



CSB IAS ACADEMY

THE ROAD MAP TO MUSSORRIE...

MAINS Impact- 2025 – 09/02/2025

MANUAL SCAVENGING

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > Social Justice >> Manual Scavenging

REFERENCE NEWS:

The Union Cabinet approved the extension of the tenure of the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)** for a period of three years up to March 2028. The financial implication for the extension would be around Rs 51 crore.

The Commission was set up as a **statutory body** in 1994 under the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993**. After the lapsing of the Act in 2024, the Commission is non-statutory, however, its scope expanded after the enactment of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.

MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA:

Manual scavenger " means a person engaged or employed, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for **manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain** or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the central government or a state government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed and the expression manual scavenging shall be construed accordingly.

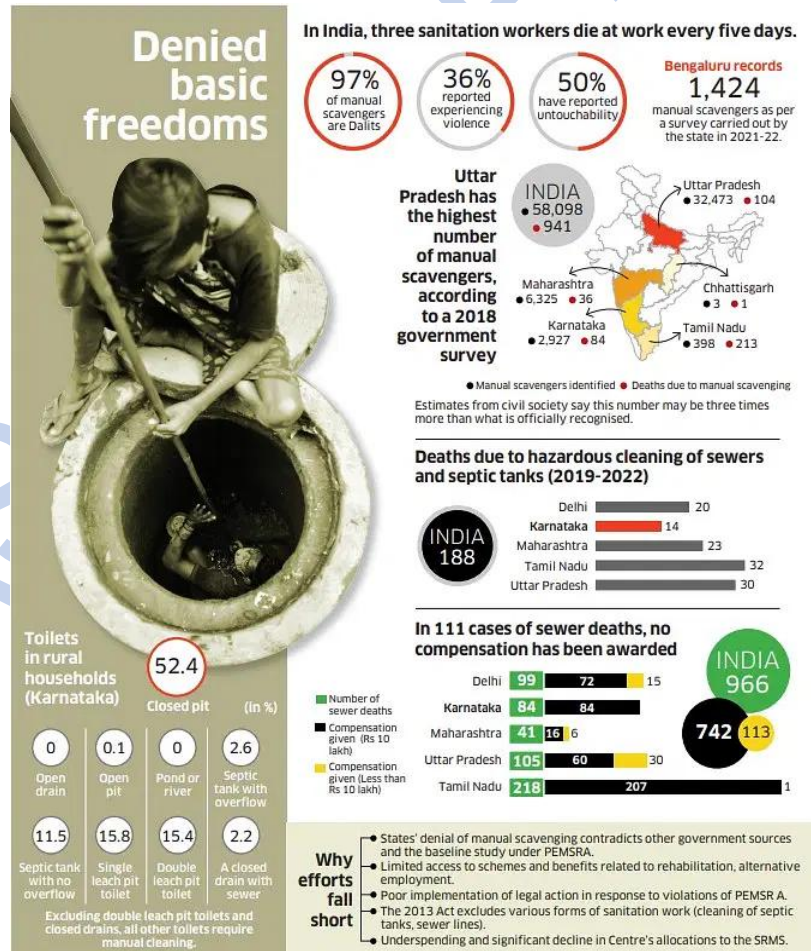
-----The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013

- According to the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)**, **58,098 manual scavengers** were identified across India, but activists claim the actual number is much higher.
- **Over 1,035 deaths** due to **sewer and septic tank cleaning** have been reported since **2017**, with **58 deaths recorded in 2023 alone**.
- **States with the highest number of manual scavengers as per PIB IN 2021:** Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Assam, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Delhi.
- Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has said that only 508 districts out of the total 766 districts in the country have declared themselves manual-scavenging free. **Only 66% districts in country free of manual scavenging.**

