

Manual Scavenging in India

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Context:

Supreme Court has recently directed government to file report on steps taken to end manual scavenging.

About Manual Scavenging:

1. Manual scavenging refers to the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling in any manner, human excreta or any kind of dry or wet waste from insanitary latrines, open drains, septic tanks or other similar places.
2. Manual scavenging is a dehumanizing practice that involves the use of basic and often unsafe tools like brooms, buckets, and baskets, which can lead to serious health hazards, injuries, and even death.

Manual scavenging in India: A sad story

1. As per 2011 Census of India, there were over 740,000 households in the country where manual scavenging was still being practiced. This practice is often associated with the caste system in India, where people from lower castes, such as Dalits, are forced to engage in manual scavenging.
2. According to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, a total of 482 manual scavengers died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks across India between 2016 and 2019.
3. The Safai Karamchari Andolan, an advocacy group working to eradicate manual scavenging, estimates that there are still around 1.8 million manual scavengers in India.
4. Many manual scavengers suffer from various health problems, including skin diseases, respiratory issues, and even death due to exposure to toxic fumes in septic tanks and sewer lines.
5. A total of 233 people died due to accidents while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks from 2019 to 2022.
6. Haryana had the highest number of deaths at 13, followed by Maharashtra with 12 and Tamil Nadu with 10.
7. The practice of manual scavenging is mostly carried out by people from lower castes, such as Dalits, and this perpetuates the cycle of caste-based discrimination and social exclusion.

Reasons for Persistence of Manual Scavenging:

There were many reasons why the programme proved to be ineffective:

1. Issue of Women: Most of the provisions for the rehabilitation under the scheme were not gender sensitive and directed towards men, although around 95-98% of the individuals involved in manual scavenging are women.
2. Issue of Loan: The key provision of the scheme was a loan provision with a subsidy. Giving

loans to the vulnerable communities, which were compelled to take up manual scavenging, rooted in a caste system and face social, political and economic exclusion is not a sustainable solution.

3. Defaulters: Most of the loans under the Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) were issued through banks with 50% of a subsidy. However, most of the subsidy was spent on paying the chargeable interest to the bank and those not able to pay it become "defaulters".
4. Rural Areas: According to SRMS Survey, around 60% of those involved in manual scavenging are in rural areas (larger villages and settlements) However, the focus of the scheme was on urban areas.
5. Caste aspect: Government programmes have emphasised the financial aspect of rehabilitation and failed to address the caste-based oppression and related social conditions that have perpetuated this practice for centuries.
6. Corruption: SRMS survey found that in district of Madhya Pradesh there were more than 165 women involved in manual scavenging but not a single name was included in the list of beneficiaries. Only districts with more than 302 women were included. only 10% of those involved in manual scavenging were actually included in the list. This resulted in many eligible individuals not reaching the benefits and those not eligible benefiting of the scheme.

Challenges of stopping manual scavenging:

1. Social stigma: Manual scavenging has been associated with certain castes and communities, which has resulted in social discrimination and stigmatization of people engaged in manual scavenging.
2. Lack of awareness: There is a lack of awareness among people about the health hazards associated with manual scavenging, which has resulted in people continuing to engage in this practice.
3. Insufficient implementation: While laws and regulations have been put in place to prohibit manual scavenging, their implementation has been poor in many areas.
4. Poor infrastructure: In many parts of India, there is a lack of proper sanitation infrastructure, which has resulted in people engaging in manual scavenging to clean the sewage.
5. Inadequate rehabilitation measures: Many of the rehabilitation schemes have not been implemented properly, which has resulted in people not being able to find alternative sources of livelihood.

Steps taken by the government to curb manual scavenging:

1. The government has formulated the NAMASTE scheme or National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem in an effort to stop deaths due to hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks,
2. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 was introduced to ban manual scavenging.
3. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 to further reinforce the ban and to provide for the rehabilitation of people employed as manual scavengers.
4. In 2014, the Supreme Court directed the government to take several measures including: One-time cash assistance to people employed as manual scavengers
5. Houses for manual scavengers Training in livelihood skills for at least one member of their families. Concessional loans to prop them up financially and find an occupation
6. Payment of ₹10 lakh in compensation in the case of sewer deaths Despite the legal prohibition and government efforts to eradicate manual scavenging, the practice still persists

in various parts of the country.

Way Forward:

1. Socio-Economic Rehabilitation: A viable and formidable rehabilitation scheme should be developed which must include provision for social and economic rehabilitation of families liberated from scavenging. Providing adequate provision for compensation, education, accommodation and employment
2. Gender Aspect: All rehabilitation schemes and programmes must be totally redesigned for the women that make up 98% of the workforce and are enslaved by this exploitative tradition.
3. Government Appointments: In the appointment of workers, assistants and cooks in ICDS (Anganwadi) centres, only women from Dalit communities should be appointed. Among Dalits, the manual scavenging community should be preferred.
4. Dalit Muslim and Dalit Christian Manual Scavengers: Non-scheduled castes such as Dalit Muslim and Dalit Christian communities engaged in manual scavenging should receive similar facilities and security to manual scavengers from scheduled castes. Indian Railway: The Indian Railway is the largest institution in the country that use dry latrines.
5. The Railway Ministry must immediately prohibit this practice and for the next three years present progress reports in every session of Parliament. This, so that the Government of India can ensure total abolishment of scavenging in Indian Railway in stipulated time.
6. Priority to Manual Scavengers Community: Inclusion of manual scavengers' families and those families who have left manual scavenging in the priority list of all government schemes and entitlement.
7. Adopting Technology to End Manual Scavenging: It is not going to be possible to eliminate manual scavenging unless we create the right technologies. There are reportedly about 15 innovations developed across the country to replace manual scavenging. While technology is considered essential to end this scourge.

