

Beyond Legislation: Policy Discourses and Implementation Gaps in India's NAMASTE Scheme on Manual Scavenging

Varun Srivastava, Amity University

Sudipta Roy Choudhury, Amity University

Ashmika Agrawal, Amity University

Aayush Tripathi, Amity University

Abstract: This study undertakes a critical evaluation of the NAMASTE Scheme (National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem) through data obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, to assess the operationalisation of India's statutory and policy mechanisms for the elimination of manual scavenging. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative data acquired via RTI with qualitative analysis of global waste management models to examine implementation efficacy, structural limitations, and policy coherence. The study engages with legislative and institutional frameworks while foregrounding the intersection of caste, labour, and sanitation in the Indian context. A comparative policy review is conducted with reference to Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, and Singapore, countries that have established high-functioning, inclusive sanitation systems. Preliminary analysis reveals critical implementation gaps in training, technological deployment, and livelihood rehabilitation. The study concludes that India's pathway toward eradicating manual scavenging must align legal intent with decentralised governance, caste-sensitive mechanisation, and global best practices rooted in accountability and social justice.

Keywords: manual scavenging; NAMASTE scheme; comparative waste management; caste and labour; public policy implementation

1 INTRODUCTION

The narrative of South Asia's rapid urbanisation is often framed around economic growth, technological advancement, and infrastructural development. Yet, this progress exists alongside widening social inequalities, deepening labour precarity, and the persistent exclusion of marginalised communities from the benefits of urban transformation (Desai & Sanyal, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2022). Nowhere is this contradiction starker than in the sanitation sector, where the archaic, dehumanising practice of manual scavenging continues to thrive beneath the surface of so-called modern cities.

Manual scavenging, defined as the manual removal of human excreta from toilets, sewers, and drains without the use of protective equipment, is not merely a remnant of an outdated sanitation system - it is a living symptom of caste-based oppression, structural neglect, and policy failure (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Iyer, 2018; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2023). Despite constitutional guarantees of dignity, equality, and justice, this practice has

survived through institutional loopholes, administrative apathy, and social impunity, disproportionately affecting Dalit and other marginalised communities (Ganguly, 2022; Kumar, 2022).

A modern nation state must carry out social welfare and development functions. India has a poor record in providing basic public amenities including sanitation (Ashok Antony D'Souza, 2015). In India, manual scavenging has been addressed through legislative and policy measures, notably the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, and their recent counterpart, the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) Scheme. In spite of this, reports from official channels and independent investigations consistently reveal disturbing gaps that exist between policy intent and real-world outcomes (National Commission for Safai Karamcharis [NCSK], 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2019). The systemic weaknesses in implementing these frameworks have been exposed through the rising number of fatalities in sewer lines, rampant underreporting, and a lack of rehabilitation support.

However, there are lessons that India can learn from its Global North counterparts and its neighbours in Asia, such as Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the Netherlands, and Germany. These countries have reimagined sanitation work through a combination of things such as technological innovation, strict regulatory oversight, and inclusive social policies (OECD, 2023; WHO, 2021). These models aptly demonstrate that with political engagement, investment in technology, and a respect for the dignity of human beings, the hazardous nature of sanitation work can be eliminated.

This research situates itself at the intersection of these concerns. Building on global experiences while critically engaging with India's socio-cultural complexities, the research interrogates why manual scavenging persists, identifies gaps in implementation, and explores the possibility of adapting successful international models to India's context. In doing so, it aligns with a growing body of scholarship that calls for centering social justice, dignity, and worker protection in sanitation policy (Harriss-White, 2015; UNDP, 2023).

This paper argues that manual scavenging continues in India not because laws are missing, but because implementation is weak. Using RTI data on the NAMASTE Scheme, the study shows that workers are being identified, but key support like training, safety equipment for all, and livelihood help is not reaching them properly. The paper also uses lessons from other countries to show that mechanisation works only when the government enforces rules, trains workers, and protects them through formal jobs and accountability.

