



# ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OF SAFAI KARMACHARI WOMEN MAHARASHTRA

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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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# ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OF SAFAI KARAMCHARI WOMEN MAHARASTRA

## About The Socio Economic Status Of Maharashtra And Mumbai

“**M**aharashtra is located on the coast of the magnificent Arabian Sea and occupies the western & central peninsular region of India. The State ranks 2nd by population & 3rd in terms of geographical area and is one of the highly urbanised states in India. The State is well connected through roadways, railways, airways, waterways and ultra-modern transport systems like monorail & metrorail. The State ranks 2nd by population & 3rd in terms of geographical area and is one of the highly urbanised states in India. The State is well connected through roadways, railways, airways, waterways and ultra-modern transport systems like monorail & metrorail. Well-developed infrastructure, abundant natural resources, connectivity to all major areas, skilled manpower and quality education make Maharashtra an ideal destination for setting up of new industries. The State capital Mumbai is the financial capital of India. Mumbai

is home of nationalised banks, leading finance institutions, corporate houses & firms as well as has Asia's oldest Stock Exchange, the Bombay Stock Exchange. The female work participation was lowest in the konkan revenue division, where Mumbai is situated and lowest (18.28 per cent) in Mumbai Suburban district” (Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2023-24).

## Focus and Factoids: Maharashtra NFHS 5 2019-21 (Aashna Jain. PARI 2021)

1. Approximately half (53 per cent) of the households surveyed in Maharashtra were in rural areas. Around 77 per cent of the households resided in pucca houses and 97.4 per cent of households had access to electricity.
2. Of the households surveyed, 15 per cent were headed by women. Further, 80.6 per cent of the household heads in Maharashtra were Hindu, 10.2 per cent were Muslim and 6.1 per cent were Buddhist/Neo-Buddhists.
3. Around 93.8 per cent of surveyed



households had access to an 'improved source' of drinking water, such as piped water, public taps, standpipes, tube wells or boreholes. Basic sanitation facilities were accessible to 71 per cent of households in the state. The report notes that 17.4 per cent of households did not have any toilet facilities and used open spaces and fields for defecation.

4. 'Clean fuel' – electricity, liquefied petroleum gas, natural gas – was used by 79.7 per cent of the total households surveyed in the state. The numbers were higher in urban areas (95.6 per cent) than in rural areas (65.4 per cent).
5. In Maharashtra, 60.5 per cent of

children (aged 2-4 years) attended preschool. Among children aged 6-17 years, school attendance was recorded at 92.5 per cent. Attendance was high (96.9 per cent) among children between the ages of 6-14 years but fell to 78.8 per cent among those aged 15-17 years.

6. The median age at first marriage for women (aged 20-49 years) was 19.6 years. The total fertility rate in the state was recorded at 1.7 children per woman, a fall from the fertility rate of 1.87 children recorded in NFHS-4.
7. The report recorded the contraceptive prevalence rate among married women (aged 15-49 years) to be 66 per cent. About 64 per



cent of married women surveyed in Maharashtra used modern methods of contraception like sterilization, pills, intrauterine devices, injectables and condoms.

8. Among women aged 15-24, around 85 per cent used hygienic methods of menstrual protection. As many as 75.8 per cent used sanitary napkins, 1.7 per cent used tampons and 0.1 per cent used menstrual cups.
9. The infant mortality rate in Maharashtra reduced slightly from the NFHS-4 numbers of 23.9 deaths (before the age of one year) per 1,000 live births to 23.2 deaths in NFHS-5. During the same period, the under-five mortality rate also reduced slightly from 29.1 deaths (before the age of five years) to 28 deaths. Infant mortality rates were highest among people belonging to Scheduled Tribes (31 deaths).
10. Of the women who had given birth in the five years prior to the survey, 81 per cent received antenatal care from a doctor and 12 per cent received care from an auxiliary nurse midwife, a lady health visitor, a nurse or a midwife. Almost 95 per cent of all births in the state took place in a health facility and 5.1 per cent took place at home.
11. Among children (aged 12-23 months) 73.5 per cent were vaccinated against tuberculosis, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, and measles. Roughly, 5.2 per cent of the children in this age group had not received any vaccinations.
12. The report notes that 69 per cent of children between the ages of 6-59 months were anaemic, an increase from the 54 per cent noted in NFHS-4. Anaemia was also recorded among 54 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men (aged 15-49 years) in the state.
13. Among the people surveyed in the state, 88.4 per cent of women and 95.1 per cent of men had heard of HIV/AIDS. However, only 34.4 per cent of women and 42.6 per cent of men had 'comprehensive knowledge' of it.
14. For every 100,000 persons in Maharashtra, 131 were estimated to have medically treated tuberculosis. As per self-reports (questionnaires answered without researcher guidance), per 100,000 men and women each, 1,523 men and 1,547 women had asthma, and 2,340 men and 1,721 women had diabetes.
15. In the 12 months preceding the survey, only 41 per cent of women compared to 82 per cent of men (aged 15-49 years) were employed.
16. Among women between the ages of 18-49 surveyed in the state, 26 per cent reported having experienced sexual or physical violence and five per cent women reported both sexual and physical violence. Only two per cent of these women sought help from the police.

