

# MANUAL SCAVENGING

Manual scavenging is a caste-based and hereditary occupation for Dalits that is predominantly linked with forced labour. It is the job of removing human excrement from dry toilets and sewers with bare hands, and the vast majority of workers involved are Dalit women.

In India and other caste-affected countries in South Asia, the word 'scavenger' is perceived as a human being who is considered as 'untouchable' or 'polluting' by other caste persons. So for a manual scavenger, social identity and stigma is being born as a 'low caste' and as a 'scavenger'. As stated by a UN Special Rapporteur, "the degrading nature of this work is an extreme case and is very much tied up with the inequalities of a deeply ingrained caste system and the lack of choice in finding other types of work."<sup>i</sup>

Dalit scavengers are rarely able to take up another occupation due to discrimination related to their caste and occupational status, and are thus forced to remain scavengers. They are paid less than minimum wages and are often forced to borrow money from upper-caste neighbours in order to survive and consequently they end up maintaining the relationship of bondage.

## Banned by law – widespread in practice

Although manual scavenging is banned by law in India, it continues to exist in a large scale. The exact number of manual scavengers remains disputed, but estimates are that more than one million persons are affected.<sup>ii</sup> The Government of India has formulated many policies and schemes, and has set the goal to totally eradicate manual scavenging by 2012, the end of the current Five-Year Plan.<sup>iii</sup> However, implementation remains weak. A 2012 study of the Government's rehabilitation scheme (SRMS) by Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan - Jan Sahas has found that there are serious deficits in the allocation and release of funds to manual scavengers and their children.<sup>iv</sup> A new law, which has been proposed to Parliament in August 2012, includes touch penalties for those who employ people as scavengers.<sup>v</sup>

The International Labour Conference (ILO) has a manual scavenging project, which focuses on supporting the implementation of the renewed government policy in five Indian states, and has held a National Conference to develop a roadmap for the elimination of this practice. In March 2012, a National Public Hearing on "Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers and their Children in India" was held to increase the political will to address the issues and sensitize other sections of the society and involve them in these efforts.

In other countries, such as Bangladesh, Dalits work as sanitation workers. Known as "sweepers", they clean out sewers and septic tanks and are subjected to considerable health risks, which are similar to those experienced by manual scavengers. In effect, the Dalit movement in Bangladesh has demanded the formulation of a law to protect Dalit communities from untouchability practices and discrimination based on work and descent.<sup>vi</sup>

## Human right to safe drinking water and sanitation

Access to water and sanitation is in a complete denial for manual scavengers, as they have to do these menial jobs with their bare hands and they have higher risk of occupational illness and health hazards. In 2012, NCDHR prepared a submission on stigmatization of Dalits in access to water and sanitation in India for a thematic report by the UN Special Rapporteur on water and sanitation.<sup>vii</sup> In the report, the Special Rapporteur states that caste systems are closely related to stigma and patterns of human rights violations, and that stigma is often closely linked to perceptions of uncleanness, untouchability and contagion (see text box).



Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India, Oct 2007. Niita Tank, 35, cleans the dry latrines of 25 houses and gets 43 eurocents per house per month. According to beliefs, Dalits are unclean, so treating human waste is left for Dalits such as Niita. Photo: Jakob Carlsen/IDSN

**TEXT BOX: Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on water and sanitation (A/HRC/21/42)  
21<sup>st</sup> session of the Human Rights Council (Sept 2012)**