1.1 Definition and Context

Manual scavenging in India is not merely a sanitation issue; it represents a persistent form of caste-based occupational segregation and structural inequality embedded within India's socio-legal fabric (Ambedkar, 1936; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Defined by statute, manual scavenging involves the manual handling, cleaning, or disposal of human excreta from dry latrines, open drains, septic tanks, sewers, or railway tracks, often without protective gear (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2023). The caste system is of critical importance in the Indian social structure and is linked with sanitation. Since the very beginning, unsanitary works have been ascribed to certain castes (Pais, 2021). Though officially prohibited under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (2013), the practice endures through informal contracting and bureaucratic reframing,

frequently masked under the more general category of sanitation work. Sanitation work encompasses a broader range of labour, including waste and sewage management, that may not always involve direct contact with excreta but often remains informal, hazardous, and caste-mediated.

Historically, manual scavenging has been imposed on Dalit communities, particularly among sub-castes such as Valmiki and Hela, exemplifying what is known as caste-based occupation, which refers to hereditary labour assignments rooted in the hierarchical structure of the caste system (Ilaiah, 2001; Iyer, 2018; Thorat & Newman, 2012). The endurance of such labour practices despite legal abolition illustrates what public health scholars refer to as structural violence, meaning systemic forms of harm produced by institutional neglect, policy fragmentation, and entrenched social hierarchies (Farmer, 2003). This intersection of caste, informality, and administrative inaction contributes to the continued invisibility of manual scavengers within formal labour and welfare systems.

Although the law provides for rehabilitation, defined as the provision of alternative livelihoods, training, financial assistance, and social support to liberated manual scavengers, implementation has been sporadic and inadequate (Bezwada, 2020; Kumar, 2022). The scale of the problem also remains contested. While government records list relatively few individuals engaged in manual scavenging, civil society groups report widespread underestimation, often attributed to definitional ambiguities, lack of proactive identification, and political reluctance to acknowledge the problem (Ganguly, 2022; UNDP, 2023) (See Table 1).

Table 1: Estimated Underreporting of Manual Scavengers in Selected States

State	Official Count (2023)	Civil Society Estimates
Uttar Pradesh	0	27,000
Bihar	0	11,000
Maharashtra	132	15,000
Tamil Nadu	58	8,000
Delhi	0	12,000

Source: MSJE (2023); NCSK (2024); Safai Karmachari Andolan (2024)

At the international level, such hazardous sanitation labour has been eliminated in most high-income countries through universal mechanisation, robust infrastructure, and enforceable labour protections (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). By contrast, in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, unsafe waste handling continues, disproportionately affecting economically and socially marginalised populations (UN-Habitat, 2022). The successful elimination of these practices in Sweden, Japan, and Singapore highlights the transformative role of inclusive policy design, technological innovation, and strong enforcement mechanisms. These international contrasts not only expose the structural deficiencies of India's sanitation framework but also underscore the potential for transformative, rights-based policy solutions adapted to local contexts.

This paper argues that manual scavenging continues in India not because laws are missing, but because implementation is weak. Using RTI data on the NAMASTE Scheme, the study shows that workers are being identified, but key support like training, safety equipment for all, and livelihood help is not reaching them properly. The paper also uses lessons from other countries to show that mechanisation works only when the government enforces rules, trains workers, and protects them through formal jobs and accountability.

1.2 Rationale and Objectives

Despite the existence of a formal legal framework on manual scavenging, it persists in India due to deep-rooted caste hierarchies, economic marginalisation, and weak institutional accountability. Rapid and unforeseen urbanisation has only exacerbated these issues by increasing the demand for sanitation workers without equivalent investment in worker safeguards or mechanised systems (Desai & Sanyal, 2012; UNDP, 2023). While the Act of 2013 and the NAMASTE Scheme recognise the issue, their implementation is hampered by fragmented governance, limited resources, and ineffective enforcement (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2023; National Commission for Safai Karamcharis [NCSK], 2024). RTI data collected for this research indicates serious gaps in rehabilitation and safety provisioning, notwithstanding the validation of over 80,000 workers (National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation [NSKFDC], 2025).