Legal Framework Against Manual Scavenging

- **The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993:** First law criminalizing manual scavenging and construction of dry latrines. Punishment up to one year of imprisonment or fine of ₹2,000.
- **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:** Declared manual scavenging illegal in all forms. Mandated mechanization of sewer cleaning. Provided rehabilitation (₹40,000 assistance, skill training, and housing).
- **Constitution:** Guarantees rights under **Articles 14** (Equality before Law), **17** (Abolition of Untouchability), **21** (Right to Life and Personal Liberty), etc.
- National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (**NAMASTE**) scheme: Aims at formalization and rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers.
- **The Supreme Court Judgment (2014):** Ordered ₹10 lakh compensation for families of those who died in sewer cleaning accidents. Mandated **strict enforcement** of mechanized cleaning.
- SC in **Dr. Balram Singh Vs Union of India (2023)** directed the Union Government to take appropriate measures to ensure that the practice is completely eradicated in a phased manner.

- The court had observed that **claims of fraternity, equality and dignity among citizens remain a mere illusion if a sizeable section of society were forced to enter sewers for a living and die trapped in them even a decade after the introduction of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.**
- The Supreme Court on January 29, 2025 ordered a complete stop to the practice of manual scavenging and hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks in top metros (Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad) across the country.
- **The Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and PILs:** Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA), a Dalit rights organization, filed a PIL in 2003, leading to stronger legal provisions. In 2022, SKA exposed that many deaths in Tamil Nadu, Delhi, and Gujarat were due to **lack of protective gear.**



CAUSES OF THE PREVALENCE OF MANUAL SCAVENGING IN 2025:

- **Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities & Lack of Alternative Livelihoods:** Over 95% of manual scavengers belong to Scheduled Castes (SCs), particularly Valmikis and Haila sub-castes. Many workers **lack education and alternative job opportunities**, forcing them to **continue the practice for survival**.
- **Weak Law Enforcement & Lack of Political Will:** Many **municipalities continue to employ manual scavengers illegally**, ignoring mechanization guidelines. In **Tamil Nadu (2021)**, **46 workers died due to manual scavenging**, but FIRs were filed in **less than 30% of cases**.
- **Caste-Based Discrimination & Social Stigma:** Manual scavenging is **historically linked to caste oppression**, where lower-caste Dalits are forced into degrading jobs. **Families engaged in manual scavenging for generations face exclusion from mainstream society**, limiting their access to education and employment.
 - In villages of **Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan**, manual scavengers are still forced to **drink water from separate utensils** in public spaces.
- **Lack of Mechanization & Infrastructure for Waste Disposal:** Only 30% of urban local bodies (ULBs) have mechanized sewer-cleaning equipment. Jetting and suction machines, robotic cleaners, and protective gear are either absent or insufficient.
- **Informal Employment by Private Contractors:** Municipal bodies outsource cleaning work to private contractors, who employ manual scavengers informally to avoid legal accountability. Workers are often **hired on a daily wage basis**, with **no job security or safety measures**.
 - In **Delhi (2022)**, **4 workers died while cleaning a sewer**, and their families received **no compensation** because they were hired **without proper records**.
- **Weak Rehabilitation & Inadequate Compensation:** Many manual scavengers do not receive the full benefits of rehabilitation schemes. ₹40,000 one-time assistance under the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) is insufficient to transition into alternative livelihoods.
 - In **Bihar and Haryana**, only **20-30% of identified manual scavengers received vocational training** for alternative jobs.
- **Corruption & Lack of Accountability in Municipal Bodies:** Many local authorities **falsify records** to show zero manual scavenging while continuing the practice.
 - In 2021, the **Centre reported "zero manual scavengers"** in many states, but ground surveys by **NGOs like Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA)** found **thousands still engaged in scavenging**.
- **Public Indifference & Lack of Social Awareness:** General apathy towards sanitation workers leads to poor implementation of reforms. Many people still hire manual scavengers privately to clean septic tanks and latrines.
 - In **Hyderabad and Pune**, NGOs found **residential colonies secretly employing manual scavengers**.

