



MAINS iMPACT 2025

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MANUAL SCAVENGING

SYLLABUS:

GS 2> Social Justice > Vulnerable & Backward sections

REFERENCE NEWS:

- Recently, in a statement to the Lok Sabha, **Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment Ramdas Athawale** said that **no reports of manual scavenging** have been received from **any State or Union Territory**. He referred to the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013**, which banned the practice effective **December 6, 2013**.
- However, in a response to a separate question, the Ministry disclosed the findings of a **social audit** it had commissioned in **September 2023** to investigate **deaths from hazardous sewer and septic tank cleaning** in 2022 and 2023. The audit covered **54 such deaths** across **17 districts in eight States and UTs**, raising serious concerns about the ground reality.

MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA:

- According to the UN India, manual scavenging refers to **“the practice of manual cleaning, disposing, or handling of the human excreta, in any manner, from dry latrines and sewers.”**
- In 1993, India banned the employment of people as manual scavengers. In 2013, the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act** put an end to the practice in any form.
- However, the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)’s latest annual report (2019-20) noted that the practice is still continuing in both rural and urban areas.
- As per the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011 (SECC-2011) data of manual scavengers, there were **1.82 Lakh manual scavengers in the rural areas** of the country.
- However, according to a parliament response from December 2021, a total of **58,098 manual scavengers** have been identified as per the criteria laid down in the 2013 act.

- The government asserts that **no new manual scavengers have been identified since 2018**, following the redefinition in the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act.

- In a comprehensive government study conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment under its **NAMASTE (National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem) programme**, data gathered from over 3,000 urban local bodies across 29 states and union territories reveal that **91.9%** of the 38,000 workers profiled so far belong to **Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Class (OBC) communities**. These workers are predominantly engaged in the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, highlighting ongoing socio-economic disparities.

The NAMASTE programme, launched in 2023-24, aims to mechanize all sewer work to prevent deaths from hazardous cleaning. This initiative replaces the earlier Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS).

The detailed demographic composition of the sanitation workforce is as follows:

- **Scheduled Caste (SC): 68.9%**
- **Other Backward Classes (OBC): 14.7%**
- **Scheduled Tribe (ST): 8.3%**
- **General Category: 8%**

REASONS FOR CONTINUED MANUAL SCAVENGING:

- **Caste and gender-based discriminations:**
 - Due to the prevalence of the caste system, such harmful tasks are mostly done by those belonging to the lower rung of the hierarchy particularly women.
 - For instance, as per the study conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment under its **NAMASTE programme**, around **92% of workers cleaning urban sewers, septic tanks are from SC, ST, OBC groups**
- **Poor policy implementation:**
 - Rehabilitation schemes such as one-time cash assistance, skill development training, and subsidies are provided to a smaller number of persons out of the identified manual scavengers.
 - For instance, as of 2019, the Self Employment Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (SRMS), had **covered a mere 6 percent of Safai Karamcharis**.
- **Weak institutions:**
 - In the recent annual report of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), the Chairperson admits that the organisation lacks the resources, and that the results over the years have not matched the expectation.

- **Lack of alternative opportunities:**
 - Lack of skill development coupled with poverty and social stigma against Safai Karamcharis have resulted in very few alternate employment opportunities for them. To make ends meet, these social groups continue to pursue manual scavenging.
- **Lack of enforcement and accountability:**
 - States often deny the existence of manual scavenging. For example, in 2025, the central government told Parliament that **no State/UT reported any manual scavenging**, despite a **government-commissioned audit finding 54 sewer deaths in 2022–23 alone**.
 - This reflects a governance gap and lack of accountability.
- **Data deficiency:**
 - There is a huge issue with data related to various aspects of manual scavengers. Such discrepancies in data result in inefficient enforcement of legislations and schemes formulated for relief & rehabilitation of manual scavengers.
- **Institutionalization of the practice:**
 - Despite government outlawing the use of direct human labour in the cleaning of sewage, municipal corporations and government agencies have institutionalized the practice. For instance, SKA reports that in Railways there are **36,176 railway sewer cleaners**.
- **COVID-induced vagaries:**
 - COVID-19 has pushed many into poverty and the vulnerable sections have turned to manual scavenging activities for livelihood.
 - The social exclusion got even more enhanced due to the stigma that surrounded sanitation workers involved in COVID-19 relief works.
- **Engineering challenges:**
 - Mechanised scavenging remains limited largely to urban areas of the country. Also, most of the sewers and septic tanks have engineering defects which means that after a point, machines cannot clean it.
- **Absence of political will:**
 - Manual scavenging largely affects marginalized groups with **low political visibility**. As a result, there is **minimal urgency or electoral pressure** to enforce bans or invest in mechanisation and rehabilitation.
- **Limited impact of technology adoption:**
 - While initiatives like **Bandicoot robots** are operational in several states, their deployment is **limited in scale** and **not integrated into mainstream municipal operations**.
- **Fragmented implementation between ministries:**
 - Schemes like **NAMASTE (Social Justice Ministry)** and **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge (MoHUA)** are poorly integrated, leading to **duplication, delays**, and **bureaucratic overlap**, reducing overall impact.

