



## Transforming denial into deliberation

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**(MainsGS2:Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and the States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections.)**

### Context:

- Manual scavenging is a shameful practice, eradication of which is not only the responsibility of the government but also of the society because manual scavenging is rooted in India's historical system of hierarchy and exclusion: The caste system.
- As per recent data by the government, out of 43,797 identified manual scavengers, 42,000 belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC) or Dalits.

### Risk exposure:

- According to the UN India, manual scavenging refers to the practice of manual cleaning, disposing, or handling of the human excreta, in any manner, from dry latrines and sewers.
- Due to the prevalence of the caste system in India, such harmful tasks are mostly done by those belonging to the lower rung of the caste hierarchy, the Dalits.
- Manual scavenging workers are exposed to the risk of getting infected with diseases like cholera, hepatitis, tuberculosis, typhoid, and many more.
- According to a study conducted by Water Aid India in 2018, 1,136 women were engaged in manual cleaning of dry latrines in just 36 settlements across four states.

- According to a study by TERI, the wages they receive are generally low, ranging somewhere between INR 40 to INR 100 for cleaning around 50 dry toilets and the maximum is INR 500 to INR 1,000 for cleaning four drainage lines and sewers depending on the choice of employers.

### **Unanswered questions:**

- The practice of manual scavenging poses several questions over equal access to protection offered by the Indian Constitution and the Indian judiciary guaranteeing rights to all its citizens.
- Various legislations like Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 and Prohibition Of Employment As Manual Scavengers And Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR) have been brought to provide the group with the rights they deserve and are necessary for living a dignified life.
- Despite these legislations, no significant improvement in the condition of manual scavengers is witnessed due to the lack of pace of the reform drive.

### **Perpetuating the practice:**

- The denial of the practice can also be related to the recent Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), which has also been criticised for perpetuating the practice of manual scavenging in India by increasing the number of toilets that require manual cleaning.
- Based on the analysis of toilets constructed under the SBM till 2017, 13 percent have twin pits, 38 percent have septic tanks, and 20 percent have single pits, all of these come under dry toilets that require manual cleaning.
- Indian Railways (IR) is the largest user of dry toilets in India, IR has 296,012 dry toilets, which require manual cleaning, making it the biggest violator.
- However, Indian railway has installed 258,906 bio-vacuum toilets in all the long-distance travelling trains, which is not only helping save 400 crores of the additional maintenance cost.
- If steps like these are applied in all types of trains running, it can solve the issue of manual scavenging in government enterprise and will broadcast a positive message to other sectors who are relying on the practice of manual scavenging.

### **Lack of data:**

- The task of identifying the manual scavengers is given to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), who in turn depends on the state governments for actual data.
- Lack of data is also hampering the compensation process where 10 lakh is granted to the families who lost someone engaged in manual scavenging activity, as of now only 50 percent of 123 workers were able to receive the compensation.

- Identifying the numbers of manual scavengers in India will not only provide more extensive coverage but will also uniform the data collection process across different states through formalised techniques like service level progress (data collected by local bodies), citizen feedback, and certification process.

### **Required efforts:**

- To increase the alternative employment opportunities for manual scavengers, the Self Employment Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (SRMS) was brought in; however, as of 2019, the scheme had covered a mere 6 percent.
- Lack of required data on beneficiaries, high level of risks associated with self-employment, and the longer transition/waiting period after the upskilling are a few factors that have led to the scheme's failure in bringing any required real change.
- Thus, employing all the identified scavengers in tasks related to the Swachh Bharat Mission immediately after their identification could help them transition faster.

### **Sticking to distressed activity:**

- In the recent annual report of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), The Chairperson admits that the organisation lacks the resources, and that the results over the years have not matched the expectation.
- This shows the distinction between the vision of the government and how they execute the plans for the reforms.
- As the economic slowdown gets even worse due to COVID-19 resulting in a subsequent rise in unemployment, these manual scavengers will be forced to stick with the decades-long distressing activity which is already a stigma to their identity.

### **Conclusion:**

Despite acknowledging the detrimental effects of manual scavenging, no concrete effort to make any real change has been witnessed over the years which leads to the still prevailing menace of manual scavenging.