



A REVIEW OF THE PLIGHT OF SANITARY WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

The environmental sanitation is still an ignored issue in India. Most cities and towns India are characterized by over-crowding, congestion, inadequate water supply and inadequate facilities of disposal of human excreta, waste water and sewage. More than five million sanitation workers in India, do the job of cleaning and emptying pit latrines, entering confined areas such as septic tanks, sewers, and other sanitation systems. Progress in urban sanitation and sewage treatment is critical to the quality of life in cities. As the population of cities grows, sanitation and sewage management have become a severe problem that requires quick attention. This review article discusses about the gross and pertinent increase in sanitary workers in India. The review is prepared on the basis of extensive literature search from prominent news papers and concerned data bases.

**KEYWORDS :** sanitary workers, environmental sanitation, environmental pollution.

INTRODUCTION

As urban population grow the sanitation and sewage management have become a serious issue which needs immediate treatment. Progress in urban sanitation and sewage treatment is essential to improve the quality of life of people near industrial and urban areas. Here comes the importance of sanitation workers, they provide an indispensable public service a key role to run our society clean and tidy. India is home for more than five million sanitation workers who regularly deal with hazardous job environment, they clean and empty pit latrines, enter into confined spaces like septic tanks, sewers and other sanitation systems, transport fecal sludge, remove contaminants from the sludge and process the sludge for disposal or reuse.

Even though Sanitation workers are the backbone of the waste management system and they work under inhuman conditions and put their health and life's in danger they are ostracized and neglected by the society. Sanitation workers are in drive need of safety equipment's and specific laws to protect their labour rights. It is important to improve their working condition and safeguard the dignity and health. The World Bank, World Health Organization (WHO), International Labor Organization (ILO) and WaterAid collaboratively took a decision to flash light on this neglected issue and ensure that the theme "no one will be left behind" comes to fruition. Improving the working condition of sanitation workers would contribute to four of the 17 sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); end poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG 1), by promoting access of the poor to basic services; ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (SDG 3), by reducing exposure to unsafe chemicals on the job; ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (SDG 6); and focus on decent work (SDG 8). Thus, the SDG framework offers an opportunity to revert and improve the situation of sanitary workers.

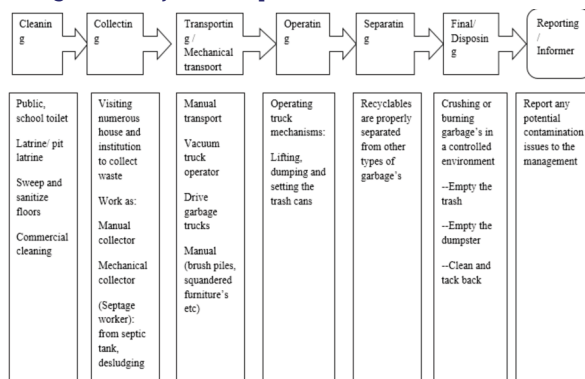
The very need of sanitary workers

In 2010 the UN General Assembly recognized access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as human right and is vital for preventing, protecting and maintaining human health during all epidemics. Inadequate sanitation is estimated to cause 432000 diarrheal deaths (worldwide) annually and is a major factor in several neglected tropical diseases. Clean water and sanitation could prevent the death

of 297000 children aged under 5 years each year. If the garbage not removed or drainage has not been cleaned, bug and rodent infections will widespread and we will end up with many emerging and reemerging diseases.

The environmental sanitation is still an ignored issue in India. Most cities and towns India are characterized by over-crowding, congestion, inadequate water supply and inadequate facilities of disposal of human excreta, waste water and sewage. Poor sanitation is a persisting issue linked to many of India's health issue, more than two-third of wastewater is let out untreated into the environment, polluting land and water. To respond to these challenges, urban India will need to address the full cycle of sanitation and this shows how badly we need sanitation workers.

Categories and job description of sanitation workers



Newspaper reviews about the issues of sanitation workers in India

The last few years many newspaper articles introduced the situation of sanitation workers in the country, their different personas, the challenges that they face in their work, the solutions that have to be implemented to resolve their difficulties and the governmental plans, policies and programs for them.

The Hindustan Times

A report came in The Hindustan Times on August 31, 2017 written by Smriti Kak Ramachandran says that the 'Centre blames states for deaths of manual scavengers, lapses in rehabilitation'. The Centre asked the states to expand the definition of manual scavenger and include those who clean human waste from open drains and along railway tracks in

the list. The directive to first identify and then compensate the manual scavengers, especially the families of those who died while cleaning septic tanks or sewers, comes on the heels recent incidents that left 10 sanitation workers died in Delhi.