33. Dalits are regularly forced into the most menial, socially degrading, dirty and hazardous jobs. Some Dalits, in particular women, work as manual scavengers or sweepers; the terminology varies across countries, but generally refers to those who clean faeces from dry toilets.<sup>15</sup> As a result of their direct contact with human faeces, manual scavengers suffer from a range of health problems (A/HRC/15/55 and Corr.1, para. 75) that are for the most part left untreated and add further to their stigmatization. Manual scavengers and sweepers suffer extreme forms of social exclusion, even within their own caste. These practices are not only deeply rooted in society, but also institutionalized through State practice, with municipalities themselves employing sweepers (*ibid.*). Moreover, patterns of stigmatization are perpetuated in schools, being reflected in the nature of cleaning duties, namely, through the assignment of toilet cleaning to the “lower” castes. Instead of breaking caste barriers, teachers perpetuate stigmatization, limiting the rights of young people to be free from discrimination and to access education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent](#) – a comprehensive framework to address caste-based discrimination. Published by the UN Human Rights Council in 2009 ([A/HRC/11/CRP.3](#))
- [Joint Declaration and Global Call for Action to Eliminate Caste-Based Discrimination \(IDSN, 2011\)](#)
- [Report on Good Practices and Strategies to Eliminate Caste-Based Discrimination \(IDSN, 2012\)](#)

## KEY RESOURCES

- IDSN’s Database - documents on manual scavenging: <http://delicious.com/idsn/manual-scavenging>
- [Employers of manual scavengers to face prison \(IDSN News August 2012\)](#)
- [Parliamentarians in India raise their voices for the eradication of manual scavenging \(IDSN News May 2012\)](#)
- [Manual Scavenging highlighted by ILO and others in conferences, reports and a hearing \(IDSN News April 2012\)](#)
- [Written statement, 21<sup>st</sup> HRC session \(IMADR, NCDHR and IDSN\): “Stigma, “untouchability” and caste-based discrimination”](#)
- [Submission on stigmatization of Dalits in access to water and sanitation in India \(NCDHR, 2012\)](#)
- [Stigma and manual scavenging – Note by Safai Kamachari Andolan \(2012\)](#)
- [Study on rehabilitation of manual scavengers](#) (implementation status of SRMS scheme) and [“Note on Uncompleted and unsuccessful rehabilitation](#) by Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan – Jan Sahas (2012)
- [ILO Project: Promotion of Equality at Work in India](#) (good practice case, IDSN Consultation 2011)
- [Garima Abhiyan - A story of Change \(Jan Sahas\)](#) (good practice case, IDSN Consultation 2011)
- [Steps towards the Elimination and Eradication of Manual Scavenging Practice](#) - a manual for Advocacy on Manual Scavenging. [Advocacy Plan on the Eradication of the practice of Manual Scavenging.](#)
- Lesson series published by the [Human Rights Correspondance School: An examination of the situation faced by Dalit communities working as manual scavengers and manhole workers](#)

<sup>i</sup> The Good Practice Book [“On the Right Track” released by the UN Special Rapporteur on Water and Sanitation](#) (Lisbon, February 2012)

<sup>ii</sup> According to the Census of India 2011, there are still 794,390 dry latrines in the country, where human excreta are cleaned up by humans. Apart from these there are 1,314,652 toilets where the human excreta is flushed in open drains. The census also adds that there are 497,236 toilets in the country where the human excreta is cleaned up by animals through eating it. Thus there are more than 26 lakhs [2.6 million] dry latrines in the country where the practice of manual scavenging still continues. Source: [Uncompleted and unsuccessful rehabilitation of manual scavengers](#) (Jan Sahas 2012)

<sup>iii</sup> As per a Public Interest Litigation filed in the High court of Delhi, Indian Railways managed by the Govt. of India, which employs a large number manual scavengers, is a violator of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993. Despite recommendations from the ILO Expert Committee on Conventions regarding Convention no. 111 in 2002 which looked into questions related to manual scavenging, this pernicious practice still continues.

<sup>iv</sup> [Study on rehabilitation of manual scavengers](#) (implementation status of SRMS scheme) in India by Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan – Jan Sahas (2012) and [“Brief Note on Uncompleted and unsuccessful rehabilitation of manual scavengers in India”](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Employers of manual scavengers to face prison \(IDSN News August 2012\)](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Demands by the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women’s Federation (BDEWF). See news story: <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=240444>

<sup>vii</sup> [Submission on stigmatization of Dalits in access to water and sanitation in India \(NCDHR, 2012\)](#)