

Manual Scavenging Practices in South Asia: A Review from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal

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Abstract

The constitutional ethos of a nation aims to treat people across all sections of the society with equality, justice and fairness. The multi-cultural and multi layered society absorbs such values in proportion to its understanding of constitutional mandate, socio-cultural norms and economic progression. All nations are expected to provide basic human rights & dignified, hygienic working conditions to its people, but unfortunately sanitation services and hygiene practices in South Asia have been quite alarming. Large numbers of people in developing countries are forced to work under endangered conditions, which threatens their life and violates their right to earn livelihood with dignity and safety. This Paper aims to present a comparative analysis of manual scavenging practices in South Asia focusing on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Additionally, paper delves into legal institutional mechanisms available in these countries to address the problem of manual scavengers. It also proposes workable solutions to put an end to this obnoxious prevalent practise.

Keywords: *Manual Scavenging, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal*

I. INTRODUCTION

The development index of SAARC Countries (India, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka) is lagging behind on many fronts as compared to developed countries of the world.³ The challenges faced by

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³Anand, S. and Sen, A., 1994, *Human Development Index: Methodology and Measurement*, *Human Development Report*; (May 2, 2022),

South Asian countries in terms of resources, population, technology, social cultural construct is strikingly different from developed nations. Among all the SAARC nations, the country at the bottom in terms of population and resources is Maldives, followed by Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and then India. The kind of resources and technology available with developed nations for waste management and sanitation is more robust and effective, result of which lies in the fact that standards of sanitation and waste management is higher in developed nations⁴. Developed countries are managing the solid waste by use of advanced technologies and recovering energy from wastes. Most of the developed countries are using advanced management techniques, like Mechanical Biological Treatment Plants & Enhanced Resolution, Mobile Sorting, etc. which enables better recycling of waste without human interaction. On the other hand, developing countries attempts to grapple with sanitation trouble, which is exacerbated by water crisis, behavioural issues and rapid urbanisation with fewer resources⁵.

Another challenge to adoption of strategy in dealing with sanitation practices and waste management is the socio-cultural and religious arena in which a nation flourishes. If we look at the SAARC countries; Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Maldives are Islamic nations. India, Nepal and Bhutan are secular nations and Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation.

India though secular in nature and a melting point of culture, practices and customs; is predominantly consists of Hindus. Indian society has maintained its traditional roots and practise in the name of caste and cultural distinctions. Although our law makers have ensured that no discrimination takes place with respect to fundamental rights in the name of religion, caste, or creed, even then

<https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-methodology-and-measurement>.

⁴ Srivastava, Rishabh, *Waste Management: Developed and Developing Countries*, INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH, (2013); ISSN (Online: 2319-7064).

⁵Maharaj, N., Maharaj, B. (2021), Sanitation Challenges and Policy Options in Developing Countries: A Critical Review. In: Thakur, B., Thakur, R.R., Chattopadhyay, S., Abhay, R.K. (eds) Resource Management, Sustainable Development and Governance, Sustainable Development Goals Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85839-1_24.

society is trapped in clutches of varnas in terms of occupational stereotypes. One such outcome of occupational stereotype is manual scavenging.

“Manual Scavenging is the worst surviving symbol of untouchability”⁶. It pertains to an exercise wherein human excreta is manually cleaned from dry latrines. It also includes carrying or disposing or handling in any manner, human excreta from dry latrines and sewers.⁷ This practice is a blot and disgrace on rich, pious social and cultural fabric of India.⁸ Apart from stigmatized practices, other reasons for manual scavenging are poverty, lack of resources, lack of intention and apathetic attitude of the government towards manual scavengers. Waste picking (Scavenging) is also stimulated by financial needs in many parts of the world.⁹

Globally, sanitation services and hygiene practices in South Asia have been quite alarming. Large chunk of population is circumstantially forced to live in inhumane conditions violating human rights and a great risk to their health. Although sanitation is an essential public service which extremely crucial to shield good human health but they are most who are most discriminated, poor and marginalised doing their jobs for society in absence of any protective gears and secured legal rights.¹⁰

Sanitation workers' pathetic condition in this region is not hidden. “They have long been marginalized across South Asia because of stigma around the nature of

⁶National Advisory Council resolution, October 23, 2010, (Mar. 24, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india>.

