



# COVID-19 IMPACT: Safai Karmacharis 2021 - 2022



**SAFAI KARMACHARI ANDOLAN**

# Safai Karmacharis In 2021 - 2022: Covid-19 And Its Impact

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## About Safai Karmachari Andolan

Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) is a programme of Aman Vedika for the liberation and Rehabilitation of persons and communities affected by the caste based discrimination by work by descent of manual scavenging.

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**Safai Karmachari Andolan**

36/13, Ground Floor

East Patel Nagar

New Delhi – 110008

skandolan@gmail.com; deepthi.sukumar@gmail.com



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Following the pandemic, the related lockdowns, and mobility restrictions on humans and goods, India and the world witnessed big economic. The crisis has been persistent and has impacted the marginalised sections most devastatingly. In the case of India, the pandemic came at a time when the economy was just beginning to recover from the slowdowns following the demonetisation and abrupt introduction of GST. It was widely documented that these measures, as well as the lockdowns, disproportionately affected the lives and livelihoods of those working in the informal sector. Almost 90% of workers in India are in the informal sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic started in the year 2019 and lasted for almost 3 years as a health crisis that destroyed the livelihood of millions of families. The brunt of the economic crisis due to the pandemic has been on the weaker sections of society most indiscriminately. In India, it was the large population belonging to the category of an unorganised workforce that experienced livelihood loss during this period due to the economic lockdown first and the health catastrophe due to COVID-19 later. The health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented spread of inequalities due to the multidimensional crisis that emerged<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/03/D\\_FINAL\\_WIL\\_RIM\\_RAPPORT\\_2303.pdf](https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/03/D_FINAL_WIL_RIM_RAPPORT_2303.pdf)

# Impact Of Covid-19 On Safai Karmacharis

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Majority of the safai karmacharis earn their living on a daily basis, and the forced lockdown left them struggling to even manage food for a single day. The physical force applied by the police made their situation even more challenging, but they had no other option; it was a matter of surviving hunger. Consequently, they ventured out in search of work, despite being assaulted by the police. The government provided them with no assistance, and they did not receive any protective gear or PPE kits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without financial aid, they were left to fend for themselves. Many even took on the grim task of

disposing of the bodies of COVID-19 patients, a high-risk job, especially when they lacked proper protective gear. Succumbing to such risky work conditions, approximately 472 manual scavengers lost their lives between 2018- 2020<sup>2</sup>.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on manual scavengers in India during the 2021-22 period was profound, exacerbating an already dire situation for excluded safai karmachari communities. Manual scavengers, who manually clean human waste from sewers, septic tanks, and insanitary latrines, faced heightened health risks, economic instability, and

social exclusion during this time. While specific data for 2021-22 is limited in national reports, insights can be drawn from trends, anecdotal evidence, and the broader context of the pandemic's second wave in India (April-May 2021), which was particularly devastating.

### **Impact on Children**

Children from low-income groups have suffered immensely as their studies came to an abrupt halt. Limited or no access to smartphones and data packs were significant issues these children had to face. With their schools and tuition closed, they had no one to turn to for help with their

studies, as most of their parents were illiterate. In a recent study, the ASER (Annual Status of Education Report)<sup>3</sup>, an annual survey aimed at offering dependable yearly assessments of children's educational status and fundamental learning levels in every state and rural district of India, revealed that a substantial number of young children haven't enrolled in school. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of out-of-school children in the 6-10 age group. This percentage has risen from 1.8% in 2018 to 5.3% in 2020. The increase is also notable among all children up to the age of 16, growing from 4% to 5.5%.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/govt-separate-entity-address-issue-manual-scavenging-bezwada-wilson>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/six-million-children-out-of-school-in-india-due-to-the-impact-of-covid-19-girls-most-affected>

## BUDGETARY ALLOCATION IN 2021-22

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COVID-19 has exposed the growing inequalities and vulnerabilities that millions of people in the unorganised sector have been suffering for the last few years. The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth<sup>4</sup>. 73% of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while 670 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1% increase in their wealth. The impact of inequalities has spread mainly to those sections of society that have already suffered through caste, religion, region, and gender-based oppressions for generations.

