



Policy Position on Safai Karmacharis 2022-2023



SAFAI KARMACHARI ANDOLAN

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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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The status of manual scavengers in India during the 2022-23 period reflects a complex situation where official claims of eradication contrast sharply with ground realities, persistent challenges, and ongoing efforts toward rehabilitation.

On March 16th 2022, in the Rajya Sabha, the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment said,

“No Sir, there is no verified report of people engaged in manual scavenging in the country. However manual cleaning of sewer and septic tanks is being resorted to in some areas”.

The Union government in the Winter Session 2022 told Lok Sabha that no person had died from manual scavenging in the country in the last three

years (2019 to 2022). He added that 233 people had died “due to accidents while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks” in this period.

While the Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Shri Ramdas Athawale in a written reply in Rajya Sabha during Budget session 2023 informed about the details of deaths of persons in sewers and septic tanks during the last five years (2018 to 2022)¹. Regarding compensation of Rs. 10 lakhs in the event of death, the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, Shri Ramdas Athwale presented the following data regarding compensation in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha on

02 February 2022². Out of the 321 persons who died, 259 had received compensation between 2017 and 2021.

Claim of Eradication

The Indian government, through the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, aimed to declare India "manual scavenging-free" by August 2023, as part of its commitments under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. By mid-2023, Minister Ramdas Athawale stated that 520 out of 766 districts had reported themselves free of manual scavenging, with the remaining 246 districts under pressure to

comply or report data via the "Swachhata Abhiyaan" mobile app launched in December 2020. However, the ministry consistently maintained in parliamentary responses (e.g., July 2022, August 2023) that "no credible reports" confirmed the ongoing practice, asserting that manual scavenging, as defined under the 2013 Act, had been eradicated.

Survey Data

Official surveys identified 58,098 "erstwhile manual scavengers" between 2013 and 2018 across 18 states, with no new nationwide survey conducted specifically for 2022-23 or covering all states.

¹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1897425>

² <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=231297>

GROUND REALITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Persistent Practice

Despite the ban and official claims, manual scavenging continued in 2022-23, often under the guise of sewer and septic tank cleaning, which the government technically distinguishes from "manual scavenging" unless performed without protective gear or mechanization. The Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA), reported 339 deaths of manual scavengers in 2022-23, highlighting the practice's persistence. This figure contrasts with the government's claim of zero manual scavenging deaths, instead attributing 84 deaths in 2022 to "hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks."

Underreporting

The SKA and other activists, argue that the official count vastly underestimates the reality, estimating closer to 7.7 lakh manual scavengers nationwide, compared to the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011 figure of 1.82 lakh households dependent on the practice. The 2018 survey by the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), which found 87,913 manual scavengers but recognized only 42,303, was criticized for being limited to statutory towns, excluding rural areas where 60% of manual scavenging occurs.

Caste and Gender Dynamics

Data from 2022-23 reinforces

the caste-based nature of the occupation, with over 97% of manual scavengers belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC), particularly Dalit subcastes like Valmiki and Hela. A 2024 analysis of the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) profiling showed 92% of sewer and septic tank workers (SSWs) were from SC, ST, or OBC communities. Women, comprising 95-98% of dry latrine cleaners, faced double marginalization due to caste and gender, often earning less than men who cleaned sewers.

Deaths and Hazards

The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) reported 631 deaths from sewer and septic tank cleaning over the decade ending

2023, with 84 occurring in 2022 alone. Tamil Nadu (52 deaths from 2018-2022), Uttar Pradesh (46), and Haryana (40) were among the highest. These fatalities, often due to toxic gas inhalation (e.g., hydrogen sulfide, methane), underscore the lack of safety gear and mechanization, despite legal mandates.

Health Risk

Manual scavengers faced chronic health issues like respiratory diseases, skin infections, and hepatitis, exacerbated by poor working conditions. The absence of PPE remained a critical gap in 2022-23, with studies (e.g., Karnataka research cited by CSE in 2024³) noting inadequate transitions to safer livelihoods.

