 18 states. The right technology is considered as one of the solution to eradicate this scourge. In spite of that, the social and gender issues should be abolished by educating pupil about this ill.

Keywords: Manual scavengers, manholes, insanitary latrines, health issues.

Introduction

Across India, manual scavenging and its allied forms—the manual cleaning of dry latrines, sewers, manholes and septic tanks, abstraction of debris from sewage canals and any interaction with excreta—are openly prevalent, defined as a “cultural vocation” annexed to a few make-believe lower castes—Hindu Dalits, a few Dalit Muslims and some converted Dalit Christians. In India, this affair is hazardous, unsafe, unsanitary, degraded and above all, illicitly proscribed by Parliament a few years ago. The level of susceptibility increases as we peregrinate from rural to urban areas. However, reports designate that these days; there is incremented fatality in rural India, as well.¹

The data from the National Commission for Safai Karmacharis (NCSK) revealed appalling facts on the pattern of the deaths of manual scavengers from January 2017 to September 2018 and were widely shared by media houses and convivial media users. “In India, every five days, a manual scavenger dies in a sewer, septic tank or a manhole,” the report verbally expressed. However, its scope was constrained as its primary source of data was statistics from NCSK, which has disarrayed information organised arbitrarily.



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Manual Scavenger at work—A bitter truth of reality: The two major Acts have been since 1993 by Parliament to ban and control manual scavenging. One of the Act passed by Narsimha Rao Government in 1993 created a history in the legislation banning manual scavenging altogether and aimed at rehabilitation of scavengers followed by passing of another Act in 2013 by UPA II after it was reported that manual scavenging still persists despite a slow progress.²

According to the India census of 2011, there are more than 2.6 million dry latrines in the country. Along with that toilets with human excreta flushed in drains is 13, 14,652 and 7, 94,390 dry latrines are cleaned manually. It has as well been identified that seventy three percent of these are in rural areas and twenty seven in urban areas.

The few key features of the Act are

Prohibits the expression or maintenance of insanitary toilets

Prohibits the engagement or employment of anyone as a manual scavenger

Violations could result in a years' imprisonment or a fine of INR 50,000 or both

Prohibits a person from being engaged or employed for hazardous cleaning of a sewer or a septic tank³

Offences under Act are cognizable and non-bailable calls for a survey of manual of scavengers in urban and rural areas within a time limit framework. While the Act is encouraging in that it focuses on the duty of official to ensure its implementation, it does not outline administrative measures beyond conduct rules that can be imposed if officials do not implement the Act.

The mundane accidents include falls/slips fire or explosion, oxygen depletion, heat stress, drowning, asphyxiation arising from gas, gas poisoning, vapour and entrapment by free flowing solids. Amongst these hazardous gases etc are facilely overlooked or neglected leading to earnest causalities.⁴

Definition: Manual scavenging refers to the unsafe and manual removal of raw (fresh and untreated) human excreta from buckets or other containers that are used as toilets or from the pits of simple pit latrines.

According to the Indian Law, 1993, Manual scavengers means a person engaged or employed at

the commencement of this Act or any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor for manually cleaning carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the central government or a state government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed, and the expression 'manual scavenging' shall be construed accordingly.⁵

The prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, defines a manual scavenger as an individual employed by a local authority or agency for manually cleaning, carrying and disposing of human excreta from insanitary latrines.²

Categories of Sanitation Workers: A caste predicated and hereditary vocation, which is bequeathed, as a legacy from one generation to the next; "manual scavenging" has been an age-old routine for this community, which is untouched by technological advancement in sanitary practices.

i. Sewer Cleaners: These cleaners are involved in unblocking and cleaning of the permissive wastewater drains. The work is need based (pluvial season) and infrequently for preventive maintenance. The sewer gas is a complex amalgamation of toxic and non toxic flatulency engendered and accumulated in sewage system by the decomposition of organic home or industrial waste.

ii. Latrine Cleaners: They are involved in cleaning the process of evacuating dry/single-pit latrines preferably in rural areas. The process involves daily amassment and convey/evacuating of faecal matter.

iii. Faecal Sludge Handling: The scavengers muddled in faecal sludge by emptying, collecting and transporting human waste from septic tanks. The work is carried out on demand. The frequency of de-sludging ranges from six months to 10 years.

