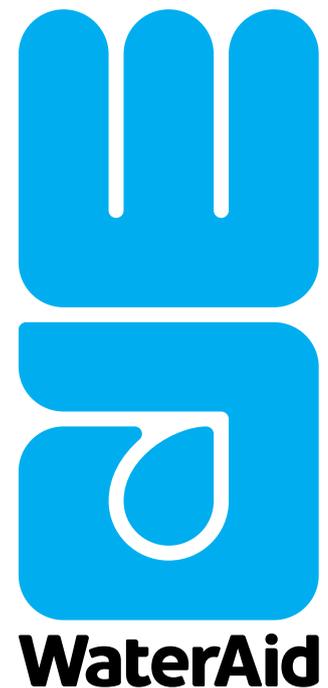




WaterAid/ CS Sharada Prasad

# The hidden world of sanitation workers in India



# Introduction

***Sanitation workers<sup>1</sup> are those who work in any part of the sanitation chain. They ensure that our contact with human waste ends when we leave the toilet, one of the most important jobs in society, and yet they remain mostly unseen and unappreciated.***

The stigmatised caste system in India remains to be the key determinant of the fate of these workers. As a result, people, families and communities mainly 'Dalits' are compelled to perform these tasks which are not just hazardous and stigmatising but also highly underpaid. This not only makes their identities confined to sanitation work they are involved in, but also pushes them to accept the burden of inheritance, stigma and exploitation as social norms.

A study conducted by Dalberg Associates<sup>2</sup> in 2018, estimated 5 million sanitation workers in various urban locations across India. They were categorised into nine broad types of sanitation workers identified along the sanitation value chain, including those engaged in cleaning sewers, cleaning latrines, faecal sludge handling, railway cleaning, work in waste treatment plants, community and public toilet cleaning, school toilet cleaning, sweeping and drain cleaning, and domestic work.

These workers often come into direct contact with human waste, working with no equipment or protection, which exposes them to a wide variety of health hazards and disease. Toxic gases, such as ammonia, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide in septic tanks and sewers can cause workers to lose consciousness or die. It is estimated that three sanitation workers die every five days in India<sup>3</sup>. Countless more suffer repeated infections and injury, and have their lives cut short by the everyday risks of the job. Family members of the sanitation workers do struggle too, both due to the stigma of the work and due to the life losses or health consequences in their families.

While government departments used to be the key employers for these workers, there are relatively new avenues of employment in today's day and age, like shopping malls. There is a change in contracting arrangements as well, where the cleaning and maintenance of public space and public conveniences is contracted out to private agencies. While the worker's attire and other visible identities under these arrangements have undergone some changes, the individuals involved in these works and their backgrounds broadly remain same.

---

<sup>1</sup> The ambit of sanitation work includes a range of work and workers' categories. These include but are not limited to cleaning and sweeping of houses, streets, roads, institutional premises, railway lines, train toilets, community and public toilets, drains and sewers. This also includes handling of municipal waste of different kinds including hazardous medical waste; emptying, carrying and disposing human waste from dry latrines; getting into and emptying septic tanks of toilets at both household and community level. There are further more such jobs like handling carcasses, cleaning leather, managing dead bodies and welcome cleaning at child birth.

<sup>2</sup> Dalberg Associates. The Sanitation Workers Project. Available at: <http://sanitationworkers.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/official-data-shows-one-manual-scavenging-death-every-five-days-5361531/>

# Reality of sanitation work in India

While there are several forms of sanitation work, one of the most challenging forms of sanitation work in India is that of manual scavenging, wherein these sanitation workers, mostly women, do come in direct contact with human faeces in different forms, without any support systems or protection gear. Historically, reforms for addressing this exploitation underwent several efforts from not only the civil society but also the state. India first banned manual scavenging in 1993 with the Employment of Manual Scavenging and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act<sup>4</sup>. In 2013, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (PEMSR)<sup>5</sup> replaced this 1993 legislation, by expanding the definition of manual scavengers to include most categories of hazardous sanitation work, and by mandating the state with responsibility for identification of persons engaged in manual scavenging, their liberation and rehabilitation<sup>6</sup>. A year later in 2014, the Supreme Court of India ruled that manual scavenging violates international human rights commitments<sup>7</sup> and strengthened the mandates of PEMS

R 2013 further. While media sensitivity and societal attention happens only around the unfortunate episodes of deaths during sewer or septic tank cleaning, these fatalities form only the tip of the iceberg. In reality, the huge and devastating vulnerabilities of various types of sanitation workers and their communities, during their day-to-day lives and work, go unseen, including the woes and insecurities of the families who lost their breadwinners to the hazards of this work. The concerns around sanitation work seems to be growing, given the large number of toilets that has been constructed under the ongoing Swachh Bharat Mission, using technologies that would require periodic emptying and offsite treatment of faecal matter. Organisations working for the welfare of sanitation workers feel that this can add to their woes, and might end up in expansion of the undignified work of manual scavenging including in rural areas. In the absence of proper sanitation systems and non-availability of mechanised emptying and cleaning, this can further affect the vulnerability of sanitation workers.