³ *State of India's Environment, 2024. CSE and Down to Earth Publication.*

POLICY AND REHABILITATION

Budget Allocation

The Union Budget 2022-23 did not allocate specific funds for the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS). Instead, Rs. 100 crore was earmarked for National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem” (NAMASTE) in 2023-24, focusing on mechanization and profiling SSWs for the purpose of making them ‘sanipreneurs’ rather than direct rehabilitation of manual scavengers with alternate occupation and livelihoods. By 2022-23, only 27,268 of the 58,098 identified scavengers had received benefits like one-time cash assistance (Rs. 40,000) or skill training, per ministry data.

The Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers

SRMS was designed to assist the identified manual scavengers and their dependents in rehabilitation in alternative occupations. The major components of this scheme, as of the year 2020-21, included:

1. One-Time cash assistance of Rs. 40,000/- provided to identified manual scavengers.
2. Credit-linked back-end capital subsidy of up to Rs. 3.25 lakh and concessional loans for project costs up to Rs. 15.00 lakhs.
3. Skill development training

lasting up to two years, with a stipend of Rs. 3,000/- per month, offered to manual scavengers and their dependents who opt for such training.

4. Subsidy on loans for manual scavengers, sanitation workers, and their dependents for sanitation-related projects (for projects costing up to Rs. 15 lakhs).
5. Coverage of manual scavengers for health insurance under the Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) Yojana.
6. Behavioral skill development training (RPL)
7. Health camps.
8. Workshops on hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.

NAMASTE Initiative

NAMASTE scheme (National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem) scheme has the following key goals:

- ▶ Ensure the safety and dignity of sanitation workers in urban India by recognizing their vital role in maintaining sanitation infrastructure.
- ▶ Provide access to entitlements and alternative livelihood support through capital subsidies for sanitation-related projects, reducing the vulnerabilities of sanitation workers and breaking the cycle of intergenerational sanitation work.
- ▶ Promote a change in behavior among stakeholders to enhance respect and demand for safe sanitation services. Encourage mechanized cleaning of sewer lines and septic tanks to eliminate hazardous cleaning practices and prevent sanitation-related deaths.

The key difference between the two schemes, SRMS and the NAMASTE schemes:

1. SRMS included the objective of rehabilitating the manual scavengers in alternative occupations:

In the context of SRMS, there was a clear goal to address the plight of manual scavengers who were engaged in this demeaning and hazardous occupation. The objective of SRMS was to provide support and assistance to help these manual scavengers transition into different and more dignified occupations. This rehabilitation process was essential for improving their quality of life and economic well-being.

2. Providing them with the freedom to choose their labor:

The SRMS emphasized the importance of empowering manual scavengers by giving them

the freedom to decide what kind of work they want to engage in. Rather than being forced into manual scavenging due to a lack of alternatives, they should have the autonomy to choose occupations that align with their skills, interests, and aspirations. This choice is crucial for their personal dignity and economic independence.

3. The NAMASTE scheme does not focus on rehabilitation at all:

In contrast to SRMS, the NAMASTE scheme does not prioritize the rehabilitation aspect for manual scavengers. It may primarily focus on other aspects, such as improving safety, providing skill development, and changing societal perceptions about sanitation workers. This lack of emphasis on rehabilitation means that NAMASTE might not

actively support manual scavengers in transitioning to alternative occupations.

In summary, SRMS placed a strong emphasis on rehabilitating manual scavengers and empowering them to choose different occupations, while the NAMASTE scheme does not have rehabilitation as a central focus. It focuses on sanitation work only and allocates no funds to remove the safai karmacharis from the sanitation line of work. This difference in approach reflects varying priorities and strategies between the two schemes in addressing the challenges faced by manual scavengers.