India does not even have categorical licit provisions cognate to the management of faecal sludge, additionally called septage in municipal parlance, albeit a number of laws cover sanitation accommodations and environmental regulations.⁶

iv. Railway Cleaners: These employees cleans the human excreta i.e. remains of a train that has ended its journey, leftover food, packets and paper boxes

from the track as well as cleaning of the railway toilets. All these activities are carried out several times a day. These workers are employed by private contractors to whom the India Railways has outsourced. Most of the time when the water doesn't get the job done or the drains get clogged, the cleaners have to scoop up the excreta with ply boards using their bare hands without any precautions.⁷

- v. **Treatment Plant Workers:** Treatment plant workers maintain and operate sewage and faecal sludge treatment plants on a quotidian footing. Workers are mostly in urban areas spread across India – working in the 527 STPs/FSTPs.⁸
- vi. **Community and Public Toilet Cleaners:** These workers are engaged in maintaining the public toilets on daily basis. The workers belong to the rural and urban areas of slums and public convenience shelters. The task of these cleaners (halalkhors) is still the same as of colonial era.⁹

Statistics on Manual Scavengers in India:

According to the findings of the socio-economic and caste census, 2011, the Ministry of Rural Development (Government of India) has revealed that that a paramount number of manual scavengers were analyzed in the state of Maharashtra followed by Madhya Pradesh at second position. The other states in the line of higher number are Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Tripura, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Daman and Diu, Bihar. The census has as well acknowledged that Tamil Nadu, Kerela, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Gujrat, Assam and Manipur have no manual scavengers. These statistics are based on the number of households in the states. This survey communicates that India has 18.06 lakh manual scavengers in the country.¹⁰

The press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has verbally expressed that a Task Force was constituted for carrying out a National Survey of manual scavengers in 2018 in 170 identified districts of 18 states. The national Survey concluded in 163 of the 170 identified districts. A total of 50,644 persons registered themselves in the survey camps. It was claimed that 20,596 persons have been accepted after identification with subsequent verification as manual scavengers. Data of the identified manual scavengers is being digitized in National Safaikaramcharis Finance and Development Corporation. Besides that the data of remaining 11,757 manual scavengers were digitized upto October 2018.

Onetime cash assistance has been relinquished to 8438 identified manual scavengers.¹¹

Schemes Available for Manual Scavengers: The National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (A Government of India undertaking the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) introduced Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) and their dependents in alternative occupations by 2009. According to the updated number announced by States/UTs, 1.18 lakh manual scavengers and their dependents in 18 States/UTs were determined. One from each family of the identified manual scavenger is eligible for receiving cash assistance of Rs. 40000 immediately after their identification. The beneficiary is sanctioned to withdraw an amount of Rs. 7000 maximum in monthly instalments.

The quantum of loan upto a maximum cost of Rs. 10 lacs is permissible under this scheme and a sum of Rs. 15 lacs in case of sanitation related projects such as vaccum loader, suction machine with vehicle, garbage disposal vehicle etc. which are immensely compatible for target group with high success rate and income. The moratorium period is of two years. The repayment mode is of five years including the period of moratorium for the projects upto five years.¹²

Beneficiaries can as well avail the facility of subsequent loan from banks, if needed without capital and interest subsidy.

The training is administered to the beneficiaries for gaining new skills and entrepreneurship capabilities. The training is being provided by govt. agencies/Institutions along with the reputed specialized training agencies. The training is given as per their level of education and aptitude.¹²

Remedies: The solution, it seems, is a public-private partnership. Collaboration would work best because it would ravage the mafia of private cleaners, making them accountable

It was also found that some scavengers have endeavoured to challenge their social and economic status by transmuted their jobs. But determinately, they have to return to their pristine profession because of a social boycott and the lack of foothold from both private and governmental agencies. The law and order machinery has additionally proved inefficient.

Eradication of manual scavenging needs to be worked out on war footing. A mission for total eradication of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of manual scavengers needs to be set up and implemented by the government.

The right technology is considered as one of the solution to eradicate this scourge. In spite of that, the social and gender issues should be abolished by educating pupil about this ill.

The sewage handlers come across with multiple health issues such as respiratory and skin diseases, anaemia, jaundice, carbon monoxide poisoning and sometimes leads to death. The health issues should be taken care by the agency and safety equipments to be provided before handling. Vaccination against hepatitis A, E-Coli, Rotovirus, Norovirus must be administered to these workers to avoid deaths at young age of their life.

The construction of toilets under Swachh Bharat Mission on a large-scale was built under single pit toilets but the cleaning of these excreta is carried out by manual scavengers. Therefore, a technology based structure should be introduced to dispose of waste and reduce the figures of manual scavengers.

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