---

<sup>4</sup> Government of India. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993. Available at: <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/TheEmploymentAct1993.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> PEMS Act defines manual scavenging in an inclusive way as 'a person engaged or employed... for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an unsanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrine is disposed of, or on a railway track...'.

<sup>6</sup> Government of India. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Available at: [http://www.egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2013/E\\_35\\_2013\\_385.pdf](http://www.egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2013/E_35_2013_385.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Government of India. SUPREME COURT OF INDIA CIVIL ORIGINAL JURISDICTION WRIT PETITION (CIVIL) NO. 583 OF 2003. Available at: <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/scavenging%20SC%202014.pdf>

## Lack of data on sanitation workers

One of the striking challenges that the sanitation workers face in the country, in addition to the various vulnerabilities and hazards that they face in their day-to-day work, is the fact that various levels of governments are not even counting them. We do not have reliable statistics of people who are engaged in this kind of work. This problem cannot be addressed without having a detailed understanding of the depth and width of this labour force. How many of these workers are engaged across states and towns? As urban local bodies recently started to contract out this work to individuals or agencies, the need and compulsions for keeping and tracking such work is paramount. The currently available data is limited to the issue of manual scavenging. The available data on manual scavenging from various sources provides a contradictory picture of the situation.

The actual number of deaths of sanitation workers is as much a mystery as the data on number of people engaged in sanitation work or manual scavenging. Several attempts have been made to enumerate both the living and the dead. In July 2019, National Commission

In 2002-03, the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment counted nearly 8 lakh (770,338) manual scavengers across the country<sup>8</sup>

Census of India 2011 reported 7,94,390 household level insanitary latrines with waste and excreta cleared out by manual scavengers<sup>9</sup>

1,82,505 families engaged in some form of manual scavenging as per the Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011<sup>10</sup>

In July 2019, a Parliament response by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment stated that Government has identified 54,130 manual scavengers from 170 districts across 18 states in the country. This includes 39,625 people identified through a national survey held by NITI Aayog, and 14,505 people identified by the states<sup>11</sup>

for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) revealed that at least 50<sup>12</sup> sanitation workers have died cleaning sewers in the first six months of 2019 alone, going by media reports limited to just eight states of India. While NCSK states that between 2017 and late 2018, on average, one

<sup>8</sup> <https://p.thewire.in/stories/the-7-national-surveys-that-counted-manual-scavengers-thus-far-and-their-varied-numbers-1181.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://in.one.un.org/page/breaking-free-rehabilitating-manual-scavengers/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133286>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/as-told-to-parliament-july-24-2019-survey-reveals-54-130-manual-scavengers-in-18-states-65810>

<sup>12</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/50-dead-cleaning-sewers-in-first-6-months-of-2019-panel-report-5846479/>



sanitation worker died every five days<sup>13</sup> in the country, other sources estimate over three deaths<sup>14</sup> every five days.

As reported by organisations like Safai Karmachari Andolan, the counting by government omitted several sanitation workers employed as casual workers, contractual workers and migrant workers. The most vulnerable sanitation workers often work informally because of the stigma attached and prohibition of the practice of manual scavenging by law. Lack of good quality evidence and data makes it more

difficult to persuade authorities to take decisive action to improve the lives of sanitation workers.

There is an urgent need to look into the adequacy of the law, role of the law enforcement agencies, accountability mechanisms and other institutional arrangements for addressing the plight of sanitation workers. It should also analyse the solutions envisaged to the problem, including that of technological alternatives and the social mobility designs.