- **Violation of human rights:**
 - **Right to live with human dignity** is one of the most important rights which is embodied under Article 21. However, the persistence of manual scavenging violates this right.
- **Undermines social contract:**
 - The practice of manual scavenging poses several questions over equal access to protection offered by the Indian Constitution and the Indian judiciary guaranteeing rights to all its citizens.
- **Threat to life:**
 - Manual scavengers are exposed to gases such as hydrogen disulfide, ammonia, and methane. Long exposure to these lead to death by asphyxia.
 - **Between 2019 and 2023**, there have been at least **377 reported deaths** across India resulting from hazardous cleaning activities, as stated in government data tabled in the Indian Parliament.
- **Poor health outcomes:**
 - Manual scavengers are exposed to diseases like cholera, hepatitis, tuberculosis and typhoid, and physical harm due to dilapidated work environment. This, coupled with poor nutrition perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty.
- **Perpetuation of social discrimination:**
 - Prevalence of manual scavenging perpetuates the discrimination and stigma against the people involved in them and restricts their scope to realize their true human potential.
- **Environmental and Sanitation Impact:**
 - Manual practice reflects inefficient waste systems, with poor sewer design and lack of mechanisation contributing to public health hazards and environmental pollution

MEASURES AGAINST MANUAL SCAVENGING:**I. LEGISLATIVE**

- **The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993:** Criminalized employment of manual scavengers for cleaning dry latrines.
- **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:** Aimed to eliminate manual scavenging and promote rehabilitation through mechanization. Engaging a manual scavenger is punishable with **up to 2 years imprisonment and/or ₹1 lakh fine**.

II. INSTITUTIONAL

- **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK):** Set up in 1993; now functions as a **non-statutory body**. Investigates Safai Karamcharis' conditions, grievances, and scheme implementation.

- **National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC):** Apex body since 1997 for socio-economic upliftment of Safai Karamcharis through **loan and non-loan schemes**.

III. POLICY

- **NAMASTE Programme (2023–24)** Replaced SRMS. Aims for **full mechanization** of sewer and septic tank cleaning.
- **Key components:**
 - **Worker Profiling:** Nationwide sanitation worker database.
 - **Safety Training & Equipment:** To reduce health risks.
 - **Capital Subsidies:** ₹2.26 crore to 191 workers; ₹10.6 crore for 413 workers/dependents to start sanitation enterprises.
- **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge (2020):** Launched by MoHUA to **prevent hazardous sewer cleaning** and promote mechanization. Focuses on **PPE provision** and **formalizing informal workers**.
- **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge:**
 - On the occasion of World Toilet Day November 19, 2020 **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)** launched the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge-2021.
 - It is aimed at preventing hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and to promote mechanised cleaning.
 - It also intends to thrust upon providing proper protective gears and equipment and identification of informal workers and thereby integrating them into formal mechanism.

IV. OTHERS:

- **Bezwada Wilson and Safai Karamchari Andolan:**
 - Bezwada Wilson, a key activist from Karnataka, has led the **SKA since 1986** to abolish manual scavenging. He filed a **PIL in 1993** against violators of the Prohibition Act. Under his leadership, SKA campaigns for the **demolition of dry latrines** and **rehabilitation of manual scavengers**.
- **Technological solution: Bandicoot robot**
 - The Bandicoot is a spider-shaped robotic machine that is engineered for cleaning any type of sewer manholes.
 - Developed by Genrobotics, the technology is currently used in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Assam, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Enhanced Data Collection and Monitoring:** Establish a **real-time, centralised digital dashboard** for tracking hazardous sanitation work and deaths. Integrate **U-WIN cards**, **NAMASTE data**, and **Swachh Survekshan** inputs. Ensure **independent social audits** are institutionalised for accurate assessment and to reduce underreporting by States/UTs.
- **Independent and Empowered Oversight Mechanism:** Upgrade **NCSK** into a **statutory, autonomous body** with clear powers for inspection, grievance redressal, and enforcement of rehabilitation protocols. Regular reporting to Parliament must be mandated.