⁷Breaking Free: *Rehabilitating Manual Scavengers, United Nations in India*; (Aug 9,2021), <https://in.one.un.org/page/breaking-free-rehabilitating-manual-scavengers/>.

⁸ B. N. SRIVASTAVA, “MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA: A DISGRACE TO THE COUNTRY, (Sulabh International Social Service Organisation, New Delhi, 1997), ISBN 81-7022-639-2

⁹ Ibrahim, Salilu, “*An assessment of the implications of Scavenging as emerging enterprise on the urban development of Minna Town*”, International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology, Vol. 6, Issue 5, May 2021; <https://ijisrt.com/assets/upload/files/IJISRT21MAY164.pdf> (Feb. 27, 2022)

¹⁰News report exposes horror of working conditions for millions of sanitation workers in the developing world, News release, World health organisation, Nov 14, 2019; <https://www.who.int/news/item/14-11-2019-new-report-exposes-horror-of-working-conditions-for-millions-of-sanitation-workers-in-the-developing-world>(Mar. 5, 2022)

their work and discrimination based on caste, ethnicity and religion”¹¹. Whether it's open defecation or inappropriate hygiene practices or poor menstrual hygiene management or poor conditions of drinking water or health care for sanitation workers, South Asian countries are highly vulnerable for millions of people and the situation is worse when it's about manual scavenging practice.

In South Asian countries, manually cleaning of excreta from open drains and public dry toilets is the practice of manual scavenging¹². Usually, workers physically enter sewers and main holes, drains, sceptic tanks and dig out the excreta. While cleaning these sewers it is piteous that these manual scavengers use basic tools like brooms and baskets. A *prima facie* study of SAARC nations depicts that manual scavenging is still prevalent in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

This paper intends to make a comparative analyses of manual scavenging practices in South Asia among countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Paper aims to provide workable solutions to deal with this inhuman practice.

II. METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual paper which has been split into seven parts. The first part of this paper explains the concept of manual scavenging and sanitation practices and uses integrative approach of literature review in introducing the topic and questioning the discourse surrounding practices of manual scavenging. The second part deals with practise of manual scavenging in India. Third part examines manual scavenging in Bangladesh. Fourth part introspects the condition of manual scavenging practices in Pakistan. Fifth part takes up manual scavenging in Nepal and discusses comparative challenges in this region. Sixth & the

¹¹Safety and wellbeing of sanitation workers during COVID-19 in South Asia: A Rapid assessment from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal in lockdown, WaterAid global website, (May 2, 2022), <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/safety-wellbeing-sanitation-workers-south-asia-covid>.

¹²Cleaning Human waste, Human Rights Watch news release, Aug 25, 2014, (Mar.19, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india>.

concluding part deals with comparative challenges in South Asian region and proposed some workable solutions towards the end of research paper.

III. MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA

“What is guaranteed by the fundamental right is not the mere existence or vegetative survival but rightful opportunity to unfold the human potential and share in the joy of creative living.”¹³

This quote by Justice Krishna Iyer reminds us of the ethos which our constitution aims to uphold for the joyful living and development of humankind. Indian Constitution which came into effect on 26 January 1950 gave several fundamental rights to its people. These rights were understood as vital to the life of a human being and our constitution as a custodian of fundamental rights spelled out these rights under different article of the constitution. Particularly Article 14 (Right to Equality), Article 15 (Right against discrimination), Article 17 (Right against Untouchability) & Article 21 (Right to Life & Personal Liberty) are very relevant to understand the backdrop in which we intend to unfold the issue of manual scavenging. Our constitution has provided to its people all the above-mentioned rights and specifically abolished practice of Untouchability which was deep rooted in our social and cultural construct.¹⁴ Even after untouchability getting abolished, it persists in various shapes and sizes. One such way in which it is still practiced in our society is manual scavenging.¹⁵

After 73 years of successful independent democratic history of our country wherein great strides have been taken in science, technology, innovation as a global international power player. It is indeed unacceptable that Manual scavengers are still clutched in modern slavery, untouchability and live in

¹³ V. R. KRISHNA IYER, LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE AND INDIAN OVERVIEW, (Punjab University, Government Press 2001).

