

Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 8 and **their relevance to** **Sanitation work in India**



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& their Relevance to Sanitation Work in India**

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CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION FACED BY THE DALIT COMMUNITY IN INDIA

- Relegation to menial jobs considered 'impure', 'polluting', and 'unclean to society'.
- Named 'untouchable' because of the work they were assigned and removed from the community settlements.
- Little to no access to the public and daily amenities like drinking water, land, and other resources, which are necessary for survival and dignified life.
- Often discriminated against for accessing clean drinking water from natural resources such as groundwater, rivers, ponds, and springs that are accessible by other communities.
- Deviance to comply with the caste rule results in physical violence and disownment, and removal from the land they inhabit.



Photo: Sajana J

INTRODUCTION

India is a developing nation that is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. India recently surpassed China's population and this rapid Population explosion has compounding effects and impacts not only in our country's economy, resource utilization, development actions, and most importantly socioeconomic lives of the people. Even in terms of renewable resources, the unequal distribution and utilization of the resources is further going to push the existing havoc of the economic disparity among the rich and poor in the country if the government and responsible citizens take no feasible, just, and timely action. Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 aspires to provide clean water and Sanitation; Goal 8 aspires to Decent Work and economic growth for all and India is serious about it.

When it comes to 'Clean drinking water and Sanitation work in India', we must talk about caste and Caste Discrimination and ask why a certain section of the Dalit community is engaged in this work and why only them, why it is made exclusive, Nature, evolution, and impact of this work, and exclusivity of engagement. Without this discussion and narrative, understanding Sanitation work from the Dalit Human Rights perspective is unattainable. Dalit community in India has been facing caste-based discrimination from time untraceable.

The caste system in India has put Dalits in the lowest rank of the Caste hierarchy and relegated them to menial jobs that were considered impure, polluting, and unclean to society. Dalits were named untouchable because of the work they were assigned and were discarded from the community settlements, often shifted to the outskirts of the mainland with little to no access to the public and daily amenities like drinking water, land, and other resources, which are necessary for survival and dignified life.

Even to this day, Dalits are often discriminated against for accessing clean drinking water from natural resources such as groundwater, rivers, ponds, and springs that are accessible by other communities while being forced to survive on the mercy of those who offer them some water for drinking or forced to drink unsafe water and fetch water from distant places. Deviance to comply with the caste rule would mean physical violence and disownment, and removal from the land they inhabited.

Dalits are often discriminated against for accessing clean drinking water from natural resources such as groundwater, rivers, ponds, and springs that are accessible by other communities

To date, these unspoken rules exist in India, making the lives of Dalits difficult and challenging. One such horrifying incident covered by *The News Minute*¹ took place in the Channuar village in Karnataka, where an upper caste attempted several times to kill the Dalit people by poisoning the only well used by the Dalit for drinking purposes. This well was one of seven wells in the village, but this one in particular is located on the outskirts of the village. An upper caste person named Gollalappagouda Kallappagouda Kukanur had taken land on lease from the Dalit. after this, he rampantly went on harassing Dalits from fetching water from the well.

He even poisoned the well, but his attempt was unsuccessful due to the foul smell noticed by a Dalit person named Mahantappa while fetching water. Later, this incident was reported in the Jewargi Police Station, and this case was booked under Section 3 of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The division of labor and laborers in India is the brainchild and fruit of the caste system in India as stated by Dr.B.R Ambedkar. Dalits were assigned work that would require hard manual labor, handling human and animal carcasses, cleaning and sweeping, leather work, etc. Anything that according to religious books would make them impure in their body and soul. Among all these works, Manual handling of human excreta, and manual scavenging in general is considered the most impure work that a human would consider doing.

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Valmiki community among the Dalit community was assigned this work and has been the most discriminated group in the society. This work has robbed them of dignity and Human rights. They are not allowed to touch, speak directly, enter public places, or temples, or access resources that are there for everyone just because they belong to the Dalit community.