This study examines these institutional failures through legal and policy analysis, supported by comparative insights from Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, and Singapore. It proposes a justice-oriented framework aligned with India's commitments under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ILO Convention No. 111, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations, 1965, 1966, 1979; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022).

In light of the above concerns, this research study pursues the following objectives:

- To critically evaluate the implementation of India's legal and policy frameworks, with a specific focus on the NAMASTE Scheme, by identifying operational strengths, systemic limitations, and opportunities for reform.
- To examine international waste management models that have eliminated hazardous sanitation labour, with emphasis on mechanisation, regulatory enforcement, and social inclusion.
- To analyse the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions required for contextual adaptation of global practices within India, with particular focus on caste hierarchies, urban governance, and state capacity.
- To formulate context-sensitive policy recommendations that integrate legal reform, technological innovation, and participatory strategies to enable the sustainable eradication of manual scavenging.

1.3 Methodology and Scope

This research study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating doctrinal legal analysis, comparative policy evaluation, and empirical data review. The doctrinal component

interprets statutory texts, including the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, alongside judicial directives and policy instruments such as the NAMASTE Scheme, to examine the legal and institutional framework governing sanitation labour in India.

Comparative analysis draws on sanitation and waste management systems in Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, and Singapore. These case studies have been selected for their demonstrated effectiveness in reducing hazardous manual sanitation work through the advent and usage of mechanisation, regulation, and inclusive labour practices.

This Research Study's empirical dimension consists of primary data obtained under the Right to Information Act of 2005. This Act allows Indian citizens to lawfully seek information from public authorities in order to enhance transparency as well as accountability (Government of India, 2005). By examining how the NAMASTE Scheme is put into action in India and how institutions respond on the ground, this method lays the groundwork for both doctrinal and comparative analysis. Taking a multi-angle view helps the researchers in uncovering not only the legal rules in place but also the everyday practices and institutional habits that allow manual scavenging to continue in India even today.

1.4 Data Collection

In order to obtain up-to-date, specific information about how the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) Scheme is being carried out, a formal request was made using the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. This application, submitted in June 2025 under the registration number NSKFD/R/E/25/00014, was directed to the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), which operates under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. A reply to the RTI request was received on June 28, 2025, providing official data as of June 25, 2025. The response included a state-by-state breakdown of sanitation workers who had been surveyed and verified, details on the distribution of PPE kits, and figures on capital subsidies granted to support sanitation-based livelihoods.

To facilitate structured reference, key policy indicators extracted from the RTI response are presented in the following table (See Table 2).

Table 2: RTI-Sourced Policy Indicators on NAMASTE Scheme Implementation (as of 25 June 2025)

Indicator	RTI-Based Observation
Validated Sanitation Workers	80,188 workers validated (out of 84,298 surveyed)
PPE Kits Distributed	45,871 kits dispatched; the highest numbers in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra
Capital Subsidies Issued	663 disbursed nationwide
Notable Gaps	Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Meghalaya reported no capital subsidy disbursement

Source: RTI Response, NSKFDC (28 June 2025)

This institutional data set forms the empirical foundation for evaluating implementation trends and will be analysed in conjunction with secondary sources in the subsequent sections of this study.

1.5 Legal and Policy Review

India's key legislation addressing manual scavenging, the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*, criminalises the practice and mandates the demolition of dry latrines, identification of affected workers, and their rehabilitation through financial assistance and vocational training. Although the legislative framework is well-defined, implementation has been inconsistent. Local bodies often fail to submit accurate data or operationalise mandated rehabilitation measures (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2023).