¹⁴ Anshika Singh, *Manual Scavenging: A Mephitic Heredity of Social Stratum*, 5 (1) IJLMH Page 73 - 86 (2022), (Mar. 24, 2022), DOI: <https://doij.org/10.10000/IJLMH.112430>.

¹⁵ Shahid, M. (2015), *Manual Scavenging: Issues of Caste, Culture Violence and Social Change*, 45(2), 242–255, (Apr. 14, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085715574187>.

extremely backward conditions¹⁶. Manual Scavengers are one who are involved in cleaning dry latrines and sewers. Their work also includes emptying pits, septic tanks, manholes, operating pumping stations and treatment plants”¹⁷. Although manual scavenging in India is banned but still in many parts of the country it is being practised. This section of society has inter-linkages with caste system, human inequality, gender biases and with those links they stand off for a messiah who can grant them social, economic and political rights for a respectable and honourable life as envisioned by Aristotle.

Gupta, Abhishek (2016)¹⁸ argues that rights of people hailing from socially and economically weaker people is denied by the society. Manual scavenging is still in practice and enslaves around 1.2 million people in India¹⁹. They have to suffer severe pain on many grounds from mental, to physical, social to economic. They carry out the work of lifting and many times loading this excrement in buckets to designated sites and that too without proper tools²⁰.

Brooms, small tin plates and baskets are the only tools available to them for manually cleaning dry latrines. “It would be no surprise to know that among the major population of manual scavengers in India, 95% to 98% are women. The working conditions are extremely unbearable. While doing their job, they have to many times clear it by removing of dead animals, even performing funeral related

¹⁶ Pradhan, S., Mittal, A., *Ethical, Health, and Technical Concerns Surrounding Manual Scavenging in Urban India*. *J Public Health (Berl.)* 28, 271–276 (2020); <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-019-01039-7> (Apr. 19, 2022)

¹⁷ New report exposes horror of working conditions for millions of sanitation workers in the developing world, News release, World health organisation, Nov 14, 2019; <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-11-2019-new-report-exposes-horror-of-working-conditions-for-millions-of-sanitation-workers-in-the-developing-world> (Apr. 28, 2022).

¹⁸ Gupta, Abhishek “*Manual Scavenging: A Case of Denied Rights*”, ILI Law Review, Summer Issue (2016)

¹⁹ Kumar, Shubham & Preet Priyanka, “*Manual Scavenging: Women Face Double Discrimination as Caste and Gender Inequalities Converge*”, Economic & Political Weekly, ISSN (Online) 2349-8846, Vol 55, Issue No 26-27, June 2020.

²⁰ *Sharing her awful feelings, a manual scavenger from Mainpuri, UP shares how she is compelled due to poverty and helplessness to clean 20 toilets every day, using tin plate and broom, removing human excrement from houses and collecting all in a basket.* Full report can be accessed at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india> (May 02, 2022).

activities and sometimes also cleaning placentas after delivery.²¹ Children of manual scavengers also undergo discrimination at every social sphere.

*"The people who do the manual scavenging work are from scheduled castes and marginalized communities. Their voices are never strong. They don't have a political representation. Using machines requires money. For politicians, departments that fetch commissions and vote banks are more important. They say issues like manual scavenging are not national issues. Love for nation and language is considered a national feeling."*²² Manual Scavenging is socio-economic political issue, wherein a dignified life is denied to manual scavengers. Attempts to address this issue have been in vain and livelihood programs have failed to eradicate it. Even after legislation of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR 2013) which prohibited the practice but even after prohibiting, many follow as a hereditary vocation in India. In Safai Karamchari Vs Union of India 2014, Supreme Court gave strict instructions to State Governments for enforcement of PEMSР law. It was taken as a violation of Article 17, which abolishes untouchability. Besides, on September 18, 2019, the Supreme Court observed "*In no country, people are sent to gas chambers to die. Every month four to five people lose their lives in manual scavenging*".²³

Manual scavenging, deeply embedded in hierarchical caste system and adversely affects women and girls of low strata. Many times, these are forced for manual scavenging and have to face multiple vulnerabilities. They lead a denied life wherein they are denied basic rights and justice in all spheres of life. It has been observed that generally manual scavengers are forced to reside on isolated outer regions of the cities or villages. It is to observe that the habitation of people in cities/villages depicts hierarchical order of the society wherein upper caste people