### The Wire

On November 13, 2018 Nirat Bhatnagar wrote an article in The Wire (an Indian non-profit news and opinion website), about 'Understanding the problems of India's Sanitation Workers'. He quotes that, there are five million people employed in sanitation work of some sort in India with about two million of them working in 'high risk' conditions. Despite increasing focus by the government and programmes such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, unsafe sanitation work, loosely captured under the catch-all phrase manual scavenging, still exists in India.

### The Indian Express, by Express News Service Vadodara

In The Indian Express, by Express News Service Vadodara, an article has been updated on December 3, 2018 tells that four sanitation workers of a private company died of suffocation while cleaning a water tank in a frozen food processing unit in Vadodara. On the next year June 28, 2019, Vadodara reported that a temporary sanitation worker from Padra municipality was hospitalized after he inhaled toxic gases while cleaning a sewer of a public toilet near the Sardar patel vegetable market in Padra. On May 27, 2020 Mr. Abhimanyu Chakravorty wrote an article regarding 'Fighting from the bottom, India's sanitation workers are also frontline workers battling Covid. He states that India's 40 lakh waste pickers in the informal sector and garbage collectors employed by states are at a direct risk of getting infected with coronavirus from handling unmarked medical and contaminated waste.

### Times of India

In Times of India, on November 22, 2020, Deval Sanghavi wrote that 'Sanitation workers – The invisible warriors keeping our cities clean'. Here it is mentioned that in a 2019 report by the Accountability initiative and Centre for Policy Research observed a progressive decline in allocations to the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) since 2013. The report also notes that the mandatory compensation the death of a manual scavenger, was paid only in 63% of cases of 2017. According to National Commission for Safai Karmacharis, there is one manual scavenging death every five days and countless others suffers from various health hazards. The main reason for this crisis is the lack of personal protective equipment and desludging pipes and cesspool vehicles for carrying out these jobs. Likewise, on August 22, 2021 Anahita Bakshi and Keshav Kanoria and Nirat Bhatnagar wrote about 'No progress for sanitation workers: What must change'. Here they mention that the sanitation work, and who are (inaccurately) called as manual scavengers – a historically designated and socially invisible class of human labour – remain forgotten and have not seen much advancement beyond tokenism.

### The challenges faced by sanitation workers

Sanitation workers are real gems of a society, without them we could not even think of a healthy social life. Even though they are putting their efforts to make a healthier surrounding, most of them are unaware about their health and the labor rights that they deserve in a society. Many national and international agencies are raising their voice to improve the working condition and to safeguard health and the labor rights of the sanitation workers. The World Bank, World Health Organization (WHO), International Labor Organization (ILO) and Water Aid have joined and take initiative to the betterment of sanitation workers. Their main findings flash light on the working challenges and risks of sanitation workers in nine countries like: Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Haiti, India, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda.

### The key challenges and risks are:

- **Financial challenges:** The sanitation workers employed

in informal or in any temporary/private sector is not fully or even partially paid. On many occasions they are forced to spent money from their own pocket for the maintenance and purchase of personal protective devices In India, some reports reveal that sometimes they have been paid by food rather than money.

- **Gender inequalities:** Many women sanitation workers are faced additional workload and got paid less, which adversely affects their physical health and family life.
- **Social implications:** Sanitation workers are often face social discrimination and lack of dignity in a society. Sometimes the job sanitation is linked with caste, it is recognized as the job of low-caste people where they have to deal with fecal matter, waste, sludge, sewages etc. for example the countries like India and Bangladesh it is perceived that the sanitation is the job of Dalit caste.
- **Occupational and environmental health and safety:** Sanitation workers are exposed to a handful of occupational health hazards as they are working in contact with fecal matters, poisonous gases, working in confined dangerous spaces and operating equipment's used in waste water, sewages. Sanitation workers those who are not provided with adequate personnel protective equipment's are highly risking their jobs and life to danger and even to death.
- **Weak legal protection:** Sanitation workers are always in suffer with inadequate legal protection and lack of accessibility to existing legal supports. Even though the countries like India and Senegal have made legislations to prohibit the riskiest manual scavenging, the practice is not yet got stopped, but its been forced it underground.

### CONCLUSION

Poor sanitation is a persistent problem in India, and more than two-thirds of wastewater is discharged into the environment untreated, damaging land and water. Sanitation employees urgently require safety equipment as well as specialized labour legislation to protect their rights.

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