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/official-data-shows-one-manual-scavenging-death-every-five-days-5361531/>

<sup>14</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network (2018). Justice Denied: Death of workers engaged in manual scavenging while cleaning septic tank or sewer. Available at: <https://idsn.org/new-report-justice-denied-death-of-workers-engaged-in-manual-scavenging-rashtriya-garima-abhiyan/>



## Key Findings

As part of “Strengthening rule of law and advancing rights and freedoms of Manual Scavengers in India” project, in partnership with Association for Rural and Urban Needy (ARUN) and Centre for Equity studies (CES), supported by the European Commission – European Instrument of Democracy and Human Rights (EC-EIDHR), WaterAid India conducted studies on manual scavenging to understand different dimensions of the issue. Below are few of the findings:

### **BOX 1: BASELINE FINDINGS FROM 36 LOCATIONS, 12 DISTRICTS AND FOUR STATES**

- 2,505 dry latrines were identified from 36 locations in 12 districts of 4 states, this number appeared to be coming down as result of the ongoing Swachh Bharat Mission
- 1,686 sanitation workers identified who were engaged in different forms of manual scavenging - including 956 dry latrine cleaners (with women accounting for 92.35% of these workers), 423 septic tank cleaners and 286 open drain cleaners
- Only 26% of people engaged in manual scavenging were aware of the PEMSR 2013, and only 20% were aware that manual scavenging is prohibited by law
- Names of a vast majority of manual scavengers not included in Government Surveys, with limited benefits from Government schemes related to rehabilitation, alternative employment, and children's education
- 36% reported of experiencing violence, and 50% reported untouchability

### **BOX 2: IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW OF PEMSR 2013 IN FOUR STATES OF INDIA**

- Most of the local and state governments denied the existence of manual scavengers and dry latrines while responding to the Right to Information queries as part of this study, however, the results of the baseline study held as part of the project found them in large number in those localities
- People engaged in manual scavenging had limited access to Government schemes and benefits related to rehabilitation, alternative employment, and education of children
- Poor implementation of punitive actions in response to violations of PEMSR 2013
- Lack of responsiveness of the PEMSR 2013 to the changing nature of manual scavenging that includes various forms of sanitation work (cleaning of septic tanks, sewer lines), especially after Swachh Bharat Mission in rural areas
- Significant decline in Government of India allocations under the self-employment scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers from 2013-14 to 2018-19, affected by under-spends/sub-optimal utilisation of annual budget

## Findings on sanitation worker situation and deaths, from studies conducted by other organisations

Study	Highlights
<p><b>Down The Drain! A study of the occupational and health hazards and the perils of contracting faced by sewerage workers in Delhi (2014)</b><sup>15</sup></p>	<p>The study covered various issues faced by the sewer workers in Delhi, including socio-economic challenges, health and safety issues, contracting related issues and the need for change. The report narrates, based on a 2008 database, that in Delhi alone, over 5,500 workers are deployed to put city's sanitation in order, covering 1,50,000 manholes spread across 5,600 kms of internal, peripheral and trunk sewers that carry 2,871 million litres of sewage in a day. The sample survey found that 67% of these workers were from Valmiki caste. Over half of these workers engaged in such a risky work had no insurance cover, or other social protection measures.</p>
<p><b>Baseline survey of conservancy workers of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai</b><sup>16</sup> <b>Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2015)</b></p>	<p>261 deaths on average per year among sanitation workers in this Municipal Corporation, with 31% respondents reporting ill health during the survey. Despite this, the health of manual scavengers and sanitation workers was highly neglected, with few receiving medical compensation for occupation related health issues and accidents.</p>
<p><b>Participatory research conducted in three cities of India</b> <b>PRIA (2018)</b></p>	<p>Women sanitation workers faced discrimination in legal redressal for claiming entitlements as citizens and workers, fair wages, decision-making processes and benefits and knowledge of welfare programmes. While workers' unions serve as an important safety net, established unions were often for permanent workers and not contractual workers, and typically excluded women.</p>
<p><b>Study on sanitation workers across India</b><sup>17</sup> <b>Dalberg Associates (2018)</b></p>	<p>Study estimated 5 million sanitation workers in various urban locations across India, across various categories of work such as cleaning sewers, cleaning latrines, faecal sludge handling, railway cleaning, work in waste treatment plants, community and public toilet cleaning, school toilet cleaning, sweeping and drain cleaning, and domestic work. Several issues and gaps around financing and governance identified, including major ones around contracting and engaging these workers.</p>
<p><b>Budget brief of the Self-employment scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS)</b><sup>18</sup> <b>Accountability Initiative and Centre for Policy Research (2019)</b></p>	<p>Significant gaps noted between budget estimates, revised estimates and actual expenditures. Allocations to SRMS has been progressively declining since 2013-14. As of December 2017, 323 deaths due to sewer cleaning were reported, with complete compensation of INR 1 million paid in only 63% cases.</p>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.praxisindia.org/pdf/file/Down%20The%20Drain%20Report%20Web%20version.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Darokar S (2018). Manual Scavengers: A blindspot in urban development discourse. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 53, Issue No. 22, 02 Jun, 2018