²¹Study Report: Inclusion and Exclusion of Dalit in Health and Education (2008-09), Jan Sahas-UNICEF, (May 02, 2022), <http://www.dalits.nl/pdf/ExclusionAndInclusionOfDalitCommunity.pdf>

²²Bezwada Wilson, Founder of Safai Karamchari Andolan, Magasasay Awadee shared his views on work, dignity and being human, December 2017; (May 12, 2022) Thehindu.com/society/bezwada-wilson-in-conversation-with-perumal-murugan/article22260315.ece.

²³ Revisit PEMSР 2013 to uplift manual scavengers, S. Jyotiranjan, July 5, 2021, THE PIONEER, State Edition; (May 11, 2022), <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2021/state-editions/revisit-pemsr-2013-to-uplift-manual-scavengers.html>.

occupy better locations, followed by other castes. Manual scavengers face serious health concerns due to the type of work they do. They get exposed to various kinds of diseases like cholera, hepatitis, meningitis, skin infections, cardiovascular problems, etc.²⁴

Inspite of putting a ban on this practise of manual scavenging since 1993, it has been continued.²⁵ Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, has not been completely implemented due to lack of commitment. The prohibition of Employment as Manual scavengers and the Rehabilitation Bill, 2020 is awaited to take shape of Act. Despite all such constitutional rights and legal frameworks, manual scavengers remain victims of discrimination and are killed in sewers at large. Although the govt. refused to acknowledge existence of this practice anymore, but news reports coming from corners of the country shows a different picture.²⁶ The practice can vanish only when the government takes it on priority and take laudable steps curbing this most obnoxious act.²⁷

IV. MANUAL SCAVENGING IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has come into existence as a nation in 1971, and as of now it is on the eleventh position in terms of the most densely populated countries of the world.²⁸ The country is progressing steadily towards economic growth, scientific

²⁴Sweepers and scavengers of third world cities, R R Pandey, 2014; https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/15970/Sweepers_and_Scavengers.pdf?sequence=2 (May 02, 2022).

²⁵ Noronha, K. M., T. Singh, and M. Malik. 2018, “*Manual Scavenging in India: A Literature Review*” CPR Research Report; (Apr. 13, 2022), <http://cprindia.org/research/reports/manual-scavenging-india-literature-review-annotated-bibliography>.

²⁶ *No manual scavenging deaths, 161 died while cleaning sewers in 3 years: Government, Tamil Naidu has the highest number of deaths in septic tanks and holes as per the report, published on 6 April 2022, HINDUSTAN TIMES (May 21, 2022)*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-manual-scavenging-deaths-161-died-while-cleaning-sewers-in-3-years-govt-101649247631971.html>.

²⁷ *The long march to eliminate manual scavenging, INDIA EXCLUSION REPORT, Wilson, B., & Singh, B, 2017, (May 11, 2022)*, <https://indianculturalforum.in/2017/07/07/the-long-march-to-eliminate-manual-scavenging/>.

²⁸Countries by Population Density, (May 01, 2022), <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-by-density>.

advancement and poverty reduction,²⁹ but lack of political will and prioritization is not letting the country free from the clutches of inhuman practices.

It is grim scenario that Bangladesh which is counted in fastest growing economies of the world is also dependent on the practice of “manual scavenging” for urban sanitation. These workers in the country are employed by city corporations or privately. Firstly, there is no separate law regulating practice of manual scavenging. The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, defines “*labour as a worker who works in any establishment or industry either directly or through a contractor*”. On the basis of it, manual scavengers fall under both formal and informal labour”.

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 & 2015 have rules and regulations applicable on manual scavengers. Section 46& 47(2) of 2015 Act laid down that “a worker should use a mask when he/she working in dust and in case the inspector finds it necessary, then inspector can take up a supplementary step for disposal of solid garbage or liquid faecal, respectively”. Section 67(2) of the same law affirms that “to ensure personal safety, protective gear should be provided like shoes, hand gloves, mask, goggles, apron, earplugs etc.” “The National Occupational Health and Safety Policy 2013 and the Dhaka Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management 2017 includes guidelines about occupational health and safety for pit emptying service but that is not satisfactory enough to eradicate the practice. Specific law and regulation for the well-being of sanitation worker is still non-existence although much has already been talked about enforcing mechanism for the well-being of manual scavengers”³⁰.

