

**Labour file:**

## **The Shame of Manual Scavenging Continues**

Even after 72 years of so-called independence the abhorrent feudal practice of manual scavenging is continuing in our country. This profession is not only hazardous and inhuman but also eternal shame to our nation.

Despite various laws banning this despicable practice of manual scavenging, this practice continued in our country shows how dubious could be the implementation of laws that protect the interests of the dalits and downtrodden people who are forced by our social system to take up such menial jobs through coercion of the caste system.

According to the census of 2011, there are 1,82,505 families that are engaged in the manual scavenging in rural India to serve 7,40,078 houses in rural areas. Moreover Indian Railways is the largest employer of manual scavengers who clean the human excreta from railway tracks, stations and platforms.

Neither modernity nor super technological advancement is helpful to ending manual scavenging or coming to the rescue of lives of manual scavengers. Every day we hear deaths of manual scavengers while cleaning septic tanks, manholes and clogged sewage lines, mostly employed by the local municipal authorities throughout the country. But these authorities are criminally apathetic towards the safety of these manual scavengers and do not provide them with safety gear or safety precautions to rescue them from these deaths. They even not bother to pay them compensation often denying their responsibility and throwing the onus on to the contractors and subcontractors.

Despite a 2013 law prohibiting employment of manual scavengers, a government survey identified 54,130 people engaged in this job as of July 2019. This figure is understated as the survey was carried only in the areas where “there are reasons to believe existence of manual scavengers”. The survey was only conducted in 170 districts in 18 states. Yet the Minister for Social Justice Athavale said in the Lok Sabha that there is no record of any state punishing anyone for employing manual scavengers.

The sewer deaths also tell the same story of understatement and apathy. Tamil Nadu had registered 206 deaths of manual scavengers while engaged in cleaning work between 1993 and 2019, followed by Gujarat with the record of 156 deaths, Uttar Pradesh 78 and Karnataka 73. 15 states and UTs have not reported data on deaths. Kerala had not compensated to the families of victims to the extent of 83 per cent out of 20 reported deaths. 63 per cent of victims’ families in West Bengal were not compensated. (From the report of National Commission for Safai Karmacharis)

This National Commission rightly to the Parliament that Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has concentrated on the construction of toilets but has not cared for the banning of manual scavenging and for the rehabilitation of manual scavenges. That is why even today communal dry toilets are being maintained in many municipalities of Madhya Pradesh.

Besides the caste system, poverty too is trapping the poor dalits to take up this job of manual scavenging. The continuation of this inhuman practice in our country not only exposes the skewed feudal caste system but also the economic system that disallows the dalits to obtain a dignified means of livelihood ending their poverty.

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