Legal Developments

In October 2023, the Supreme Court directed the government to eradicate manual sewer cleaning in a phased manner, criticizing the lack of progress since its 2014

orders. The Supreme Court passed the following orders directing the Union and State Governments to ensure the following:

- Complete eradication of manual scavenging - issue such guidelines and directions as are essential, that any sewer cleaning work outsourced, or required to be discharged, by or through contractors or agencies, do not require individuals to enter sewers, for any purpose whatsoever;
- Full rehabilitation (including employment to the next of kin, education to the wards, and skill training) measures are taken in respect of sewage workers, and those who die;
- Increase compensation for sewer deaths from Rs. 10 lakhs to Rs. 30 lakhs.
- Compensation in the case

of sewer victims suffering disabilities, depending upon the severity of disabilities. Minimum compensation shall not be less than 10 lakhs. If the disability is permanent, and renders the victim economically helpless, the compensation shall not be less than ₹20 lakhs.

- Accountability for sewer deaths. The appropriate government (i.e., the Union, State or Union Territories) shall devise a suitable mechanism to ensure accountability, especially wherever sewer deaths occur in the course of contractual or “outsourced” work. This accountability shall be in the form of cancellation of contract, forthwith, and imposition of monetary liability, aimed at deterring the practice.
- Conduct a national survey within the next one year.
- Scholarships for dependents of sewer victims to ensure that the dependents of sewer victims, (who have died, or might have suffered disabilities) are given meaningful education.
- Set up State and District level committees and commissions.
- A portal and a dashboard, containing all relevant information, including the information relating to sewer deaths, and victims, and the status of compensation disbursement, as well as rehabilitation measures taken, and existing and available rehabilitation policies shall be developed and launched at an early date.

BUDGET ANALYSIS

It is disappointing that the government has only allocated Rs. 70 Crores for the Self Employment of Manual Scavengers in 2022-23.

The Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) provides: (i) one-time cash assistance of Rs 40,000 to the identified manual scavenger (ii) loans up to Rs 15 lakh at a concessional rate of interest (iii) a credit-linked back-end capital subsidy of up to Rs 3,25,000 and (iv) skill development training

for up to two years with a stipend of Rs 3,000 per month. There is no allocation under this scheme in 2023-24 (BE) and it appears to have been discontinued.

An examination of trends shows that there has been poor utilisation of funds for several years. After the National Survey on Manual Scavengers in 2018, the allocation was increased, but remained inadequate considering the number of manual scavengers identified in the survey. The National Human Rights Commission

had suggested linking this scheme to MGNREGS and boosting the monetary support from Rs 40,000 to Rs 1 lakh, but this has not been carried out⁴.

But in 2023-24 the SRMS scheme was discontinued and in its place the Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), a new scheme has replaced SRMS, with an allocation of Rs 97 crore in 2023-24 BE. The new scheme does not have any provision of direct cash

assistance as was the case earlier. The discontinuation of SRMS also comes at a time when there has been much debate in the country regarding the difference between manual scavengers and those who clean sewers and septic tanks. While the Union government maintains that there are no deaths in the country due to manual scavenging, but only while cleaning sewers and septic tanks, activists argue that both are the same⁵.

⁴ *Walking the Tightrope An Analysis of Union Budget 2023 24. CBGA*

⁵ *Walking the Tightrope An Analysis of Union Budget 2023 24. CBGA*

Parliamentary Debates

In the Rajya Sabha discussions on April 5, 2023, the Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment was questioned regarding the employment conditions of manual scavengers in India. Specifically, the inquiry focused on whether manual scavengers were employed as contract, migrant, or casual laborers, and whether any of them were working as bonded laborers. The question also sought to understand the state-wise actions taken by the government to address this grave issue.

To this question, the minister responded that **there are no people currently engaged in manual scavenging in the country.**

The response provided by the Minister in the

Rajya Sabha discussion is particularly concerning because it contradicts both historical data and the findings of various surveys, which consistently confirm the ongoing existence of manual scavenging practices in India, despite being officially banned by the 2013 Act. The government's response, which denied the existence of manual scavengers, flies in the face of the overwhelming evidence provided by the official data from SKA. It is not only out of step with the findings of national surveys but also ignores the lived experiences of many individuals who continue to be trapped in manual scavenging, often under exploitative conditions.