Another issue is that Bangladeshis also struggling to resolve the problem of waste disposal. Cleaning of septic tanks and sewers are dependent on manual labourers. According to the “Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, only 20% of the city is served by a piped sewer network and the city relies on individuals and private contractors to manually remove septic tank sludge”

²⁹Gimenez, Lea; Jolliffe, Dean; Sharif, Iffath; *Bangladesh, a Middle-Income Country by 2021: What Will it Take in Terms of Poverty Reduction?* World Bank, 2014, Washington, DC., <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/18668> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/18668> (May 07, 2022).

³⁰ Biswas, Manisha., *The occupational health and safety of manual scavengers in Bangladesh*, THE BUSINESS STANDARD, Nov 11, 2020. <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/occupational-health-and-safety-manual-scavengers-bangladesh-156466> (Apr. 22, 2022).

V. MANUAL SCAVENGING IN PAKISTAN

Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a developing nation which has not enacted any law to regulate this practice. Manual Scavenging persists in Pakistan. “Although India has outlawed caste-based discrimination with mixed success, in Pakistan it is almost encouraged by the State, The New York Times reported citing an example where the Pakistani military, last July, had placed newspaper advertisements for sewer sweepers with the caveat that only Christians should apply”.³¹ It has been stated “that the descendants of lower-caste Hindus who converted to Christianity centuries ago still find themselves marginalized and subjected to menial labor, including manual scavenging in Pakistan”.³² “Municipalities in Pakistan rely heavily on Christians for manual scavenging as Muslims refuse to clean the gutters and the Christian minorities have few other employment options. According to one estimate by the rights group, even though Christians constitute 1.6% of the population, they account for 80% sanitation workers”.³³

In one of the reports of Indian Express, a 30-year-old worker, fell unconscious while cleaning a septic tank and later was reported dead because his “dirty body” was refused to touch by doctor³⁴. Pakistan is also undergoing the same stinking practice as other countries of this region. “As per the report published in Dawn in March 2018, Karachi produces more than 1,703 million litres of sewage every day. Pakistan Supreme Court ordered all sewers to be cleaned before the

³¹*Manual scavenging: A caste-based discrimination that persists in Pakistan*, THE INDIAN EXPRESS, May 5, 2020. (Feb 11, 2022), <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/may/05/manual-scavenging-a-caste-based-discrimination-that-persists-in-pakistan-2139413.html#:~:text=Home%20World-,Manual%20scavenging%3A%20A%20caste%2Dbased%20discrimination%20that%20persists%20in%20Pakistan,the%20state%20continues%20to%20persist>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³*Minority Christians are forced to do manual scavenging work in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: Report*, May 5, 2020. (Apr. 15, 2022), <https://www.opindia.com/2020/05/pakistani-minorities-non-muslims-christians-hindus-jobs-forced-conversions-discrimination/>.

³⁴*Pakistan sewer cleaner dies as doctor refuses to touch his dirty body*, World News, THE INDIAN EXPRESS, June 4, 2017. (Apr. 13, 2022), <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/pakistan-sewer-cleaner-dies-as-doctor-refuses-to-touch-his-dirty-body-4688420/>.

monsoon. A month earlier, the court-appointed judicial commissioner on water and sanitation dismissed workers who refused to clean sewers".³⁵

Looking at this kind of condition in the South Asian region, one of the Report of WHO, states "Poor sanitation causes up to 4,32,000 diarrhoea deaths annually. Also, it is linked to the transmission of other diseases like cholera, dysentery, typhoid, hepatitis A and polio". This report was jointly authored by the International Labour Organisation, Water Aid, World Bank and WHO, 2019, titled as *Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers. An initial Assessment*.

VI. MANUAL SCAVENGING IN NEPAL

Across South Asian countries, the workers clean latrine pits without any specific tools or protective gears. Nepal is also one such country. Workers here have been highly stigmatized and discriminated against. Nepal has undergone the same situation like many other countries of South Asia. "A news report states that in Nepal, one of the waste management's groups which work with the Nepal government claimed that it provided hundreds of masks and gloves to the employees. More than one thousand sanitation workers set out on their duty in over 250 trucks every day. It said that 700 employees are deployed by the Kathmandu municipality and 1000 from private organizations. It has been said that dozens of companies and organizations including the municipality, did not provide protective gear saying they had only limited masks and gloves".