The landmark judgement of *Safai Karamchari Andolan vs. Union of India* also held that manual scavenging is a gross violation of Article 21 and Article 17 of the Constitution. However, the miserable condition of manual

scavengers persists due to the notion of caste-designated occupation and despite laws being in place, the agencies working at the grassroots level such as municipal corporations, and panchayats are failing to implement them. The amount of Rs. 110 crores allocated for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers for the period of 2020-21 remained unutilized while, for FY 2021-22, an amount of Rs. 100 Cr is allocated which is Rs. 10 Cr less than the previous allocation has raised serious questions and also revised to Rs. 40 cr.

‘Pre Matric Scholarship for children of those engaged in unclean occupations and prone to health hazards’ has received no allocation in the year 2021-22 as compared to Rs. 25 Cr in FY 2020-21. This ‘Pre Matric Scholarship’ has now been merged within the Allocation for Welfare of SCs or AWSC and for STs under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs<sup>5</sup> but the awareness about this big change has not been spread to communities effectively.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/india-extreme-inequality-numbers>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NCDHR-Budget-2021-22-1.pdf>

# LACK OF PROTECTION AND HEALTH RISKS

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During 2021-22, manual scavengers were classified as essential workers, required to continue their hazardous work amidst the raging pandemic, particularly during the deadly second wave. The lack of adequate protective equipment (PPE) was a critical issue:

## Exposure to COVID-19

Safai Karmacharis, often working without masks, gloves, or sanitizers, were at high risk of contracting the virus, especially when handling biomedical waste or working in hospitals and quarantine centers. Reports from 2020-21, which likely persisted into 2021-22, indicate that sanitation workers, including manual scavengers, lacked handwashing facilities and PPE, with a WaterAid survey from 2020<sup>6</sup> noting 40% of sanitation workers had no such access at workplaces.

## Pre-existing Health Vulnerabilities

Their routine exposure to toxic gases (e.g., methane, hydrogen sulfide) and pathogens already compromised their immunity, making them more susceptible to severe COVID-19 outcomes. The average lifespan of a manual scavenger is 40-45 years, far below the national average, due to occupational hazards—a vulnerability worsened by the virus.

## Reported Deaths

While the government claimed zero deaths from manual scavenging in parliamentary responses (e.g., December 2021), 941 sewer and septic tank cleaning deaths were reported between 2017-2021, with 25 sanitation workers dying in 2021 alone during the second wave due to lack of protective gear, as noted by ORF<sup>7</sup>. These figures likely underrepresent manual scavengers specifically, as data collection is inconsistent.

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<sup>6</sup> *Health, Safety And Social Security Challenges Of Sanitation Workers In India During The Covid-19 Pandemic. A Rapid Assessment by Urban Management Centre and Wateraid India. September 2020.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/transforming-denial-into-deliberation-the-case-of-manual-scavenging>

## ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

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The economic fallout of the pandemic hit manual scavengers hard in 2021-22:

### **Loss of Income**

Private household employers often dismissed manual scavengers due to fears of virus transmission, associating their work with "uncleanness." This was especially acute during lockdowns, reducing their already meager earnings (often less than survival wages).

### **Increased Workload Without Compensation:**

Those employed by municipalities or hospitals faced extra hours cleaning COVID-related waste (e.g., placentas, dead animals, medical refuse) without additional pay or transport

support. For instance, in Hyderabad's Mehthar Gully, scavengers reported no extra allowances despite heightened risks.

### **Debt Bondage**

Economic necessity, compounded by the pandemic's disruption of alternative livelihoods, trapped many in debt bondage, forcing them to continue scavenging. The National Safai Karamchari Finance Development Corporation (NSKFDC) schemes, like the Rs. 40,000 one-time cash assistance, were insufficient to break this cycle, with only 14,000 receiving it in 2020-21—a trend likely continuing into 2021-22.

# SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND STIGMA

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**T**he pandemic intensified the social stigma faced by manual scavengers:  
Heightened Untouchability

The fear of infection reinforced their status as "untouchables among untouchables," with communities shunning them further. Ranjitha, a Dalit scavenger from Hyderabad, noted in 2020 that the virus made her community "untouchable again," a

sentiment likely persisting into 2021-22 as the second wave fueled paranoia.