IMPACTS OF PREVAILING MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA:

- **Health Hazards & Loss of Lives:** Exposure to toxic gases (methane, hydrogen sulfide, ammonia) leads to respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, and lung infections. Skin diseases, infections, and blindness are common due to direct contact with human waste. High fatality rates due to asphyxiation while cleaning sewers and septic tanks.
 - **Since 2017, 1,035 manual scavengers have died while cleaning sewers in India. In 2023, 58 workers died due to manual scavenging, highlighting the lack of safety measures.**
- **Violation of Human Rights & Social Stigma:** Manual scavenging is a modern form of untouchability, primarily affecting Dalits (Scheduled Castes). Workers are socially excluded, discriminated against, and denied access to basic rights like education and healthcare.
 - **In Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, manual scavengers are still forced to eat separately at public gatherings.**
- **Economic Exploitation & Poverty:** Low wages & informal employment – Many manual scavengers earn less than ₹100 per day. Lack of job security – Workers are hired informally by private contractors, leaving them without legal protections.
- **Psychological Trauma & Social Alienation:** Constant humiliation & discrimination lead to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many workers suffer from alcohol addiction due to stress.
 - **A Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) study found that 80% of manual scavengers experience severe mental health issues.**
- **Generational Entrapment in Scavenging:** Children of manual scavengers are often forced into the same work due to social exclusion and lack of education.
 - **In rural Rajasthan and Bihar, many Dalit children are prevented from attending school, forcing them to continue scavenging.**
- **Environmental & Sanitation Risks:** Improper human waste disposal pollutes water sources, increasing the spread of waterborne diseases. Open defecation & lack of sanitation infrastructure worsen urban and rural hygiene conditions.
- **Hindrance to India's Development & Global Image:** The United Nations and human rights organizations have repeatedly criticized India for the continued practice of manual scavenging. It contradicts India's goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy, as it reflects deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities.
 - **In 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on Water and Sanitation condemned India's failure to eliminate manual scavenging, affecting global trade and diplomatic relations.**

WAY FORWARD: STRATEGIES TO ELIMINATE MANUAL SCAVENGING

- **Strict Law Enforcement & Accountability:** Immediate arrest & conviction of offenders under the 2013 Prohibition Act. Regular audits of municipalities to prevent illegal hiring of manual scavengers.
- **Complete Mechanization of Sewer Cleaning:** Robotic sewer-cleaning technology (Bandicoot Robots) must be mandated nationwide. Increase government funding for mechanized sanitation systems like Bandicoot robots.

- **Sustainable Rehabilitation & Alternative Employment:** Expand NAMASTE Scheme to ensure all manual scavengers receive job training & employment guarantees. Reservation in government jobs for rehabilitated workers.
- **Social Awareness & Caste Reforms:** Public awareness campaigns on the dignity of sanitation workers. Community engagement programs to remove caste-based discrimination.
- **Private Sector & CSR Participation:** Encourage Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to fund rehabilitation programs. Private sector involvement in skill development & technology adoption for waste management.

A **multi-pronged approach—strict law enforcement, complete mechanization, sustainable rehabilitation, and strong public awareness**—is essential to **completely eliminate manual scavenging and ensure dignity and safety for sanitation workers in India.**