"Although Nepal Prime Minister KP Oli did announce that every sanitation worker will get life insurance but the news disappeared soon"³⁶. There were no check-ups, no follow-up, no COVID-19 tests were conducted. If anyone of the

³⁵How do other countries clean their sewers and is there something India can learn from them? Vijayta Lalwani, Sept 23, 2018, (Apr. 15, 2022) <https://scroll.in/article/895013/how-do-other-countries-clean-their-sewers-and-is-there-something-india-can-learn-from-them>.

³⁶Raman Paudel, *Nepal sanitation workers fight COVID-19 unarmed*, DOWN TO EARTH, May 11, 2020. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/nepal-sanitation-workers-fight-covid-19-unarmed-71033> (April 17, 2022).

worker gets the virus, who was responsible for such things? said Padam Bahadur Shresth, an advocate for labourers.³⁷

VII. COMPARATIVE CHALLENGES AND WORKABLE SOLUTIONS

Condition of sanitation workers and manual scavengers is similar in majorly all South Asian countries. Sanitation workers have been working unarmed, without protective gears or gloves or masks. Conditions in COVID have been more challenging wherein millions of people have been affected.

“New research by Water Aid in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse for the vast majority of these workers. Some have even been redeployed to service COVID-19 quarantine centres with limited training on COVID19 related risks or how to use PPE. Their financial security has also been affected either due to increased but non-compensated working hours in some cases, and reduced demand for their services in others. Their transportation costs increased due to lockdowns and many had to buy face masks and other equipment that their employers did not regularly provide”³⁸. This region, already face bleak conditions of working for sanitation workers and in present of pandemic times have exacerbated life-threatening conditions along with risk to dignity with stigma of discrimination.

Manual scavengers have been on higher risks during pandemic times rather exacerbated risks and extremely poor conditions of these sanitation workers. Sanitation workers have been long marginalized in this region. In spite of safety risks and financial challenges, manual scavengers face stigma and discrimination. Few of the countries, it is further associated with lower caste and religious minorities. In the pandemic, health workers contribution in society was appreciated but the one who cleaned dustbins, cleared the dirty stuff, cleaned quarantine centres were not even named, still they remain doing their jobs by cleaning hospital waste, streets and sewer systems in spite of unpreceded risks.

³⁷ Raman Paudel, *Nepal sanitation workers fight COVID-19 unarmed*, DOWN TO EARTH, May 11, 2020. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/nepal-sanitation-workers-fight-covid-19-unarmed-71033> (Apr. 19, 2022).

³⁸*South Asia: Authorities must urgently protect sanitation workers risking their lives on the Covid -19 frontlines*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, Water aid and International Dalit Solidarity Network, Joint Public Statement, Nov 19, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA0433492020ENGLISH.pdf> (Apr. 20, 2022)

Working in the absence of protective gears, gloves, tools etc. is a normal feature in these countries and portrays a bigger challenge in providing a happy and honourable life.

Major challenge was posed by the scarce availability of protective gears. Manual scavengers received very few protective gears for their safety and even absolute absence of training to deal with such kinds of conditions. Reports from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India mentioned shortage of protective gears, overheating of PPE in high temperatures. Hand hygiene was an issue which was manageable in a better manner in Pakistan and Nepal in comparison to the countries of Bangladesh and India wherein there was more limited access to facilities.³⁹

Impact on livelihood has been absolutely adverse. These manual scavengers have worked even during lockdowns. These informal workers were the worst hit of the pandemic, who had no regular income to fall back on and even no available opportunity to do any kind of labor work during these times. Covid lockdowns undoubtedly deepened the existing inequalities. “Only 35% of workers in India and 42% in Nepal reported being covered by any form of insurance; no workers in Pakistan or Bangladesh, and no informal workers in any of the countries, had any insurance coverage”⁴⁰.