## **Mental Health Strain**

Women, who comprise 95% of manual scavengers, faced additional emotional distress. The lockdown and economic pressures led to a spike in domestic violence, with societal prejudice compounding their isolation.

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# POLICY AND REHABILITATION GAPS

**Government response during 2021-22 remained inadequate:**

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## Vaccination Neglect

While frontline sanitation workers were prioritized for vaccines in 2021, manual scavengers were often excluded. Pragya Akhilesh, in The Indian Express (February 2021), highlighted that despite a manual scavenger being the first vaccinated in India, the broader community was overlooked, a gap likely persisting into 2021-22.

## Budget and Rehabilitation

The 2020-21 Union Budget allocated Rs. 110 crore for manual scavenger rehabilitation but was revised down to Rs. 30 crore. In 2021-22 too the allocation was Rs. 110 crore and was This was unchanged for 2021-22 despite

rising sewer deaths (e.g., 2019's peak of 110 fatalities). Only Rs. 84.80 crore was released in 2019-20, and utilization remained low in 2021-22, with just 30 people receiving capital subsidies by September 2020—a trend of underfunding likely continuing.

## Legal Enforcement

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers Act, 2013, was poorly enforced. The Supreme Court in 2023 criticized the lack of progress since its 2014 directives, suggesting 2021-22 saw little improvement in mechanization or safety gear provision.

## CONCLUSIONS

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In 2021-22, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the plight of manual scavengers through increased health risks, economic precarity, and social ostracism, with the second wave amplifying these challenges. The lack of PPE, exclusion from vaccination drives, and stagnant rehabilitation efforts left them uniquely vulnerable. While exact 2021-22 statistics are scarce due to underreporting (e.g., only 58,098 identified scavengers by December 2021 against SKA's 7.7 lakh estimate), the qualitative evidence paints a grim picture of a community pushed further into the margins.

Apathy towards the plight of manual scavengers continues as is evident from the exchanges in the Parliament. In the Rajya Sabha discussion on 16.03.22 the Government was asked about the status of Manual Scavenging in the Railways as of September, 2021. The Railway Minister replied that there is no manual scavenging on Indian Railways, despite surveys and data consistently showing that the practice continues. The fact that the government has never conducted a comprehensive survey to determine the number of manual scavengers suggests a lack of concern for this caste-based occupation.

Further, when the Minister was questioned about the statistics of rehabilitation measures taken by the government, instead of providing any specific numbers, cities, or states, he merely outlined the benefits of the SRMS scheme. However, this scheme, though detailed on paper, seems to have had limited success in actually benefiting those affected.

In another session, the Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment was asked about the progress of eradication of manual scavenging and whether it had been a government priority. The concern was raised that the progress had been rather inadequate,

slow, and sporadic. In response, the Minister asserted that eliminating manual scavenging is a high priority for the government. However, it is deeply troubling to report that, according to data available with the SKA, 142 people died in sewers and septic tanks in just 2021-2022 alone.

The fact that the government has repeatedly fabricated facts and denied the existence of manual scavenging in the country, while safai karmacharis continue to die in sewers and septic tanks, highlights their lackadaisical attitude. They must be held accountable for this ongoing neglect and the lives lost as a result.

# NARRATIVES

**Suraj Raju Madhave**

**Suraj Raju Madhave: Died while cleaning  
a septic tank on 29th March 2022 in  
Mumbra, Thane district.**

As Raju Ji's shop closed and his wife's school shut down because of COVID-19, all their sources of income closed. Suraj last resort was a cleaning job in Mumbra, which had him working in 3-4 places. A private contractor, lured him into cleaning septic tanks and offered 1000 rupees for entering and cleaning septic tanks. He was never provided with any safety gear or even hand gloves.

That day he entered the tank with Hanuman Vyankati Korpakkvad, who was 27 years old. The septic tank was 15ft deep. As he broke the lock and opened the tank, gas came out and they fell in unable to breathe. People outside raised an alarm as there was no movement for a while in the tank. However the contractor waited for a while before he acted. After 10 minutes, the people around panicked

and a person entered the tank. Soon it was found that all three had become unconscious by inhaling the poisonous gas. The fire service was called only then, who took them to the hospital where they were declared dead on arrival.