# Report of Safai Karmachari Andolan's Study with Safai Karmachari Women in Mumbai on their experiences of economic inequalities:

**S**afai Karmachari Andolan interviewed 90 safai karmachari women in Mumbai city on their experiences with economic inequalities. The Economic survey and the National Family Health Survey 5 of Maharashtra indicates that the state and the city of Mumbai are above average when compared to the survey of India in the same national surveys. However, the safai Karmacharis living in the segregated bastis and slums in the middle of Mumbai have a different story to tell. The results highlighted below point to structural inequalities based on caste and gender that continue to oppress them and maintain barriers that prevent their economic empowerment.

The safai karmachari live in 3 slums of Mumbai. The slums are segregated and isolated by caste and occupation. Of the 90 women who participated in the study, there were 29 single women (5 unmarried, 1 divorced and 23 widows). 22 women were in the age group of 20-35; 52 in the age group

of 35- 50 yrs and 14 in the age group 50-65. A few did not know their age. There were 4 women with a physical disability.

The Safai karmachari Andolan held interviews using a detailed questionnaire, which was translated to hindi. The questionnaire was designed at an expert consultation. A workshop was held to orient the team on the process of interviews and using the tool.

## **The Questionnaire included the following heads**

- ▶▶ Background Details which included Age and marital status
- ▶▶ Education and scholarships
- ▶▶ Occupation
- ▶▶ Economic status of assets and housing
- ▶▶ Health
- ▶▶ Access to Government Schemes and Entitlements
- ▶▶ Caste and Gender Discrimination
- ▶▶ Problems women face due to their gender

## EDUCATION STATUS

### ►► Educational levels are very low in the Safai Karmachari community

Only 1 woman has studied beyond Class 12, and nearly 40% (30) have never been to school. 50% of the women had less than 5 years of schooling.

#### EDUCATION

No education	30
Class 1 - 5	16
Class 6 - 10	36
Class 11 - 12	4
Above class 12	1

According to NHFS 5 Twelve percent of women age 15-49 have never been to school and 32 percent of women in the same age have completed 12 or more years of schooling. But safai karmachari women are far below the state average showing the inequalities in education.

### ►► Access to government scholarships for the children

The next generation, the children, find access to education a challenge

#### Scholarship for Children's education:

Availed of government support for children's education	0
Children availed Pre Matric Scholarship for children of scavenging community	0
Children availed Post Matric Scholarship for SC	0
Children availed any other Scholarship	0
Children secured admission in Special Residential School	0

While the government has special educational schemes for the community, access to these entitlements is non-existent. No child from this community in Mumbai has received any benefit from government education schemes whether it is Pre Matric Scholarship for Scavenging Committee or other Scholarships or admission in a Special Residential School.



## OCCUPATION

### ►► Primary Occupation and Employment Status

Of the 90 persons who participated in the survey, close to 54 (60%) stated that their occupation is in sanitation in public spaces. Even those who said they did other work probably do this in addition to the sanitation work they do as they listed their occupation as domestic workers or maids.