Despite constitutional mandates and progressive laws, implementation remains fragmented and under-researched at the operational level. Judicial oversight has played a critical role in reinforcing constitutional protections. In *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court ruled that manual scavenging violates Articles 14, 17, and 21 of the Constitution, and ordered financial compensation for workers who died during sanitation work. In *Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India* (W.P. (C) No. 324/2020), the Supreme Court revisited and reinforced its earlier decision in *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014), delivering a detailed set of binding orders on 29 January 2025. The Court declared a total prohibition on manual scavenging and the manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks in six of India's largest cities: Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The court emphasised that identifying sanitation workers without offering appropriate rehabilitation and mechanised alternatives falls short of constitutional and legal obligations. To ensure accountability, the Court directed the Chief Executive Officers of the affected cities to submit affidavits by February 13, 2025, explaining how the hazardous practices were brought to an end. These affidavits were to be reviewed under ongoing judicial supervision, with any failure to comply requiring state officials to appear before the Court and justify the lack of action (*Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India*, 2025; *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India*, 2014).

At the international level, India is a signatory to multiple conventions that establish obligations related to non-discrimination and dignified labour. Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, it must ensure the right to safe and humane working conditions (United Nations, 1966). Further obligations arise under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which require states to dismantle caste- and gender-based occupational hierarchies (United Nations, 1965, 1979). Limited progress in mechanisation, as revealed by RTI data, also raises concerns regarding India's compliance with the International Labour Organisation's Convention No. 111, which prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2022; United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN-Habitat], 2022).

1.6 International Case Studies

To contextualise India's challenges, this study draws on international models from Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Germany. Sweden and the Netherlands have implemented decentralised sanitation systems embedded in circular economy principles. Japan and South Korea utilise robotics and automation to prevent direct human contact with waste. Singapore's model combines legal safeguards, welfare coverage, and mechanised operations through a centralised governance structure. Germany relies on tripartite governance involving the state, labour unions, and employers to enforce workplace protections and eliminate exploitative sanitation labour (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; ILO, 2022).

Even though each country has its very own unique situation, the main public policy ideas are similar: keep investing in better technology, make sure safety rules for workers are followed, and set up systems that hold institutions accountable for their actions. These cross-border insights can help India improve how it handles sanitation work, making it safer and fairer for everyone involved.

1.7 Scope

This study focuses on urban and semi-urban areas in India, where manual scavenging is still common. The main reasons include poor infrastructure, informal work arrangements, and deep-rooted caste-based job divisions (Desai & Sanyal, 2012). This study looks closely at tasks like cleaning sewers, emptying septic tanks, and handling solid waste, all of which continue to be done by hand, even though such work is officially banned. While rural contexts are excluded, the impact of rural-to-urban migration on the sanitation workforce is acknowledged, particularly the vulnerability of undocumented workers (Kumar, 2022). This research study sets the foundation for answering the pertinent question as to why, despite policy efforts, the inhuman practice of manual scavenging remains deeply entrenched in India.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Caste, Labour, and the Historical Embedding of Manual Scavenging

Scholars have consistently argued that rigid caste hierarchies have confined Dalit communities to some of the most stigmatised forms of labour, with sanitation work serving as a central example. The varna-jati system has functioned not merely as a cultural order but as an occupational governance structure that allocates labour through hereditary exclusion (Jodhka, 2012; Gupta, 2000; Iliaiah, 2001). B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste (1936, 1945) remains foundational in understanding manual scavenging not simply as a labour arrangement but as an institutionalised system of inequality.

Subsequent scholarship deepens this analysis. Thorat and Newman (2010) demonstrate the structural relationship between caste and occupational segregation, while Jodhka and Shah (2010) show how caste-based exclusion persists within urban labour markets. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste continues to shape the division of labour through both formal and informal institutional mechanisms. Urbanisation, rather than dissolving these patterns, has often transformed caste-bound work into informal contractual arrangements, making exploitation less visible while preserving its structural basis (Desai & Sanyal, 2012; Bhan, 2016; Baviskar, 2011). Empirical studies by Still (2017) and Kumar (2022) further illustrate how caste-based exclusions are reproduced spatially within urban infrastructure and municipal employment practices.