Also to be noted that even in this work, Dalit women are relegated to manual handling of human excreta from dry latrines which are still in existence. Freedom to choose, choices, and denial to do this work is still non-existent in this society to many of those engaged in this work mostly for women.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE **SDG 6** AND **SDG 8** IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA



GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

According to the World Health Organization, 2 billion people were living in water-stressed countries in 2021 due to climate change and population growth, which is expected to increase in the following year. The same report says that in 2022, contaminated water with faeces was the source of drinking water for at least 1.7 billion people which hints at the huge health issues and waterborne epidemics. As per the UN.Org report, India has only 4 percent of the global water resources against 18 percent of the global population. According to them, by 2030, over 75% of households will not have clean drinking water, and 40% of the population will have no access to drinking water². 37.7 million children are affected by waterborne diseases annually in India. India uses groundwater more than China and USA combined which means it draws nearly 25% of the world's groundwater as per the report by Daiki Axis India. Children are at risk of being affected by life-threatening waterborne diseases in the country.

As per the UN.Org report, India has only 4 percent of the global water resources against 18 percent of the global population

SDG 6 : Clean Water and Sanitation

SDG 6: Sub-Goals	Objectives	Indicators
6.1	Universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water.	Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services.
6.2	Adequate and equitable sanitation for all.	Proportion of the population using safely managed sanitation services, including a hand-washing facility with soap and water.
6.3	Improvement of water quality through reduction of water pollution.	Proportion of wastewater safely treated; Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality.
6.4	Increase of water use efficiency across sectors and reduce number of people suffering from water scarcity.	Change in water-use efficiency over time; Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources.
6.5	Implementation of integrated water resource management at all levels.	Degree of integrated water resources management implementation (0-100); Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation.
6.6	Protect and restore the health of water-related ecosystems.	Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time.

SDG 6: Sub-Goals	Objectives	Indicators
6.a	International cooperation and capacity building in developing countries through waste water treatment, desalination, recycling and reuse technologies etc.	Amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance that is part of a government-coordinated spending plan.
6. b	Participation of local communities for the improvement of water and sanitation.	Proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management.

Table 1: Goal 6 and its indicator for India for Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Water and Sanitation is an intersecting challenge and has a larger impact on health, education, gender, and other socioeconomic problems.

According to the UN report, in India, only 31 % of the Industrial and domestic sewage is treated³. At the same time, the rest are disposed of in the open water bodies which are killing large amounts of flora and fauna. Insanitary toilets are still in existence whereas the government has proposed a fully mechanized sanitation system in India. Major issues in sanitation are the rapid rise of population, urbanization, and shrinking of living and drainage spaces in India, mostly in the urban areas.

Open drainage, clogged sewage and manholes, and waterlogging are some of the challenges that we see every monsoon and this incidence is rising each year making it more difficult to deal with the situation.

One of the major reasons for this is the poor drainage and sewage system, illegal housing, etc. which makes it harder for the mechanical cleaning of the drains and sewage because of lack of space, drainage system incompatible with machine cleaning which at last demands manual handling by a human, which means a Dalit person who has no choice but to risk his life in cleaning the sewage for a meagre amount of money. At the end of the day, a Dalit man would always be engaged in cleaning of manholes and sewage because the cost of mechanical cleaning and other requirements cost employers more than the meagre amount of money they can pay to a Dalit cleaner.

Some of the government's flagship programs are already being carried out and indeed made a mark at many levels, impacting lives and the community's well-being at large scales. Jal Jeewan Mission, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and Namaste Schemes are some of the important programs designed to attain Goal 6 by 2030. As per the Press information by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, the Jal Jeewan Mission has provided drinking water to 15.19 crore households throughout the country with the rural households as the primary target groups⁴. It further claims that over 78% of Rural Households have access to tap water across the country.



SDG 6 : Clean Water and Sanitation

Schemes in Alignment with Goal 6	2024-25 (General)	2023-24
Budget allocated under the NAMASTE Scheme	116.94	97.41
Budget allocated under SRMS	0.00	0
Budget allocated under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBM-Rural) (Jharkhand-SBM- SC-Rural & General - Rural + Urban)	12192.00	12192
Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) / National Rural Drinking Water Mission	70162.90	70000
Budget allocated to Jal Board		
Budget allocated to National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation	0.01	15

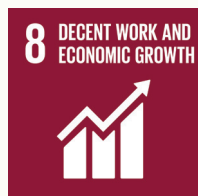
Table 2: Allocation under the Union Budget in FY 2023-24 and FY 2024-25 under the schemes in alignment with Goal 6.

Another important mission to clean water and sanitation is the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) which was inceptioned in the year 2014 and aims to ensure safe sanitation as per the official report of the SBM, 9.5 Crore toilets have been built all over the country.

