

## Uncounted Deaths of Sanitation Workers in India

### What is the issue?

In 2021, the government has no accurate record of the number of sanitation workers (including manual scavengers), nor their approximate death count.

### What do recent estimates show?

- In the last 50 years over 1 million uncounted deaths of sanitation workers estimated in India.
- Deaths in the last 5 years and their causes
- 10,000 people - Multiple chronic conditions emanating from manual scavenging and cleaning insanitary latrines.
- Over 600 people - Hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks, with around 18-20% unreported cases in both these categories.
- Many deaths occurred during the peak of the pandemic's second wave, as sanitation workers handled dead bodies in semi-urban and rural areas and on the banks of the Ganga.

### What are the realities and concerns?

- The sub-castes of the Dalit community are largely engaged in all these unidentified categories of sanitation work, including manual scavenging.
- So far, in its identification-related surveys, the government has merely reached -
  - i. 5% of the total population of manual scavengers
  - ii. 20% of the total area of India
- **Causes of Failure**
  - i. Inadequacy of identification of manual scavengers by urban and rural local bodies
  - ii. Failure to comply with Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act by District magistrates
  - iii. Failure in exhibiting appropriate lists of examination of sanitation infrastructures by Appointed Inspectors
- Safety gears and devices promised to scavengers under the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge do not reach them.
- When workers identify themselves as manual scavengers, they are often harassed with death threats by local authorities.
- Non-compliance with the Act is hardly ever penalised.
- Compensation and promises of one-time case assistance are only provided in around 40% of "all recorded cases".

### What should be done?

- Estimating the actual number of deaths of sanitation workers (manual scavengers or other categories).
- Highlighting the lapses in the implementation of the PEMSAR Act and government interventions, and rectifying them.

Source: The Indian Express