#### OCCUPATION

Cleaning work	22
Cooking	2
Domestic worker	8
House maid	2
Housewife	7
Knitting	0
Not working	1
Sanitation worker	29
Scavenger	2
Sweeper	1
Tailor	0
Tuition teacher	1

Only 3 persons have listed any form on non caste based occupation. 2 have stated their occupation to be cooking and 1 woman said that she is a tuition teacher. Of the 90 women only 3 women had broken away from the caste based occupation. When women talk of cooking as an occupation it is paid work unlike all the 8 who mentioned being housewives who were cooking as an

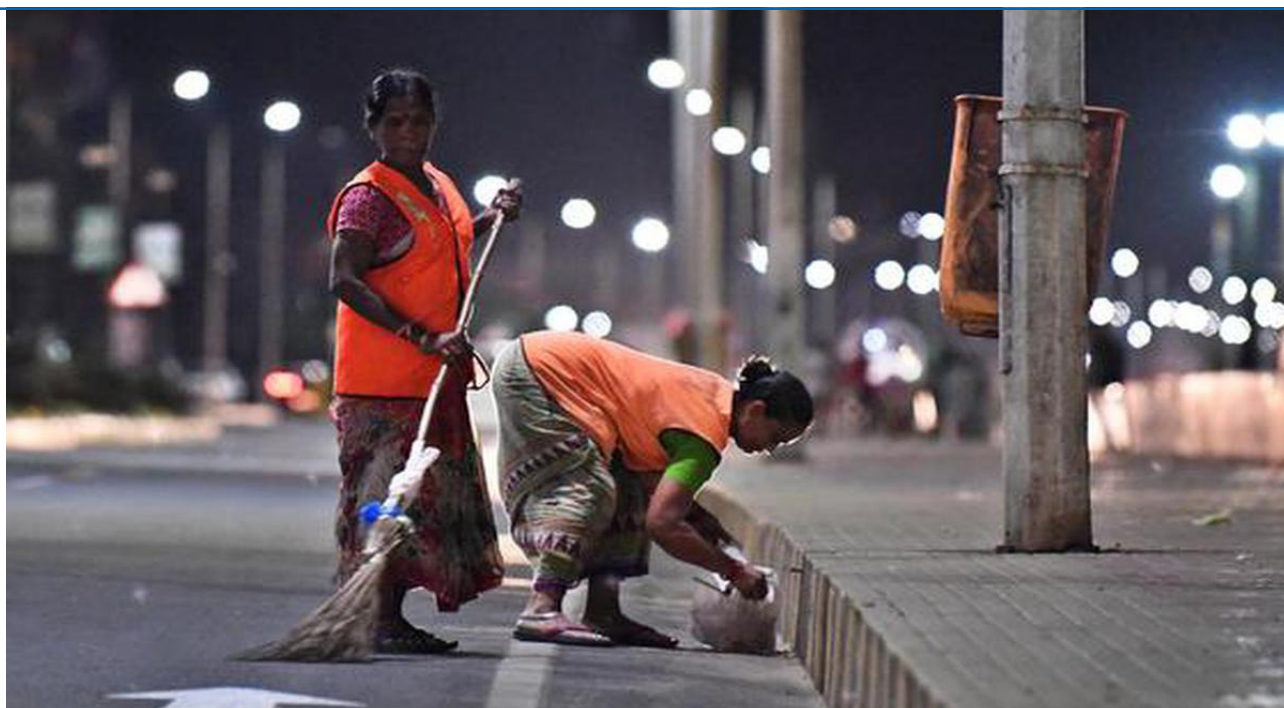
#### SANITATION WORK

Cleaning of dry latrine	0
Sewage cleaning	0
Cleaning septic tank of latrine pit	0
Cleaning latrine in other households	0
Cleaning of public flush latrine	0
Cleaning open drain	0
Cleaning railway track	7
Cleaning open defecation	0

Only 7 women said they were involved in cleaning railway tracks which appears to indicate that cleaning dry latrines, public latrines, sewer work, cleaning open drains, cleaning septic tanks, cleaning faeces from open defecation areas, and cleaning latrines in others houses is not an issue.

60 of the respondents said they were engaged as scavenger, sweeper, sanitation worker, cleaning work, domestic and house work. The probability of them being involved in cleaning toilets is too high to be dismissed





## ►► Safai Karmacharis are Discriminated by The Caste Based Work by Descent

97 percent (87 women out of 90) of the community members have been affected by manual scavenging for more than 2 generations and 57 women have themselves been doing this work for more than 34 years.

### INTERGENERATIONAL

More than three generations	2
Three generations	78
Two generations	7
One generation	0

### Years in same work of scavenging

More than 20 years	34
10 - 20 years	23
5 - 10 years	10
Below 5 years	13

This is typical of discrimination by work by descent. The intergenerational and hereditary nature of this occupation is a typical feature of caste and untouchability manifested by the work by descent discrimination. It is obvious that the previous generations of the respondents have been engaged in manual scavenging of dry latrines.