It was even observed that these workers have faced changed social attitudes. Where on one side, at some of the places they have got public recognition for providing these services while at other places like in Bangladesh where such people had pressure from their localities to not to return back from their work to homes. In country of Nepal there were reports, which reported that sanitation workers were asked to vacate their homes. Such societal pressures surmount pestering lives of these human beings.

Although there have been contextual differences in making a comparative point of these countries, still there is an urgent need to cope up with pandemic, and

³⁹Comparative challenges & required action to be taken faced by Asian countries like India Nepal and Pakistan. <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/blog/sanitation-workers-in-south-asia-on-the-margins-of-society-on-the-frontline-of-covid-19> (Apr. 23, 2022).

⁴⁰“Comparative challenges & required action to be taken faced by Asian countries like India Nepal and Pakistan”, (April 24, 2022), <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/blog/sanitation-workers-in-south-asia-on-the-margins-of-society-on-the-frontline-of-covid-19>

proactive roles to be played by regional, national, municipal authorities and non-governmental players as well.

Few suggestions are suggested to propose a solution to this blot of manual scavenging practice:

- i. Proper Identification of engaged number of workers in this work. Every country has to bring out such schemes so that these manual scavengers' data can be maintained wherein accurate number is identified. A unified data system can be helpful which can serve as a single source of truth on sanitation work and workers⁴¹.
- ii. Local administration needs to be empowered. It becomes extremely essential to empower the local authorities and attempt to search for solutions to this practice. Like in India, it is questionable that where funds are available for smart cities and swachh bharat mission and urban development, it provides a strong case for approaching resolving the issue of manual scavenging.
- iii. Understanding the practice of manual scavenging is interlinked and driven by caste, class and income divides of the society. Although majorly all countries have tried to end the practice by various legislations but still the stigma and discrimination is yet to be vanished from social fabric. A comprehensive rehabilitation package has recently been put together that includes livelihoods and skill development, access to education, access to education for children of former manual scavengers and alternate livelihoods⁴².
- iv. Stringent laws are the need of the hour. Statutory laws need to build more stringent laws to provide sanitation services on the part of state agencies, expecting these sanitation workers to have their rights.

⁴¹ *No progress for sanitation workers: What must change*, Anahitaa Bakshi, Keshav Kanoria and NiratBhatanagar, Developing India, Times of India webpage, Aug 22, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/no-progress-for-sanitation-workers-what-must-change/?source=app&frmapp=yes> (Apr. 25, 2022).

⁴² *Breaking Free: Rehabilitating Manual Scavengers*, Webpage United nations in India, [https://in.one.un.org/page/breaking-free-rehabilitating-manual-scavengers/.\(May 15, 2022\).](https://in.one.un.org/page/breaking-free-rehabilitating-manual-scavengers/.(May 15, 2022).)

- v. It has now become extremely necessary to have strict laws deal with manual scavengers and completely eradicate the practice. It has been recommended that country need to have provisions for better protection for these sanitation workers and at least compensation in case of accidents. Mechanism of sewer cleaning can prove to bring an immediate difference to manual scavengers. Like in India, Delhi Government's endeavour to convert sanitation workers to 'sani-entrepreneurs' who are supposed to become the owners of sewer cleaning machines is a step further. This has been inspired by a project launched in Telangana and both the projects are the brainchild of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry⁴³.
- vi. This could be new approach to the problem. Social Justice and Empowerment of India in Dec 2020 has launched a mobile application to identify and geotag insanitary latrines. It claims to identify manual scavengers for rehabilitating. It is an application wherein citizens can provide details of any of the manual scavenger they identify or notice or can give information about insanitary latrines.⁴⁴
- vii. Some kind of financial support must be provided for their safety and welfare.
- viii. Legislations, protocols must be established to make these workers conditions safe along with some kind of training.
- ix. Social security schemes and health schemes must be strengthened to recognize these manual scavengers work in public service⁴⁵.

⁴³Revisit PEMSR 2013 to uplift manual scavengers, THE PIONEER, S Jyotiranjan, July 5, 2021, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2021/state-editions/revisit-pemsr-2013-to-uplift-manual-scavengers.html> (Apr. 13, 2022).