Despite the law, manual scavenging is still prevalent, where it is still practiced under hazardous conditions, with individuals being forced to clean sewers, septic tanks, and latrines without proper safety equipment for a meagre amount.

Adding to this contradiction, the Ministry's own response admitted that people had indeed died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks, though the Minister argued that these deaths were not related to manual scavenging. This distinction is problematic because, in practice, cleaning sewers and septic tanks is synonymous with manual scavenging, especially when it is carried out without proper mechanized equipment or safety precautions. The Minister's attempt to separate these two concepts undermines the severity of the issue, as it fails to acknowledge that any such work is inherently dangerous

and can lead to fatalities, and it arises from the larger caste discrimination issues.

For instance, according to data provided by the Safai Karamchari Andolan, approximately 195 people died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks during the 2022-2023 period alone. This figure starkly highlights the dangerous conditions under which people are still forced to engage in manual scavenging, despite the legal framework that prohibits it. The fact that these deaths continue to occur at such alarming rates in the modern era reveals a significant gap between the government's policies and the reality faced by manual scavengers on the ground.

These deaths, many of which could have been prevented with proper equipment and mechanized tools, further underscore the inadequacy of the current rehabilitation and preventive measures. The government's

failure to adequately address these fatalities or to take meaningful steps to stop manual scavenging perpetuates a cycle of exploitation, where the safai karmachari community is forced to work in life-threatening conditions with little to no recourse for justice.

When further pressed about the state-wise details of manual scavengers and individuals who had died while performing hazardous tasks such as cleaning sewers and septic tanks in the past five years, **the Minister initially stated that there is no report of death due to manual scavenging. However, people died during cleaning of sewers and septic tanks** and then went on to provide a detailed state-wise list of individuals who had died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks between 2018 and 2022.

This response is clearly contradictory. On one

hand, the Minister denied the existence of manual scavenging and the deaths that are happening because of it. On the other hand, the state-wise list he presented documented deaths that had occurred precisely during activities linked to manual scavenging. This discrepancy raises serious questions about the accuracy and transparency of the government's reporting on manual scavenging and the rehabilitation of affected individuals.

The Minister's statement in the Rajya Sabha, which mentioned that 308 people died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks between 2018 and 2022, is highly concerning. This number, provided by the government, is far from accurate and fails to capture the true scale of the tragedy. According to data from SKA, the actual number of deaths during the same period stands at 441. This discrepancy

of 133 deaths between the government's report and SKA's data is significant and highlights a critical issue—the government's inability or unwillingness to accurately track and report deaths related to manual scavenging.

To this response SKA has repeatedly asked where are those 133 people? If according to the data, these people have not died then the government should bring these people and send them back to their families.

In a separate question, the Minister was asked about the measures the government has taken to ensure the distribution and use of safety equipment among sanitation workers, as well as the details of initiatives aimed at mechanizing the cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.

In response, the Minister stated that the government has introduced the NAMASTE scheme to prevent deaths related to sewer and septic

tank cleaning. This initiative aims to formalize the process of sewer and septic tank cleaning by ensuring that only trained workers are involved, thereby preventing fatalities due to hazardous cleaning practices. This response does not address how the formalization process will occur, how the training will be implemented, or, most importantly, how these measures will prevent the fatalities.

This attitude of the government speaks volumes about their lack of concern for the well-being of people from the Safai Karamchari communities, their failure to address the deeply entrenched caste system, and their disregard for the lives of those who continue to face hazardous and degrading working conditions. It also reflects a broader systemic neglect, hindering efforts to achieve true social justice and equality.

CONCLUSION

In 2022-23, manual scavenging in India remained a stark reality despite official denials, with 441 deaths reported by SKA against the government's 308 hazardous cleaning fatalities. The identified 58,098 scavengers likely represent a fraction of the true number, with rehabilitation efforts (e.g., SRMS, NAMASTE) lagging due to underfunding, poor implementation, and a focus on urban rather than rural areas. The period highlighted a disconnect between policy intent and execution, with caste, gender, and economic factors perpetuating the practice.

Notes