Another important objective of the program is to make the Indian village Open Defecation Free and as per the report, 564,658 villages have been declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) as of October 2024. Another important program is NAMASTE, launched in the last financial year i.e. 2023-24. Replacing the previously known schemes SRMS- Schemes for the Rehabilitation of the Manual Scavengers.



A clear shift in the priority section/objective and goals can be seen in the Namaste Schemes from its preceding scheme SRMS. In the previous program, people engaged in Manual Scavenging were the prime focus and beneficiaries with their rehabilitation to alternative livelihoods as a fundamental outcome, but in the new program, the shift has completely transferred from people to the mechanisation of the sanitation system.



GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

What makes work 'Decent work'? What are its indicators? Well, as per the International Labour Organisation in its book titled 'International Labour Reviews, Vol.142(2023), NO.2⁵ has provided some crucial and essential indicators for Decent work, which are:

Employment opportunities,
Remunerative Employment or Fair wages,
Safe and Healthy Working Conditions,
Job security,
Social Protection,
Career Development,
Equal Opportunities,
Clean water and sanitation,
Sanitation facilities,
Fire safety,
Emergency Exits,
Quality Education,
No Forced and Child Labour,
No Discrimination at work,
Freedom of Association, and
The Social Dialogue Dimension (Collective Bargaining, Economic Democracy, Participation at the National Level)

It is not surprising to realise that a vast number of works that we come across daily somewhere fail to tick all the mentioned indicators to be called a 'Decent Work' and ILO has also clarified in their reports that measuring indicators varies by country but some of the indicators are non-negligible at any cost such as 'No forced and Child Labour', and 'No Discrimination at Work'. this particular indicator also includes gender-based discrimination at the workplace. Decent work fuels not only the economic growth of the country, a community or any individual but largely contributes to the delivery of Human rights Justice. Decent work impacts the economy, social mobility, Development action political attitude and a just society.

India is one of the most influential global south countries which impacts the global indicators towards securing Goal 8 at International Level. What and how India functions, plans and delivers impacts its neighbouring countries at a large scale. India plays a powerful role in the global south. India stands as 3rd World's Largest Economy and as per the IPSOS 'What Worries the World, September report 2024, India ranks 3rd in Optimism. India is also known as the 'Voice of the Global South'. Therefore, it is imperative to say every step India takes makes an impact at the global level. India is shining bright at the international level but has it lightened up the lives of those stuck in the gambit of intergenerational forced work of menial jobs in India? Or is it just like the mighty sun which lightens up the world yet fails to lighten the deep dark caves of mountains? Let's have a look.

There is no denial of the fact that India has indeed made tremendous progress and effort in the Economic development of the people and country, yet this report tries to bring focus to the efforts towards the most marginalised and discriminated section of the community when it comes to Decent work and economic growth. Some of the work with a large number of the workforce which comes under the label of the unorganised sector are – coal mining, stone quarries, ship-breaking industries, traditional fish hunting, construction work, domestic care and sanitation work, especially

manual scavenging. The majority of these workers are poverty-stricken, migrating for work, and not covered under any health insurance policies, contractual, unsafe work conditions etc.

There is no work which is menial, inhumane, undignified and forced as Manual Scavenging. It is not only intergenerational, socio-culturally forced labour but it is that invisible force which has robbed the dignity of those forced into this work. Generation after generation, a certain section of the Dalit community is forced to do this work manually and dry latrines even to this day exist and are cleaned by women with bare hands. It is shocking yet not surprising that these women are paid in leftover food and second-hand clothes.

The issues of hatred, caste-based discrimination and inhuman treatment of them are massive and run deep. This discrimination has survived so much that even the Dalits have given up hopes that this needs to be changed, that they are equal to all, right to have dignity, treated humanely. The discrimination is so deeply rooted in their subconscious mind that they don't even dare and sometimes unconsciously chooses to sit in lower position, mostly in ground when they are in front of people from the dominant caste, they choose to stand at a distance, make less eye contact, and bow down in front of dominant caste people. Dalits in some of India are not even allowed to wear footwear, or jewellery in front of the dominant caste.

This report shall exclusively argue on the plight of Sanitation workers and manual scavengers from the lens of Decent Work and Economic Growth. 5 million people in India are engaged in Sanitation work with 50% of women working in urban sanitation work, while more than 95% women engaged in manual scavenging in rural areas and handling of human excreta with the hand is exclusive to Dalit women. Whereas cleaning of sewage, septic tanks, and manholes is exclusively done by Dalit men. Let us look at this work from the set Indicator of decent work by ILO.