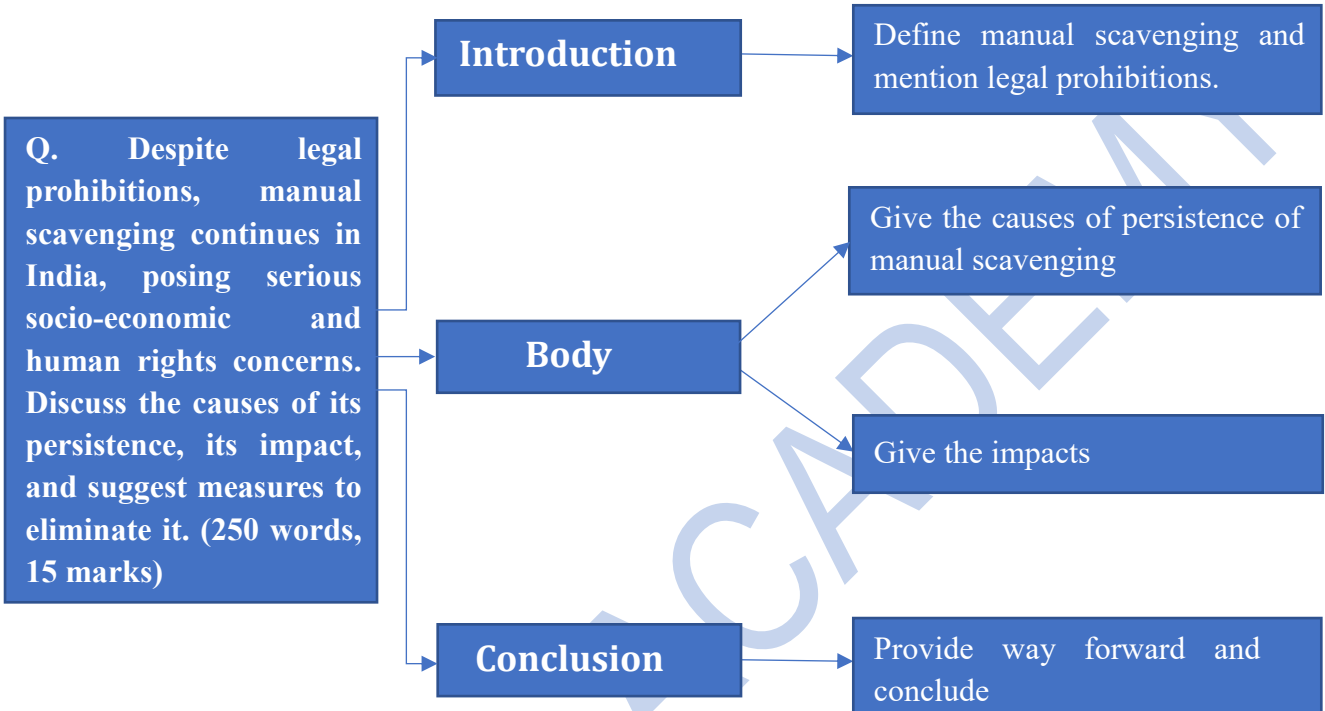
BEST PRACTICES:

- **Japan's Fully Automated Sewer Cleaning System:** Japan eliminated manual scavenging in the 1980s through complete sewer mechanization. Use of **robotic cleaning machines, vacuum suction systems, and high-pressure jet sprays** to clean sewers and septic tanks. Tokyo's "**Smart Sewer Management System**" uses **AI and IoT-based real-time monitoring** to detect blockages and deploy robotic cleaners.
- **United Kingdom's Strict Legal Enforcement & Worker Safety:** Sewer workers in the UK are fully mechanized and given protective gear. Strict labour laws criminalize hazardous manual cleaning. Heavy penalties and employer accountability for any violations. The UK's **Health & Safety Executive (HSE)** mandates **zero-human entry into confined sewer spaces.**
- **United States Public-Private Collaboration for Smart Sanitation:** Strong collaboration between local governments & private tech companies to develop smart sanitation systems.
- **Sweden: Incentivizing Private Sector for Sewer Robotics:** Sweden provides **tax incentives for private firms** developing **non-human sewer cleaning technologies.** "**Sewer Robotics AB**" developed **AI-based robotic systems** for municipal waste management.
- **Singapore: Smart City Approach to Waste & Sewer Management: 100% mechanized sewage cleaning** through a **smart underground sewer network.** Use of **IoT-based sensors & automated waste collection systems.** The "**Tuas Water Reclamation Plant**" processes sewage **without manual intervention.**
- **Kerala: India's First State to Use Robotic Sewer Cleaners:** Introduced "**Bandicoot Robots**" for sewer cleaning in **2018**, eliminating manual entry. Cities like **Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, and Kozhikode** are now **manual scavenging-free.**

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. Despite legal prohibitions, manual scavenging continues in India, posing serious socio-economic and human rights concerns. Discuss the causes of its persistence, its impact, and suggest measures to eliminate it. (250 words, 15 marks)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

Manual scavenging, defined as the **manual cleaning of human excreta from dry latrines, open drains, and sewers**, is **legally banned** under the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013**. However, the practice **continues to persist**, with **58,098 identified manual scavengers** and **1,035 reported deaths** due to hazardous cleaning since 2017.

