



## The Link between Caste and Manual Scavenging

This editorial is based on [“Indignity Made Invisible”](#) which was published in Indian Express on 23/02/2022. It talks about manual scavenging and how caste based division has further exacerbated this social issue.

**For Prelims:** Manual Scavenging, Article 21, Right to Life with Dignity, Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020, SC & ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge, Safai Karmachari Andolan.

**For Mains:** The Menace of Manual Scavenging, Link between Caste and Manual Scavenging.

Since independence, India has undergone profound changes in power dynamics and political ideals that have also transformed individual lives as well as the idea of the collective. However, the modernising forces have been deeply biased. **Caste is an overbearing reality** which is not simply a tag of identity but something that has been **dictating the way of lives**.

Caste continues to reinforce inequality as a basic value and the allocation of labour is one of its prime manifestations. **Caste hierarchy reinforces occupational hierarchy** and the idea of occupational purity and pollution are further embedded in the lives of individuals.

### Manual Scavenging and Caste Based Prejudice

#### What is Manual Scavenging?

- **Manual scavenging** is defined as “the removal of human excrement from public streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers **without any safety gears and with bare hands**”.
- Manual scavenging is **violative of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution** that guarantees ‘**Right to live life with dignity**’.
- **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020** proposes to completely mechanise sewer cleaning, introduce ways for ‘on-site’ protection and provide compensation to manual scavengers in case of sewer deaths.
  - It is still awaiting cabinet approval.

#### How is Caste Division Linked to Manual Scavenging?

- Caste leads to the division of labour as well as labourers. Dalits often **face discrimination when seeking employment** in sectors that are considered “pure”.
  - Manual scavenging or cleaning of dry latrines, for instance, is a job that the Dalit classes have been burdened with.
- They are expected to carry loads of human excrement, and clear sewage for little or no income. They are **trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion**.

- Although banned under the Prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers Act, 2013, the inhumane exercise still continues.
  - According to government data, **97% of manual scavengers are Dalits** - about 42,594 manual scavengers belong to SCs, 421 belong to STs and 431 belong to OBCs.
- The statistics are a **disturbing reminder of our collective failure to rise above caste lines** and provide dignity of labour to all.

### What Efforts have been made to end Manual Scavenging?

- The **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013** supersede and goes beyond prohibitions on dry latrines, and outlaws all manual excrement cleaning of insanitary latrines, open drains, or pits.
- In 1989, the [Prevention of Atrocities Act](#) became an integrated guard for sanitation workers, more than 90% people employed as manual scavengers belonged to the Scheduled Caste.
  - This became an important landmark to free manual scavengers from designated traditional occupations.
- [Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge](#) was launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on [World Toilet Day](#) for all states to make sewer-cleaning mechanised by April 2021.
  - **Safai Karmachari Andolan** was also a **movement for elimination of manual scavenging**.

### What is the Current Scenario Despite the Efforts?

- Caste-based prejudice has been normalised to such an extent that the plight of manual scavengers **does not get the attention that it deserves**. The governments at central and state levels have been enshrouding the problem.
  - There has always been an **attempt to fudge the data**, and contradictions are found in government data itself.
- The government said that there is no report of people currently engaged in manual scavenging and no death has been reported due to the practice in five years (2013-2018).
  - However, according to the **National Convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, 472 manual scavenging deaths** across the country were recorded between 2016 and 2020.
- According to some well-researched media reports, the **Indian Railways, the army, and urban municipalities** remain the **biggest bodies that still have workers engaged in manual scavenging**.
  - They either find ways to outsource such work to contractors so as not to be held directly accountable or liable or simply **misrepresent such workers as “sweepers”**.

### What Can Be The Way Forward?

- **Implementation of Existing Welfare Policies:** The government’s response reflects a deep sense of apathy. It needs to realise that **denial only contributes to the delay** in solving the problem. Sewer deaths are still a reality.
  - India is still a long way from the rehabilitation of manual scavengers. The government scheme provides for **one-time cash assistance of Rs 40,000, skill development training, and capital subsidy** for self-employed projects.
  - Effective implementation of these schemes is needed.
- **Stringent and Integrated Laws:** If a law creates a **statutory obligation to provide sanitation services** on the part of state agencies, it will create a situation in which the rights of these workers will not hang in the air.
  - As of now, the **provisions for punishment are both weak** and more importantly, as highlighted by activists, there have been **next to no serious legal proceedings** against people and organisations accused of engaging workers for manual scavenging.
  - There are demands by activists that the **law needs to be read along with the SC & ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** in order to strengthen it.
- **Behavioural Change:** To address the social sanction behind manual scavenging, it is required first to acknowledge and then understand how and why manual scavenging continues to be embedded in the caste system.
  - It is important to understand that **manual scavenging is not just a problem of**

**technology** or financial assistance **but also of social prejudice.**

- The state must accept the role of caste and should actively solve it. We must show impatience and a sense of urgency and should not make equality, justice and the dignity of labour wait any longer.
- **Social Awareness:** To end the problem of Manual Scavenging, it is obsessively necessary to work from the core of the problem. Lack of skills for doing another job and discrimination from the society itself are the reason they all are engaged in such kind of occupations.
  - It is a **collective responsibility** of the governments at all levels, NGOs, health officers and social communities to **create awareness among the manual scavenger community** regarding health issues, hygiene practices, and sanitization processes.
  - The **general public should also be made aware of legal implications** regarding employment of manual scavenging.

## Conclusion

Work is fundamental to how we realise our destiny in this world, to provide economically for oneself and one's family is central to dignity — a lack of it leads to alienation and stunted human growth.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

“Manual scavenging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sounds an abhorrent alarm about caste domination”. Comment.

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