The Police inspector who filed the First Information Report and was supportive to the victim family, was transferred due to political pressure.

The families received compensation of 10 lakhs after a very long struggle of proving their eligibility and following bureaucratic procedures. Raju ji's wife now has a job of cleaning and garbage collection in the Municipal Corporation. She is on daily wage employment

and not a permanent worker on a very low income which is far from adequate to take care of the family.

The contractor, supervisor, and two others were sent to jail but were released in a few days. This has further disheartened the families. The family has not yet spent a single rupee from the compensation received, as they are still mourning the death of their young son. During the interview, he would only say, 'beta gaon chala gaya,' meaning 'my son has gone to the village.' His mother puts freshly prepared food in front of his picture and washes and irons his clothes every alternate day, hoping that whenever her son comes back he'll wear them.

Darshan, 38yrs



**Darshan, 38yrs,** belongs to the Valmiki community. He is married and has three children, two of whom are currently studying in school, while the eldest son, Shiv, had to discontinue his education after completing the 12th grade as they didn't have money for his higher education. Shiv aspires to join the NDA and serve his country.

Darshan works as a sewer cleaner, earning 200-300 rupees, depending on the size, without the provision of necessary equipment or protective gear. He has never been provided with a machine for this work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Darshan transported deceased bodies, bringing them down the stairs and taking them to the crematorium grounds for a fee ranging from 1500 to 2000 rupees. He also delivered oxygen cylinders to homes

and carried them upstairs to aid those in need, all without proper personal protective equipment or masks. He acknowledged the risks to his own life during this time but had no alternative as it was a matter of survival for his family, who would otherwise have nothing to eat. He continued working despite facing police lathi charges.

The children faced challenges when their schools transitioned to online classes, as they lacked access to a smartphone. To ensure their education would not be disrupted, Darshan mortgaged his wife's jewelry to purchase a phone. He is still paying off the loan.

All he wishes for is to secure a stable job of any kind, ensuring that he can provide a good education for his children, sparing them from the need to engage in the same demeaning job for their livelihood.

**Karan Veer, 38yrs.**



**Karan Veer, 38yrs.** belongs to the Valmiki community. He works as a sewer cleaner in various sectors of Rohini, responding to calls as they come in. He has been engaged in this occupation for a significant duration, during which he suffered a severe accident that resulted in the loss of one of his toes. He never received any safety gear or protective mask when entering the sewer line. He works as per the availability and gets 200-300 rupees.

During COVID-19 he struggled even for getting food as there was no money. He received no help from the government and instead got beaten up mercilessly by the police when he stepped out of his house. He would receive

calls for work but couldn't leave home because of the fear of getting beaten up by the police.

Karan Veer is a father of four daughters and a son. Two of his children attend a private school, made possible through a "lucky draw scheme." He aspires to provide the same educational opportunities for his other children, particularly to allow them to learn English. The lockdown period had a detrimental effect on his children's education, as they had only one phone, and all of their classes were scheduled simultaneously, making it impossible for all of them to study from that single device.

He hopes to get a permanent job so that he can ensure the education of his children.

## **Bharat Singh Vidlan, Mumbai, 52yrs.**

**Bharat Singh Vidlan, Mumbai, 52yrs,** Mumbai:

Former supervisor at Tata Power, now a daily wage earner cleaning sewers

Bharat was earlier a contractual employee at Tata Power but left his job when one of his co-workers got electrocuted while working, as he was not offered any compensation by the company. In protest of this incident, he left his job and now he is forced to work as a daily wage earner by doing sanitation work. He works as a sweeper on a need basis and also takes up sewer cleaning work whenever available. He is offered Rs. 100 to enter and clean small gutters of “gali” and Rs.300 to enter big gutters/nalas. He also takes up the work of bathroom cleaning, as per availability.

Bharat is made to enter the septic tanks without any safety gear or gloves due to which he has developed certain skin problems and has breathing issues.

Bharat has 2 daughters, one of whom is married and the other is studying in a government school in class 8. His wife has passed away. Currently, their family monthly earnings are around 1600-2200/- per month. Bharat informed that he is not aware of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and the Rehabilitation Act of 2013. Bharat mentioned that at the workplace he faces discrimination on the basis of caste and the work he does. Bharat raised the demand for permanent work where he can ensure stability for his family.