Intersectional scholarship highlights the compounded vulnerabilities faced by Dalit women sanitation workers, who experience both caste- and gender-based marginalisation, frequently in conditions lacking adequate safety measures, fair wages, or institutional protection (Ganguly, 2022; UNDP, 2023). Together, this body of work situates manual scavenging within a broader framework of caste-structured labour and structural inequality.

2.2 Legal and Policy Evaluations: From Symbolism to Structural Barriers

Two significant statutory actions have shaped India's legal reaction to manual scavenging. The practice was first formally recognised in 1993 by the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, but it has since been heavily criticised for its

vague definition, lax enforcement, and lack of significant rehabilitation provisions (Bezwada, 2020; Kumar, 2022). According to scholars, the Act is mostly symbolic and reflects formal commitment without undergoing structural change (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

The 2013 Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act included procedures for identification, emancipation, and rehabilitation as well as an enhanced legal definition of hazardous sanitation employment. Nonetheless, scholarly and policy analyses keep pointing to enduring implementation difficulties. Caste-based occupational segregation is still not well addressed in operational standards, according to Iyer (2018) and Harriss-White (2015), and local authorities usually underreport or postpone identification procedures. Both the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK, 2024) and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE, 2023) have issued official studies that recognise deficiencies in the provision of rehabilitation and enforcement.

Interventions by the judiciary have strengthened constitutional safeguards. In the 2014 case of *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court upheld the basic rights violations of manual scavenging and ordered states to provide compensation and mechanisation. Further court review has reaffirmed the state's duty to do away with hazardous sanitation labour and put rehabilitation plans in place. However, research still describes implementation as dispersed, unequal, and administratively limited.

2.3 Global Models of Sanitation Governance: Legal, Technological, and Labour Innovations

Global research shows several structural characteristics linked to the abolition of hazardous sanitation employment. Research highlights the need of formalising sanitation labour, enforce regulatory frameworks, mechanising technology, and decentralising governance (OECD, 2019; ILO, 2022). Strict waste management laws, local autonomy, and Extended Producer Responsibility procedures have decreased direct human exposure to dangerous sanitation chores in many high-income situations.

Comparative studies also emphasise how crucial it is to include sanitation workers into official labour systems by providing them with pay rights, certification, and vocational training. Occupational safety regulations and institutional control are often present in conjunction with mechanised systems, such as automated sorting, AI-assisted logistics, and structured waste charge models (MOE Japan, 2021; Kang, 2020; NEA Singapore, 2019).

The literature does, however, warn against blindly importing such models into new environments. In the absence of rehabilitation and reskilling measures, automation may marginalise informal workers, according to scholars. They also point out that institutional capacity, regulatory enforcement, and equity-oriented governance are prerequisites for long-term transformation (OECD, 2019; ILO, 2022). These results imply that without more extensive structural and social change, technical reform on its own is inadequate.

2.4 Research Gaps: Towards Interdisciplinary, Context-Sensitive Approaches

Despite a growing body of scholarship on sanitation governance, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain. First, policy implementation remains insufficiently theorised. While legislative design and judicial intervention have been widely discussed, relatively few studies examine how schemes such as NAMASTE operate at the municipal level, how funds are allocated, or how accountability mechanisms function in practice (MSJE, 2023; NCSK, 2024).

Second, comparative analyses often describe international sanitation systems without developing rigorous frameworks for contextual adaptation within caste-structured labour environments such as India's (OECD, 2023; WHO, 2021; ILO, 2022). The question of how mechanisation interacts with historically embedded occupational segregation remains underexplored.