**LIVELIHOOD SKILLS:** Apart from tailoring and cooking skills, that 86 women said they have, the Safai Karamchari women have little or no other livelihood skills. Tailoring and cooking can be viewed more as domestic skills rather than livelihood skills. Combined with the extremely low levels of education, they have practically no options for alternative occupation.

### LIVELIHOOD SKILLS FOR ALTERNATIVE OCCUPATION

Agriculture	0
Construction	0
Driving	1
Livestock rearing	1
Cooking	78
Tailoring	8
Midwife	4
Beautician	4
Computers	2
Teaching	4
Others	3

If the skills that the safai karmachari women have are channeled and tapped for professional employment the link between caste and unclean occupation can be broken. Here the 90 women possess 9 other skills that has the potential to remove the economic inequalities. This points to a failure of the government schemes for rehabilitation with dignified livelihoods.



## EMPLOYMENT AND WAGE INEQUALITIES

Not a single woman has permanent government employment and 79 said they have permanent private employment. All the women who are working in the sanitation sector are working under the contract. They believe their employment is of permanent nature. But being under a private contractor and without education and skills of negotiation the women are not aware of their precarious situation. Given the lack of education and alternative livelihood skills, the members of the community are forced to continue in the sanitation work earning a meagre amount

### ECONOMIC STATUS

#### Employment Status:

Government Employment	
Permanent	0
Temporary	0
Casual daily wage	0
Contract	0

#### Private Employment

Permanent	79
Temporary	0
Casual daily wage	0
Contract	0
Self Employed	0

SKA has counted more than 140 sewerage deaths in Maharashtra. Safai Karmacharis remaining in contractual employment in unorganized sector are unprotected by any labour laws for decent work and wages. Moreover, such employment is a violation of labour laws, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013 and human rights.

### Income And Indebtedness

#### Monthly Income:

Less than 5000	18
5000 - 10000	44
10000 - 20000	15
Above 20000	0

#### Debts:

Moneylender	0
Bank	8
Employer	3
Mortgaged gold or other articles	13
Others	13

70 percent women are earning below minimum wages. Majority of the women are the providers for the family for food, water and all other household expenses in addition to education and health. The low wages points to blatant economic inequalities. They are trapped into a lifetime of indebtedness that further makes them vulnerable to humiliation from money lenders. The low wages and the indebtedness are the visible signs of extreme economic inequalities.

## ▶▶ HOUSING ASSETS AND GOVERNMENT ENTITLEMENTS

The Safai Karmachari women have very limited access to government entitlements. Only 16 women have a caste certificate. Only one woman said she had a government health card and none of them had received any kind of government support for health issues. One woman has benefitted from the Government Rehabilitation Program and 81 have the above poverty line ration card which deprives the household of much needed nutrition.

### ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT ENTITLEMENTS

Caste Certificate	16
Government rehabilitation benefit	1
Ration Card:	
BPL Card	0
Antyodaya Card	0
APL	81
Other	9
Government Health Card:	
Ayushman	1
ESI	0

Majority safai karmachari women do not have access to government entitlements. Without a caste certificate they do not benefit from the schemes for scheduled castes and cannot even access the SC ST prevention of atrocities act for protection against caste violence. This is a most unjust situation that the most vulnerable are deprived of their due entitlements.

The vulnerability of the community is further compounded by a lack of assets and accumulation of debt. Around 20 claimed to own some asset. Of these 19 own a vehicle. Nobody owns a house.

#### Housing:

Living in own house	79
Living in rented house	10
Living in unauthorised housing	0
Hut	0
Tiled Roof	57
Thatch or wood roof	32
RCC house	0
Slab	0

#### Assets/Property:

House	0
Animal	1
Vehicle	19
Livelihood asset - pushcart, sewing machine, shop, etc.	0
Animal and Vehicle	0
Animal and Livelihood asset	0
House and Livelihood asset	0
House and Agriculture land	0
House and Vehicle	0



## ►► Caste And Gender Based Occupation And Discrimination:

Most of the respondents said they felt discriminated against because of their occupation and felt that it was only because of their caste that they were in the occupation of manual scavenging. An overwhelming majority of respondents (66) said they were safai karmacharis because of their caste and 36 said it was because they were women that they were in this work.

