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Zero on Paper: A Nil Manual Scavenging Survey and the Definition Problem

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Zero on Paper: A Nil Manual Scavenging Survey and the Definition Problem

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

A fresh nationwide survey conducted under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 identified no person engaged in manual scavenging, while the government reported progress under the NAMASTE Scheme in profiling and equipping sewer and septic tank workers.

THE REPORTED POSITION

PARAMETER	FIGURE
Manual scavengers identified in the fresh survey	Nil
Sewer and septic tank workers profiled and validated under NAMASTE	89,915
PPE kits distributed	87,037
Safety device sets supplied to Emergency Response Sanitation Units	753
Earlier surveys	2013 and 2018
Manual scavengers identified in the 2018 survey	44,217

THE DISTINCTION THE NUMBERS TURN ON

The nil finding is not, on its face, implausible, because the [statutory](#) definition is narrower than the phrase suggests in ordinary use.

TERM	STATUTORY MEANING
Manual scavenging	Under the 2013 Act, manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or handling human excreta from an insanitary latrine , an open drain or pit into which it is disposed, or a railway track, before the excreta fully decomposes
Hazardous cleaning	Manual entry into a sewer or septic tank without protective gear and observance of safety precautions; a distinct category, also prohibited under the Act

A person who dies of asphyxiation after entering a septic tank is a victim of **hazardous cleaning**, not of manual scavenging as the Act defines it. So a nil manual-scavenging count and continuing sewer deaths are not logically contradictory. They are measurements of two different things.

That resolution, however, raises the sharper policy question rather than settling it: if the category that has been eliminated on paper is not the category in which people are still dying, what exactly has the elimination achieved, and is the surviving category being measured with equal rigour?

NAMASTE AND THE SHIFT IN POLICY LOGIC

SCHEME	FOCUS
Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS)	Identification and rehabilitation of manual scavengers
NAMASTE (National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem), launched 2023	Mechanisation of sewer and septic tank cleaning; profiling, PPE, occupational safety training, capital subsidy for sanitation-related enterprise, and health insurance linkage for sewer and septic tank workers

The shift is from **identifying and rehabilitating a prohibited occupation** to **making a continuing, legal but hazardous occupation safer and progressively mechanised**. That is a defensible reorientation, since sewer and septic tank cleaning will continue to be necessary work in any city, but it also changes what success looks like: the metric moves from “how many manual scavengers remain” to “how many hazardous entries occur and how many workers are protected.”

THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL ARCHITECTURE

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 17	Abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form
Article 21	Right to life, read to include the right to live with dignity and to a safe working environment
Article 23	Prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour
Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993	The earlier statute, focused on dry latrines
Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013	The governing law; prohibits both manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning, and mandates rehabilitation

Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India (2014) is the key judgment. The Supreme Court directed that the families of all persons who had died in sewerage work since 1993 be identified and paid compensation of Rs 10 lakh each, and issued directions on rehabilitation, giving the statutory scheme judicially enforceable content.

That figure is no longer the operative one. In **Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India (20 October 2023)** the Supreme Court **raised sewer-death compensation from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 30 lakh**, set scales of Rs 20 lakh for permanent disability and Rs 10 lakh for other disability, and issued fourteen directions to the Union and the States. Quote the 2023 figure as the current standard and the 2014 figure as its origin.

UPSC RELEVANCE

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GS Paper 2: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws and institutions for the protection of vulnerable sections.

Prelims pointers:

- **NAMASTE** = National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem, launched **2023; 89,915** sewer and septic tank workers profiled and validated.
- The **2013 Act** prohibits both **manual scavenging** (human excreta from insanitary latrines) and **hazardous cleaning** (sewer or septic tank entry without protective gear); these are **distinct categories**.

- The earlier statute was the **1993 Act**, focused on dry latrines.
- **Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India (2014)**: compensation of **Rs 10 lakh** for families of those who died in sewerage work since 1993.
- **Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India (2023)**: raised sewer-death compensation to **Rs 30 lakh**, with Rs 20 lakh for permanent disability and Rs 10 lakh for other disability, plus fourteen directions.
- The **2018** survey identified **44,217** manual scavengers.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE REPORTED POSITION:

Fresh national survey under the 2013 Act: nil manual scavengers identified.

NAMASTE: 89,915 sewer and septic tank workers profiled and validated; 87,037 PPE kits distributed; 753 safety device sets to Emergency Response Sanitation Units.

Earlier surveys in 2013 and 2018; the 2018 survey identified 44,217 manual scavengers.

THE DEFINITIONAL DISTINCTION:

Manual scavenging: handling human excreta from insanitary latrines, open drains or railway tracks.

Hazardous cleaning: entering a sewer or septic tank without protective gear. A sewer death falls in the second category, not the first.

LEGAL FRAME: ARTICLE 17, ARTICLE 21, ARTICLE 23; THE 1993 ACT, SUPERSEDED BY THE PROHIBITION OF EMPLOYMENT AS MANUAL SCAVENGERS AND THEIR REHABILITATION ACT, 2013; SAFAI KARAMCHARI ANDOLAN V. UNION OF INDIA (2014), RS 10 LAKH COMPENSATION FOR SEWERAGE DEATHS SINCE 1993, RAISED TO RS 30 LAKH IN DR. BALRAM SINGH V. UNION OF INDIA (2023).

Sources: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Press Information Bureau, Supreme Court of India

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