**Dharam Veer, 29yrs.**

**Dharam Veer, 29yrs,** belongs to the Valmiki community. He is unmarried and lives with his brother and his family in Delhi. He cleans the sewer line whenever the work is available. He has been doing this work for a long time now and has developed skin problems, broken teeth, and shoulder and knee injuries. He enters the sewage tanks for a meager amount of 100-200 rupees, without any safety gear or masks.

He worked during COVID-19 as well. After the

lockdown, the family was left to fend for themselves. As he is a daily wage earner, he had to go out and look for work, even after getting beaten up by the police. He had to change routes and hide from the police to look for work; otherwise, he would have to get through the day without eating. No help was provided to him or his family during the lockdown. He took up the work of carrying the dead bodies to the mortuary. Sometimes he would do this for free, especially in the scenario when the family members refused to touch the body. He felt bad about it and said, "I'm a human first," so he helped in cremating a lot of dead bodies throughout the pandemic. While working tirelessly during this time, he was not even given any PPE kit, mask, or safety gear. He had to buy masks from the small amount he would earn daily.

He is searching for a permanent job in the sanitation sector but wants to desperately give up the scavenging work.

The death of three sanitation workers while working in the septic tank on 11th March 2022, at a public toilet on Charkop link road in Kandivali (west).

**Interview with family members of the deceased.**

**Abdul Hameed Sayyad, 46yrs**, is the younger brother of the deceased Sayyad Rauf Age 40. Abdul is a tailor. Rauf worked on a contractual basis, with his daily wage ranging from 500 to 700 rupees. He was made to clean the sewage tank with his bare hands and had never been provided machines. He would get called for work based on the availability of work.

## Ganpati Veeraswamy Arunduriya, 45yrs.

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Pavitra, the niece of the deceased, is 22 years old and has studied nursing. She vividly remembers the 11th of March, 2022. Her father received a call from the Trombay Police Station, informing him about the incident. He rushed to the place and saw that three bodies were kept near the sewage tank, and none of them had any protective or safety gear, nor were they wearing gloves. They were sent down the tank with just one rope attached to them, and they did not have any machines to aid them in cleaning.

Her uncle had never received proper training for the cleaning work. The contractor who hired him asked him to do the work and

left the location. He worked on a contractual basis, with his daily wage ranging from 500 to 700 rupees. While he temporarily worked as an electrician, he took on cleaning work for extra money. Despite being a ration cardholder, he did not receive any help from the government during COVID-19.

The family has not yet received any compensation from the government, nor have they been offered jobs or rehabilitation to date. He is survived by one daughter who lives with her mother and visits their home occasionally. She is studying in a government school and managing somehow with support from her maternal side.

## Chanda Ravi Kumar, 47 yrs.

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Chanda Ravi Kumar, 47 years old, is the sister-in-law of the deceased Annadurai. She was informed by her neighbors of the incident, and then she called her husband, who followed up and went to the place of the incident. He was not a permanent worker, so he worked as per the availability of the work for Rs 500-600 rupees. No compensation from the government has yet been provided for the family, and no job or rehabilitation has been given to date. He is survived by one daughter who is 16 years old and has completed her 10th standard. She was forced to leave her school and stop her education as they did not have money to continue her education.

Nizamuddin, the owner of that public toilet; Dharmveer Rana, and the contractor conspired to take advantage of the lack of knowledge of the victim's family and gave Rs 1 lakh each to the three families, claiming they would need the money for a lawyer's fees.

They got the families to sign receipts for the money and later called them, falsely stating that the families had received 10 lakhs from them. The contractor who used to take the deceased workers for the cleaning work asked for 5k from each family, stating that he had helped them get that 1 lakh. The contractor with two others were jailed for 3 months but were let go due to political connections. All the members of the family were mostly unaware of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and the Rehabilitation Act of 2013. The lawyer had approached the families himself to take up the case and took 3k for filing the case but did not give them even the case number, implying that this matter is not even filed in the court. The family thinks that their illiteracy and poverty force them into the septic tanks and it is not because of their caste.