### CASTE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Working as safai karmacharis because of caste	66
Working as safai karmacharis because they are women	36
Working as safai karmacharis both in parent's and in-law's place	73
No-one to take their place when they don't work	62
Living in segregated habitation because of caste	76
Living in segregated habitation because of occupation	79
Discriminated against because of occupation as manual scavenger	79
Children discriminated against because of parents' occupation as manual scavenger	24

The Safai karmachari women in the community bear the burden of discrimination and violence stemming both from caste prejudice and patriarchy. They are forced to do this work no matter where they live - whether in their maternal home or their in-laws home. A very large number of 73 women categorically said they do this work in both places. 62 women said that even if they do not do this work due to whatever reason, no one else will.

Majority of those surveyed - 79 - are living in a segregated basti based on caste and specifically their occupation as safai karmacharis. They face discrimination on a regular basis. 79 women said that others look down on them because of the work they do and 24 women said their children are discriminated against in school because of the work they do. Given the lack of access to education and alternative occupation because of lack of skills and resources, they are forced to continue in the same work. Further, though 78 women have the skill of cooking, the fact that only 2 of them are employed as cooks point to a deep seated prejudice against appointing women from the community to handle food.



## ISSUES OF WOMEN

The life expectancy of safaikarmcharis is low. Majority die early at an average age of 50. Their premature deaths is mainly due to the impact of their constant contact with human excreta. It is very common to see the community affected by gastroenteritis, skin diseases, respiratory tract infections and lung cancer, liver cirrhosis etc. These diseases can be directly linked to their work and occupation.

### PROBLEMS WOMEN FACE

Health Issues	66
Respiratory	14
Stomach/Liver	6
Skin	9
Tuberculosis	1
Blindness	3
Menstrual problems	18
Anaemia	40
Blood Pressure	62
Diabetes	1
Others	15

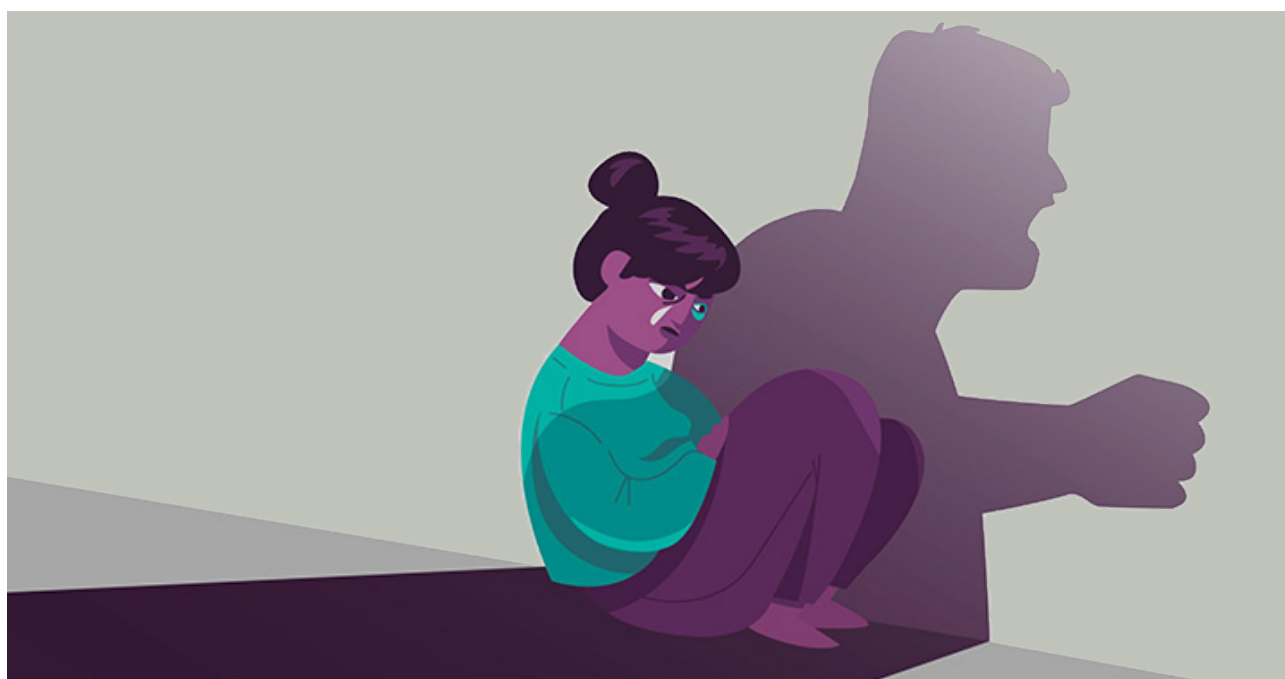
Every woman has reported a health issue that can be linked to the occupation and the environment of deprivation. The problem is exacerbated with the denial of a government health schemes. With such health issues there is bound to be loss of wages and increased indebtedness for both daily sustenance and health care. This is increasing the already existing inequalities and denial of public welfare schemes adds to the problems.

