

# THE MANACLES OF CASTE IN SANITATION WORK

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Even in 2020, the Indian government and our civil society continue to [grapple with the inhuman nature of manual scavenging](#). While civil society started a movement in the 1990s to abolish dry latrines, the focus now is on manhole deaths and provision of safety equipment to sanitation workers. The movement has been demanding the abolition of the dehumanising practice of the manual removal of human excreta and calls for the introduction of mechanisation for handling waste. Various State governments and the previous Central governments have responded to these civil society demands by introducing different laws to stop manual scavenging and provide incentives to build toilets.

If, on the one hand, the civil society has tended to approach this issue as a collective problem that needs to be addressed by the State, on the other, the current ruling dispensation seems to be framing the issue as a spectacle in the form of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, and is addressing the problem in terms of an obstacle in the way of tourism promotion.

Also read | [Manual scavenging left 282 dead since 2016](#)

In 1993, the then government promulgated an Act prohibiting the construction of unsanitary dry latrines and employing manual scavengers.

The Act defined 'manual scavenger' as a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta. On August 18, 2010, I recorded a video of a sanitation worker entering a manhole without any safety gear, in the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, for [Dalit Camera](#), a YouTube channel that documents the experiences of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and other minorities. I also approached various social movements that were campaigning against dry latrines and requested them to include this aspect of manual scavenging to their campaigns, to no avail.

The government's description of dry latrine was a problem, as it defined dry latrine as "latrine other than a water-seal latrine". Manual scavenging was not just a practice related to dry latrines, but also to insanitary latrines and open defecation. Until the introduction of the [Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines \(Prohibition\) Act](#) in 1993, State governments had a post called 'scavengers'. A scavenger's job was to manually remove human excreta in households and designated places. The local authorities levied scavenging tax on houses for availing this service. But after the Act was introduced, State governments themselves became agencies that would enforce prohibition of the construction or usage of dry latrines.

Ten years later, the Safai Karamchari Andolan, a social movement that campaigned against manual scavenging, along with other organisations, filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court. The demand was to direct State governments and Union Territories to strictly enforce the law to stop the practice of manual removal of human excreta. Mounting pressure from civil society, coupled with the intervention of the Supreme Court, forced the Central government to conduct a survey of manual scavengers in 2013. The survey found that dry latrines and manual removal of human excreta still persisted. In the same year, the government introduced the [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act](#).

Also read | [Manual scavenging fatalities highest in Tamil Nadu, says survey](#)

Though the construction of dry latrines has drastically reduced, the number of deaths in manholes, sewers and septic tanks continues to remain high. The present government had plans to amend the 2013 Act to completely mechanise the cleaning of sewers and manholes and build new sewers. But neither the past nor the present amendment addresses the issue of labour safety. Same is the case with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, which skirts the issue of labour rights and the stigma attached to sanitation. As a matter of fact, in Tamil Nadu, all political parties have trade unions for government servants, except for sanitation workers. Bodily wastes are seen as unholy elements that need to be kept away from places of living, cooking, studying, or worshipping. Not only toilets, but even cleaning work is seen as a lowly job in India. Dalit movements have been found wanting in this regard — there have hardly been any organised movements to demand permanent job status for sanitation workers. Most sanitation contracts are given to private contractors or self-help groups, and such staff hardly have ID cards, leave alone the protection of medical insurance policies.

Also read | [Govt. to introduce bill to make law banning manual scavenging more stringent](#)

Workforce in sanitation departments is recruited via open competition. The local administration usually approaches particular caste members during such hiring. The situation is so dire that while we find volunteers to distribute food and undertake rescue operations during natural calamities, hardly any volunteer offers to do clean-up work or dispose of dead bodies. During the last Chennai floods, sanitation workers from the Nilgiris district were made to travel in garbage trucks to Chennai. This situation has continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Tamil Nadu, sanitation workers are asked to work in newly formed COVID-19 wards. For example, the Gudalur municipality in the State issued an order to six of its staff members to work in COVID-19 wards. Similarly, in Kotagiri town panchayat, officials asked the sons of sanitation workers to work in COVID-19 wards.

Also read | [Burying democracy in human waste](#)

Unlike other labour forces, sanitation workers do not have a separate rule-book that lays down guidelines for their work timings, holidays, a proper place for roll call, removal from duty, etc. For example, in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, all the sanitation workers have to stand outside the office during the morning and afternoon roll calls. If they reach early, they are seen sitting on roadside pavements. Even though there are spaces within the office premises, the officers force them to stand outside. The officials claim that the practice is traditional and that for any change, new rules need to be formed. There are no vehicles for sanitation workers to travel to their designated workspaces, and they have to either walk for kilometres or use garbage vehicles. This is a forced choice and is connected to the dignity of a worker. To put this in contrast, no supervisor would stand and travel with the sanitation workers.

There are hardly any exclusive trade unions for sweepers, and unlike other sections in government or private workforce, their problems are voiced by only those who are not associated with sanitation work — often NGOs. This, I argue, is because in India, sanitation work is caste-ridden and hence, there is an urgent need to dissociate caste from labour.

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