CAUSES OF THE PERSISTENCE OF MANUAL SCAVENGING

1. **Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities** – Over 95% of manual scavengers belong to Scheduled Castes (SCs), particularly Valmikis and Haila sub-castes. **Lack of alternative employment** forces many to continue the practice.
2. **Weak Law Enforcement & Corruption** – Only 508 out of 766 districts have declared themselves **manual scavenging-free**. Despite the 2013 Act, municipalities continue to employ manual scavengers illegally.
3. **Caste-Based Discrimination** – Manual scavenging is **historically linked to caste oppression**. In Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, manual scavengers are still **forced to drink water from separate utensils**.

4. **Lack of Mechanization** – Only 30% of urban local bodies (ULBs) have mechanized sewer-cleaning equipment. Chennai has only 9 sewer jetting machines, insufficient for its needs.
5. **Private Contractor Exploitation**- Many manual scavengers are hired informally by private contractors, without safety measures or compensation. 4 workers in Delhi (2022) died cleaning sewers without protective gear.

IMPACT OF MANUAL SCAVENGING

1. **Health Hazards & Loss of Lives** – Exposure to toxic gases like methane, hydrogen sulfide leads to respiratory diseases and deaths. 1,035 deaths reported since 2017, 58 deaths in 2023 alone.
2. **Violation of Human Rights & Social Stigma** – Continued untouchability and discrimination against Dalit sanitation workers. In Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, workers are forced to eat separately at public gatherings.
3. **Economic Exploitation & Poverty** – Earnings often less than ₹100 per day with no job security. In Madhya Pradesh, many women manual scavengers earn ₹10-₹50 per household.
4. **Psychological Trauma & Generational Entrapment** – 80% of manual scavengers experience depression and PTSD (TISS study). Children are often forced into the same work due to lack of education.
5. **Environmental & Sanitation Risks** – Improper disposal of waste contaminates water sources, leading to disease outbreaks. Bihar and UP struggle with contaminated drinking water due to untreated waste.

Way Forward: Strategies to Eliminate Manual Scavenging

1. **Strict Law Enforcement & Accountability** – Fast-track courts for manual scavenging cases. Supreme Court (2025) ordered a complete ban on hazardous manual cleaning in metros.
2. **Complete Mechanization of Sewer Cleaning** – Mandate robotic cleaning (Bandicoot Robots) in all urban areas. Kerala became the first state to use robotic sewer cleaners, eliminating manual entry.
3. **Sustainable Rehabilitation & Alternative Employment** – Expand NAMASTE Scheme for job training & employment guarantees. Provide reservation in government jobs for rehabilitated workers.
4. **Social Awareness & Caste Reforms** – Community engagement programs to reduce caste-based discrimination. Strict penalties for private individuals hiring manual scavengers.
5. **Private Sector & CSR Participation** – Encourage companies to invest in sanitation technology. Gujarat promotes E-Toilets & AI-powered sanitation systems.

6. Adoption of Global Best Practices –

- **Japan** – Fully automated sewer cleaning systems.
- **UK** – Strict worker safety laws and mechanization.
- **Singapore** – Smart sanitation systems integrated into urban planning.

Despite legal prohibitions and rehabilitation schemes, manual scavenging persists due to deep-rooted social discrimination, weak law enforcement, and lack of mechanization. A multi-pronged approach, including strict legal enforcement, technological advancements, private sector involvement, and social inclusion efforts, is essential to eliminate manual scavenging permanently and restore dignity to sanitation workers in India.