Indebtedness, Menstrual issues, Health issues, the burden of Domestic work, Domestic violence, Occupation related issues, and access to water and sanitation emerge as the major issues that the Safaikarmachari women face on a regular basis. Their low education levels, lack of alternative livelihood skills, lack of assets, burden of debt, denial of entitlements, perpetuate their economic inequality that both stems from their caste based occupation and keeps them in the same occupation.

### Issues women face:

Domestic violence	9
Water and sanitation	60
Menstrual issues	26
Health issues	42
Indebtedness	30
Hunger	1
Domestic work	31
Occupation	26
Others	0

Water and sanitation is a state responsibility. Majority have stated this to be an issue. It shows that the state has excluded the community from the universal WASH schemes. Gender based menstrual issues and domestic work and caste based occupation are also significantly reported as issues. A large issue is indebtedness which is the outcome of all the inequalities



# Conclusion

The historical caste-based discrimination and exclusions has resulted in a cycle of intergenerational work by descent and segregation, trapping the safai karmachari community in an endless saga of poverty and deprivation. For long the Government of India has been making allocations for the education, dignified livelihoods, housing, WASH and many other schemes that have specifically targeted the safai Karmachari communities. But every year there has been underspend on the budgetary allocations resulting in revision to lower funding for the liberation and rehabilitation of the communities.

Most government programmes are based on eligibility with proof of identity and ownership of housing and assets to access support. The historically excluded communities have been disempowered systematically by denying these validating documents to prove eligibility as the survey shows that there is absolute exclusion of the safai Karmacharis as none have the community certificates and documents to prove eligibility. By using this criteria, the schemes have bypassed the community in the maze of bureaucratic systems, formats and mechanisms. The situation of the safai karmacharis is obvious and visible. It

does not need any sophisticated system to implement such schemes for a community victimized by the worst atrocity of manual scavenging. It only requires a committed and proactive political will which is blatantly lacking in the system either by design or oversight. This non consideration of the community's historical injustice is evident in the move of the government to remove the funding for the Self-employment scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers with the justification of bringing in infrastructure and machinery related schemes of the National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem; Jal Jeevan Mission and SBM which are universal and do not have any particular focus on empowering the safai karmachari communities with economic equality. The exclusion from education and decent work disempowers the community to assert and access inclusion in such universal schemes.

Not a single Safai Karmachari claimed to have government employment. All are employed by private contractors or on daily wage casual employment. No one was self-employed and this was after the government of India had spent thousands of crores on the scheme for the self-employment for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers for almost 25 years.



# The Recommendations

- ◆ Schemes with adequate budget allocation and utilization on addressing the historic injustice, discrimination and untouchability of manual scavenging of the safaikarmachari communities
- ◆ Bring back schemes for housing, education, health, dignified non-scavenging livelihoods and employment, social security and prevention of sewer deaths.
- ◆ Make our habitats fit for human living with adequate basic amenities of water, sanitation and dignified housing.
- ◆ Make special budget allocations for the equality and dignity of safaikarmachari communities and liberty from untouchability and discrimination
- ◆ Free water and sanitation facilities for every safaikarmachari household
- ◆ Adequate and easily accessible health and medical aid insurance schemes
- ◆ Employment in the government sector is a guarantee to socio-economic empowerment. When a woman has a permanent public sector employment she will not only empower herself but her entire family and community. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stated that he measures the progress of a community by the progress of the women in that community. This is a powerful measure that will overturn and transform the caste and patriarchal equations.
- ◆ Implement the 2014 Supreme Court order fully and absolutely to prevent sewerage workers deaths in septic tanks and manholes.
- ◆ The District collector/ District magistrate should be responsible for all sewerage workers deaths that happen in their respective jurisdiction and to be named in the FIRs of sewerage deaths.
- ◆ Issue a white paper on the preventive measures taken to stop sewerage deaths
- ◆ A special session of parliament on the liberation and rehabilitation of persons engaged in manual scavenging and stop sewer deaths



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