⁴⁴ Mobile app launched to identify, geotag insanitary latrines, manual scavengers, Outlook, the news scroll, Dec 24, 2020. (May 13, 2022), <https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/mobile-app-launched-to-identify-geotag-insanitary-latrines-manual-scavengers/1998730>

⁴⁵ Impact of Scheme of Training and Rehabilitation on Socio-economic Improvement of Scavengers in Rajasthan, https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/reports/sereport/ser/ser_istr.pdf (May 12, 2022)

- x. Public awareness must be raised to reduce the discrimination and stigma attached to sanitation.
- xi. Technological intervention can promote reducing this practice⁴⁶. For example, The Bandicoot Robot, developed by GenRobotics, Kerala, India for cleaning manhole and septic tank.⁴⁷

VIII. CONCLUSION

There has been an intense demand for strengthening of laws to put an end to this stinking practice. Water Aid India, along with Association of Rural and Urban Needy (ARUN) and Centre for Equity Studies (CES) and supported by the European Commission – European Instrument of Democracy and Human Rights (EC-EIDHR), is implementing a three-year (2018-21) project on ‘Strengthening rule of law to advance rights and freedoms of Manual Scavengers in India’. The project aims to study issues around implementation of PEMSR 2013 and demonstrate potential community-based measure to strengthen its implementation⁴⁸.

The situation of this class of society is indeed dark and grim. “Manual scavengers are at a double disadvantage. They are members of lower castes and as such, face enormous discrimination in society and second are disadvantaged because they are manual scavengers who clean human excreta”⁴⁹. We need to raise social consciousness for their social and economic reformation.

Modern society of South Asian countries will not be able to manage without sanitation workers and therefore an urgent need to pay heed on this issue. A recent

⁴⁶ *Manual Scavenging and Technological Solution to Eradicate It. (Turning Scavengers to Engineers)*: IOSR JOURNAL OF MECHANICAL AND CIVIL ENGINEERING (IOSR-JMCE) e-ISSN: 2278-1684, p-ISSN: 2320-334X, Vol. 11, Issue 3 Ver. II (May-Jun. 2014), PP 08-15.

⁴⁷ *New Report: Justice Denied-Death of workers engaged in manual scavenging*, (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan), ISDN webpage; <https://idsn.org/new-report-justice-denied-death-of-workers-engaged-in-manual-scavenging-rashtriya-garima-abhiyan/> (May 13, 2022)

⁴⁸ *UN High Level Political Forum 2019: An opportunity to protect the human rights of sanitation workers and manual scavengers*, Avinash Kumar, July 9, 2019. <https://washmatters.waterraid.org/blog/un-high-level-political-forum-2019-an-opportunity-to-protect-the-human-rights-of-sanitation> (May 15, 2022).

⁴⁹ Anahita Bakshi, Keshav Kanoria and Nirat Bhatanagar, *Breaking Free: Rehabilitating Manual Scavengers*, Webpage United nations in India. (May 15, 2022), <https://in.one.un.org/page/breaking-free-rehabilitating-manual-scavengers/>.

study conducted by WaterAid, World Bank and WHO states that a third of sanitation workers experience violence, and half of them still experience untouchability and discrimination⁵⁰. If world wish to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (to bring clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene by 2030, world has to have more sanitation workers with safe, healthy and dignified working conditions.⁵¹ Safe sanitation must go hand in hand with a safe and dignified working environment for those who run and maintain the sanitation services that protect our health⁵². Towards the end, leaders of all developing countries need to remind themselves of the following quote while keeping development as a vital for progressive society “*Development is about transforming the lives of people, not just transforming economies*” – Joseph. E. Stiglitz.

⁵⁰ *No progress for sanitation workers: What must change*, Developing India, TIMES OF INDIA webpage, Aug. 22, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/no-progress-for-sanitation-workers-what-must-change/?source=app&frmapp=yes> (Accessed on May 17, 2022).

⁵¹ *Transforming denial into deliberation: The case of manual scavenging*, YOUNG VOICE 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/transforming-denial-into-deliberation-the-case-of-manual-scavenging/> (May 19, 2022).

⁵² *New report exposes horror of working conditions for millions of sanitation workers in the developing world*, News, World Health Organization, Nov 14, 2019. <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-11-2019-new-report-exposes-horror-of-working-conditions-for-millions-of-sanitation-workers-in-the-developing-world> (May 23, 2022).