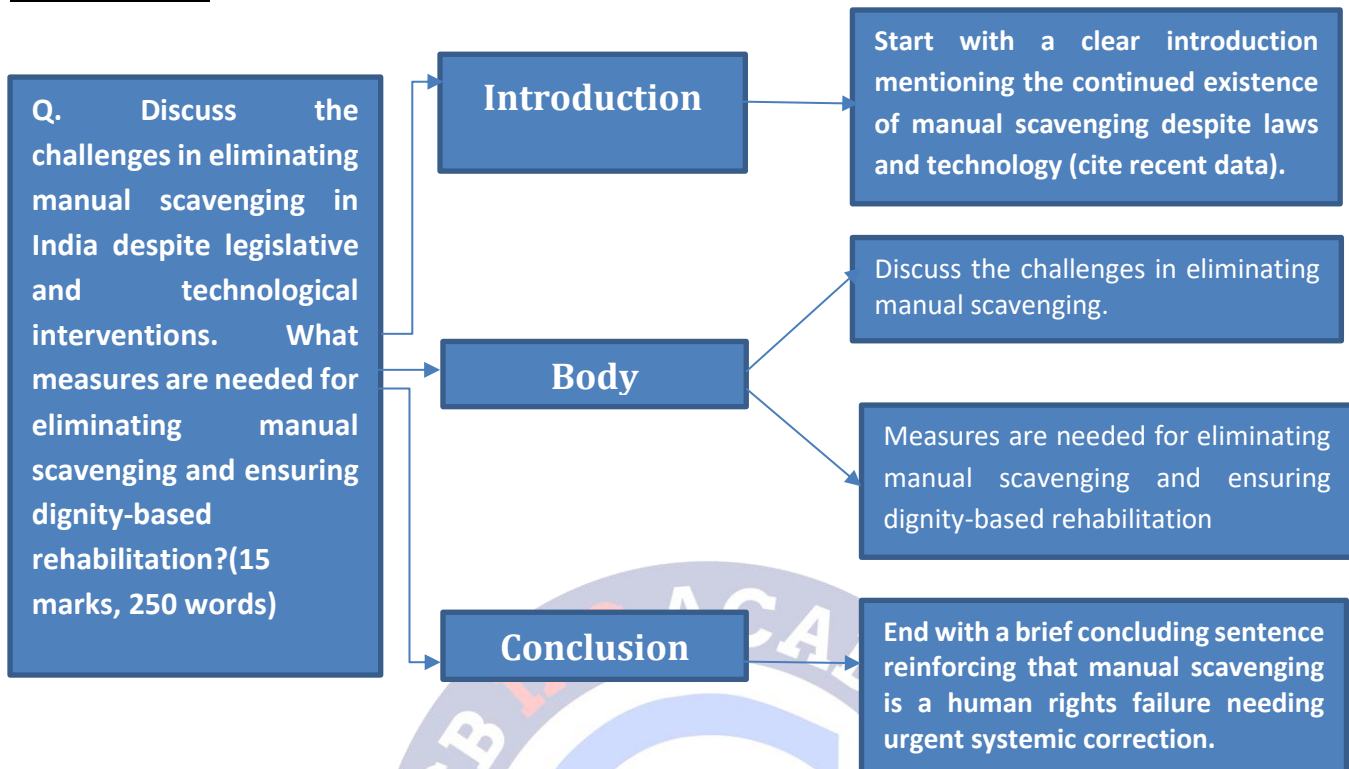
- **Adoption of Successful Models:** Expand mechanisation through models like **Bandicoot robots**, backed by **State-financed procurement and training modules**. States like **Odisha**, which achieved 100% PPE distribution under **Garima Scheme**, should serve as replicable benchmarks.
- **Policy Integration and Convergence:** Ensure coordination between **MoHUA** and **Ministry of Social Justice** so schemes like **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge** and **NAMASTE** operate in synergy. Create **joint task forces** at the ULB level for better policy execution.
- **Refocusing the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM):** SBM should be reoriented to include **urban sanitation worker dignity metrics**, promote **inclusive employment**, and support **sanipreneurs** through financial literacy, subsidies, and entrepreneurial mentorship.
- **Legislative and Policy Strengthening:** Amend the 2013 Act to expand its scope to explicitly cover **all forms of hazardous sanitation work**, including private contractors. Strengthen penalties under Section 7 and ensure **State-level accountability frameworks**.
- **Support and Rehabilitation Programs:** Enhance rehabilitation by linking manual scavengers with **urban livelihood missions**, **PM Vishwakarma Yojana**, and **vocational skilling under Skill India**. Offer **psychosocial counselling**, legal aid, and **housing support** for affected families.
- **Community Engagement and Education:** Launch a **national anti-stigma campaign** on the dignity of sanitation work, involving influencers, civil society, and school curricula. Promote social reintegration of former scavengers through **local community partnerships** and **youth awareness programs**.

