

National Conference on

“Promotion of Equality at Work in India: Manual Scavenging Practices”,

24 - 25 February 2012 at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Background:

In contemporary India, with its remarkable growth rate and corresponding investment and employment opportunities, some may find it surprising that heinous occupations like manual scavenging still persist. Manual scavenging is one of the ancient and age old occupation in India based on Caste structure. **Manual Scavenging** in literal terms means the manual removal and handling of human excreta; this occupation consists in the removal of human excreta with the help of brooms, tin plates and baskets in public streets, septic tanks and dry toilets. It is characterized by dramatically unhealthy and unsafe working conditions that continue to exacerbate the practice of Untouchability and marginalization of Dalits.

Mainly, there are three forms of manual scavenging in which people are forced to carry out scavenging work such as removal of excreta from public streets (“open defecation”) and dry latrines; removal of excreta form septic tanks and cleaning closed gutters and sewage. Especially 95% women are engaged in cleaning dry toilets and public streets whereas men of scavenger community enter into manhole and septic tanks to clean it. However, Delhi Higher Court directed on 27th July 2011 to the Indian Railways to rehabilitate sanitation workers employed into cleaning railway tracks and 1,72000 toilets. Therefore there is urgent need to re define the term ‘manual scavenger’

In 2007, the Government of India estimated 3.42 lakhs manual scavengers still operated in the country. For rehabilitation purposes the Government established the ‘Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers’ which was implemented from 2007 to March 2010. Through this scheme, more than 40.000 manual scavengers received livelihood training, almost 80.000 received loans for alternative forms of work, while almost 40.000 manual scavengers were not rehabilitated due to various reasons. On 17 June 2011 however, the Prime Minister of India dated urged his Government to eliminate the manual scavenging practice in the next six month which further reaffirms the existence of manual scavenging practice and the difficulty of its eradication.

At the same time, the National Advisory Committee adopted a number of recommendations expediting the elimination of scavenging, while the Ministry of Labour and Employment established a Task Force on Sanitation and Leather Workers which has also been initiating a number of legislative and policy revisions to assure manual scavenging will be eradicated in India by the end of the current five year plan.

The ILO scavenging project focuses on supporting the implementation of the renewed government policy in five States, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. For this purpose, the ILO organized three consultative meetings (Lucknow, Ahmedabad and Jaipur) with representatives of the scavenger community, trade unions and civil society to gain understanding of the different forms of scavenging; rehabilitation obstacles the scavenger community is facing; and ascertain the impact and effectiveness of the available Government schemes.

These meeting were preceded by field visits to obtain the observations by state government officials as well to get a better impression of their awareness and activities regarding the elimination of manual scavenging, while keeping in mind their heavy workload and multiple responsibilities. Their views contributed to the development a draft UN strategy paper (WHO, UNICEF and ILO), which is currently under construction. The paper will take into account various initiatives taken by the Government, trade unions, civil society and the scavenger's community themselves to bring out a holistic approach (health, water and sanitation, and occupational caste-based discrimination) to combat manual scavenging practice.

Henceforth, National seminar will be held in order to bring all stakeholders together to review and discuss the current situation regarding manual scavenging and to brainstorm practical and policy measures leading towards its speedy elimination, as expressed by the Government in the 12th five year approach paper. The meeting will take into account the recommendations emanating from the regional consultation meetings as well as judicial orders and recommendations made by the NAC and the MOLE Taskforce on Sanitation and Leather Workers.

Objectives of the National Conference:

- Discuss the issues and challenges in the elimination of manual scavenging and improving working conditions of sanitation workers
- Share and discuss key findings and observations derived from the zonal consultative meetings concerning to the manual scavenging
- Learn and upscale different strategies applied by various stakeholders for elimination of manual scavenging and develop a roadmap for total elimination of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of manual scavengers and sanitation workers

Methodology:

As per the mentioned objectives two days national conference will be organized at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Representatives of selected five states will be convened and approximately 50 participants are expected for national seminar.

Participants for seminar:

Approximately 50 participants will be invited to the seminar, especially Central and State Government representatives, relevant National Commissions, National Safai Karamachari Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), representatives of UN Bodies, community representatives, trade unions, National Advisory Council (NAC) and National Human Right Commission (NHRC) members, representatives of the Planning Commission, the judiciary and other experts actively involved in the eradication of current forms of manual scavenging and unsafe sanitation practices.