FAIR WAGE

Wage theft is one of the major issues for those engaged in sanitation work especially those on a contractual basis. Those employed permanently for cleaning and sweeping draw a salary of Rs.12,000/- to Rs 49,000/- (and above, varies state-wise) whereas those in Contractual work earn from Rs. 50/- to Rs. 450/-per day depending on the work they do such as sweeping, door to door garbage collection, waste segregation and cleaning of sewage and septic tanks and gender is also a factor here, women are paid less than men, a woman in the rural area gets paid less than Rs. 8000/- per month under the contractual basis for cleaning and sweeping but the payment is irregular and wage theft is one of the major issues they face.

SAFE WORKING SPACE

In India, the deaths due to manholes while cleaning are daily events. With government saying 448 deaths while cleaning septic tanks from 2018 till Dec 2023, there is a stark difference in the reports and claims of civil society organisations which says more than 700 deaths have happened. Safai Karamchari Andolan claims the deaths of 1760 people while cleaning septic tanks and manholes since 2000⁶. Sadly, these deaths are preventable if the safety rules and the laws are taken and followed strictly. There is a huge lack of legal actions taken against the negligence of the employer and the authorising person/ official who is liable to ensure the safety of the workers before entering poisonous chambers.

Deaths while cleaning Septic Tanks



448 deaths (2018-2023) **per Government Records**

700 deaths (2018-2023) **per Civil Society Organisations**

SAFETY PRECAUTIONARY KITS

While the government and employment agencies claim to give the safety kits to the workers the poor and insufficient quality of these kits makes the jobs even harder as claimed by the workers. The manhole cleaning is done at night most of the time, making the contractor and the workers sometimes untraceable to detect any life threats. The pre-investigation of these septic tanks and authorization of the entrance to these chambers are highly missing and are one of the biggest causes of these deaths.

The incompatibility of the drainage system and manholes with that of the cleaning machine which government claims for mechanical cleaning of these manholes need serious evaluation and discussion. If the mechanical cleaning of the septic tanks is in work, then why Dalits are being paid and forced to enter these toxic gas chambers and manholes, and why deaths are still occurring? There are many researches and reports by independent writers, organizations, and reporters that are raising this issue through their reports.

Apart from these mentioned indicators, the gravity of the situation when it comes to Human Rights Discrimination in Sanitation Work is huge, the impacts of this discrimination not only cost lives but strengthen this vicious cycle of poverty, indignity, substance abuse, and socio-economic disparity among the Dalits community engaged in sanitation work in India. This work has robbed them of liberty and freedom to choose alternative livelihoods because once their Dalit identity is revealed they are directly and indirectly removed from employment (other than sanitation work), separated and disconnected from social and business tractions which ultimately pushes them back to the pits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The basic amenities such as clean drinking water and Sanitation should be made safer and more accessible by the marginalized community of Dalits, especially those inhabiting urban slums and even in the outskirts and Dalit Basties/ Hamlets in Rural areas where Caste-based discrimination has threatened access

1. to these amenities for Dalits. Improved and covered drainage systems and public toilets with running water should be provided in Dalit-inhabited areas. Save Dalit children at school and create a safe space for these marginalized children with stringent action and implementation of child safeguarding policy at all academic Institutions.

Stringent Implementation of Section 36 of The Factories Act of 1948 and prevent the death of the Dalit workers in Septic tanks and manholes. Provide quality safety kits and training to the sanitation workers. Accountability and transparency of death records, Action taken reports, and other data are to be made accessible to the public.

2. Prevent wage theft by carefully monitoring wage transactions from contractors to workers, minimizing middlemen's intruding action or meddling. Transaction of wages must be made transparent and properly, officially documented, and accessible to both parties. Fair wages, health insurance, and socio-economic policies and programs must target and prioritize women engaged in sanitation work along with the educational benefits for their children.
- 3.

The indicators of decent work and economic growth must be implied in sanitation work as well, providing fair wages, creating workspaces, providing and ensuring basic work-related amenities, removal of

4. job and wage insecurities, provision of sick leave without any risk of losing a job, health insurance coverage to be made available and accessible for those engaged in sanitation workers who are employed on contractual basis.

There must be a review and evaluation of the mechanization of the Sanitation system with a closer and minute review of the utility, usage, and compatibility of the cleaning machine in the Indian Urban and Rural settlements, for this must minimize the direct human contact and prevent manual handling of the manholes.

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