CONCLUSION

- Despite legal prohibition, manual scavenging continues due to systemic gaps, caste-based exclusion, and poor enforcement. To end this inhumane practice, India must move beyond laws to ensure strict accountability, inter-agency coordination, and dignity-based rehabilitation. Manual scavenging is not just a sanitation issue—it is a human rights failure. Its eradication is essential to upholding constitutional values and ensuring social justice for the most marginalized.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. Discuss the challenges in eliminating manual scavenging in India despite legislative and technological interventions. What measures are needed for eliminating manual scavenging and ensuring dignity-based rehabilitation? (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:**MODEL ANSWER:**

Despite being banned under the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013**, and aided by technological interventions like **Bandicoot robots** and **NAMASTE**, manual scavenging persists across India. A 2025 statement in Lok Sabha claimed zero reports of manual scavenging, yet a **2023 Social Audit by the Social Justice Ministry** found **54 sewer deaths in just 17 districts**, reflecting a gap between law and lived reality. Furthermore, **91.9% of sanitation workers**, as profiled under NAMASTE, belong to SC, ST, or OBC groups, indicating how caste and exclusion continue to fuel the practice.

Challenges in Eliminating Manual Scavenging:

- 1. Caste and Gender-Based Entrenchment:** The occupation remains confined to Dalits, especially women, due to centuries of caste-based occupational stratification and social stigma.
- 2. State Denial and Weak Enforcement:** Despite visible deaths and data, many states deny the existence of manual scavenging, undermining law enforcement and accountability mechanisms.
- 3. Inadequate Rehabilitation Measures:** Only **6%** of identified workers received support under the **SRMS** scheme by 2019, reflecting systemic gaps in implementation.
- 4. Fragmented Policy Execution:** Poor coordination between ministries like **MoHUA** and **MoSJ&E** leads to duplication, delays, and ineffective outreach.

5. **Urban-Centric Technological Use:** Mechanised cleaning solutions like Bandicoot robots are largely confined to urban areas, leaving rural sanitation workers vulnerable.
6. **Lack of Political Incentive:** Manual scavenging affects electorally invisible groups, leading to political apathy and low policy priority.

Measures for Dignity-Based Rehabilitation:

1. **Empowering Oversight Institutions:** Upgrade the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) into a **statutory, autonomous body** with powers for inspection, grievance redressal, and enforcement. Mandate regular reporting to Parliament to improve accountability.
2. **Centralised Real-Time Monitoring:** Create a **national digital dashboard** integrating data from U-WIN cards, NAMASTE programme, and Swachh Survekshan. Ensure **independent social audits** and real-time tracking of hazardous sanitation work and related deaths.
3. **Inclusive and Sustainable Skilling:** Link workers to **Skill India, PM Vishwakarma Yojana**, and **urban livelihood missions**. Offer vocational training and credit support to shift from sanitation work to dignified alternative livelihoods.
4. **Destigmatization and Social Inclusion Campaigns:** Run **nationwide public awareness campaigns** involving media, schools, and local influencers to reduce caste-based stigma and promote the dignity of sanitation work.
5. **Technological Mainstreaming:** Scale up use of **Bandicoot robots** and similar innovations. Ensure **municipal capacity building** for operation, maintenance, and financing of machines to replace manual entry into sewers.
6. **Integrated Policy Execution:** Ensure **inter-ministerial coordination** between MoHUA and Ministry of Social Justice for better convergence of schemes like NAMASTE and Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge. Form **joint task forces** at ULB levels.
7. **Strengthening the Legal Framework:** Amend the **2013 Act** to cover all hazardous sanitation work, including private contractors. Strengthen punitive provisions and ensure **State-level accountability frameworks**.

The persistence of manual scavenging reflects not just a failure of law, but of **governance, dignity, and constitutional morality**. To truly eliminate this inhuman practice, India must move from **symbolic reforms** to **structural solutions**—rooted in data, dignity, and empowerment of the most marginalized.