<sup>17</sup> Dalberg Associates. The Sanitation Workers Project. Available at: <http://sanitationworkers.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Accountability Initiative and Centre for Policy Research (2019). Self-employment scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) GoI, 2018-19. Available at:



## Findings related to health and safety

The occupational health risks involved and alienation from health services is not just overlooked but also unaccounted for. The health hazards that the sanitation workers are exposed to include harmful gases, cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders, infections, leptospirosis, skin problems, and respiratory system problems.<sup>19</sup> The life expectancy of a sanitation worker is a significant concern. A study conducted by the Centre for Education and Communication (CEC) in 2005 with 200 sewage workers in Delhi found that there are few workers beyond the age of 60, and there is a rapid decline in the number of workers beyond the age of

50 – indicative of a lower life expectancy for sewage workers.

As per the baseline survey of conservancy workers of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), conducted in 2015 by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, 69.1% (22,508) of the interviewed workers received safety gears. It was reported that masks and hand gloves are distributed across the departments; but since the quality is reported to be poor and not user-friendly, a majority of the workers hardly make use of these safety gears.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Page 45, Mander Harsh, India's Lowest Depths, ILO Report, 2019

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/manual-scavengers-blind-spot-urban-development-discourse>



## Government initiatives

In 2018, the Government of India introduced standard operating procedure (SOP) for cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, with clear directives for the urban local bodies for engaging sanitation workers. In 2019, emergency response sanitation units (ERSU) that mandates systems for planning and immediate responses for specific emergencies supplemented this. However, its implementation success is yet to be seen.

On 18 September 2019, the Supreme Court stated that nowhere in the world are people sent to gas chambers to die. It questioned the government that why safety gears and oxygen cylinders are not provided to them.

Recently, the Government of India has also inducted an inter-ministerial coordination effort between ministries that are critical for sanitation and sanitation workers, to work towards ending manual scavenging and improving the safety of sanitation workers, with a deadline of 15 August 2022 through a national and state action plan. However, several critical initial deadlines have already been missed. This action plan also includes trials to substitute manual work through mechanical cleaning with customised solutions for Indian settings. While these are important initiatives, the country needs more in-depth and sincere approaches for addressing this complex issue.

# What can be done?

1. Ensure every possible measure to abolish all possible direct human interface with faecal matter during sanitation work.
2. Identify and map different forms of sanitation work and workers; incentivise officials to undertake such mapping and make them culpable on failing to do so.
3. Ensure strict implementation of the standard operating procedures and emergency sanitation response systems for operations in sewer lines and septic tanks, to ensure dignified engagement as well as health and safety of the workers associated.
4. Revise building bye-laws to ensure that buildings of a particular size have mandatory decentralised waste-water and sewage management systems with all safety systems in place, with clear responsibilities and culpabilities fixed for the owners of such infrastructure.
5. Fix accountability and responsibility of officials in implementation of the PEMSR 2013. Provide incentives for officials to report the prevalence of manual scavenging and to rehabilitate the sanitation workers involved.
6. Ensure good quality education to children of manual scavengers to enable them to avail alternative livelihood options, including selection to suitable public employment, thereby preventing the next generation from engaging in this inhuman practice.
7. Explore and deploy technology-centred alternatives to reduce the risks associated with sanitation work, including provisions for supporting existing sanitation workers or the dependants of deceased workers to move into/ own such alternative professions.
8. Ensure social security provisions like pensions for ensuring a regular guaranteed income for the sanitation workers, especially manual scavengers, different from the current provisions for one-time rehabilitation support.
9. Build public consciousness around the issue of manual scavenging and rights of sanitation workers, including conduct of social audits of the processes to engage sanitation workers.



## **The hidden world of sanitation workers in India**

November 2019

**All Photographs:** CS Sharada Prasad

### **Wateraid India Country Office**

2<sup>nd</sup> floor, RK Khanna Tennis Stadium, 1, Africa Avenue,  
Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi 110029

**Tel** +91 11 6612 4400

**Email** [waindia@wateraid.org](mailto:waindia@wateraid.org)



**[WWW.WATERAIDINDIA.IN](http://WWW.WATERAIDINDIA.IN)**