Third, existing research tends to remain disciplinarily fragmented. Legal scholarship frequently concentrates on statutory interpretation and constitutional doctrine (Rao, 2010; Government of India, 2013), while sociological studies foreground stigma, caste, and labour precarity without sustained engagement with institutional design. Technological and policy analyses emphasise innovation but often neglect structural inequality (Ganguly, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

Finally, limited attention has been given to situating sanitation reform within India's international human rights and labour obligations under instruments such as CEDAW, CERD, and ILO Convention No. 111. Greater integration of these normative frameworks may strengthen accountability discourse.

This study addresses these gaps by combining doctrinal analysis, RTI-based empirical evidence, and comparative policy evaluation to examine how implementation operates in practice and to assess the conditions required for structurally transformative sanitation reform.

3 CASTE, POLICY, AND PERSISTENCE: LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA

Manual scavenging in India persists not because of legislative absence, but due to entrenched caste hierarchies, administrative fragmentation, and lack of political accountability. Although India's legal system includes progressive laws and clear constitutional protections, caste-linked sanitation work continues to be a persistent feature of the socio-economic landscape. This section examines how legislation and court rulings have addressed manual scavenging, while also highlighting the structural barriers that limit their effectiveness.

3.1 Legal Framework and Constitutional Oversight

India's statutory framework formally prohibits manual scavenging but embeds structural limitations that affect enforcement. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 criminalised dry latrine maintenance but excluded sewer and septic tank cleaning, leaving significant forms of hazardous sanitation labour outside its scope. Its enforcement and rehabilitation provisions were minimal, restricting its transformative potential.

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 expanded the statutory definition to cover hazardous sanitation work more comprehensively and mandated identification, demolition of insanitary latrines, and rehabilitation through financial assistance and training. However, the Act relies heavily on state-led identification processes and administrative reporting, creating structural dependency on local compliance mechanisms.

In *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India* (2014) 11 SCC 224, the Supreme Court constitutionalised the issue, holding that manual scavenging violates Articles 14, 17, and 21 of the Constitution. The Court directed compensation for sewer deaths and emphasised

mechanisation. While the judgment elevated the issue to the level of fundamental rights, enforcement remained contingent on executive compliance.

Institutional fragmentation further complicates implementation. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment oversees rehabilitation, while the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs supervises sanitation infrastructure. Municipal bodies carry operational responsibility but frequently face capacity constraints and limited accountability oversight. This division of authority diffuses responsibility and weakens enforceability, allowing statutory mandates to coexist with continued hazardous sanitation labour.

3.2 Caste Segregation and Labour Hierarchy

Sanitation labour in India remains structurally linked to caste. Historically relegated to Dalit sub-castes, these occupations were transmitted across generations and embedded within both colonial administrative systems and post-independence bureaucratic frameworks (Pathak 1991). Sociologists such as M. N. Srinivas argued that caste continues to shape occupational mobility through mechanisms like Sanskritisation and dominant caste consolidation (Srinivas 1976). André Beteille further demonstrated the persistent entanglement between caste, class, and occupational hierarchy in India's stratified labour economy (Beteille 1991).

Recent data confirms that over 90 percent of India's sanitation workforce belongs to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Other Backward Classes, with Scheduled Castes alone constituting nearly 69 percent (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2023). In the domain of sewer and septic tank cleaning, this concentration intensifies. More than 95 percent of individuals engaged in these high-risk tasks come from these historically marginalised communities (National Commission for Safai Karamcharis 2024). In some municipal jurisdictions, Scheduled Caste representation in sanitation roles exceeds 98 percent, illustrating the extent of caste-based occupational confinement (Kumar 2022; Jodhka 2012).

Communities such as the Valmikis in the northern states, the Madigas in southern India, and the Pallars and Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu remain disproportionately represented. This concentration is not a matter of individual choice but the result of a long-standing system of exclusion and limited intergenerational mobility.

Stigma exacerbates this structural marginalisation. Sanitation workers from Dalit communities routinely face discrimination in housing, employment, and access to public services. Many are unaware of their legal entitlements or avoid accessing them due to mistrust and previous experiences of institutional neglect (Still 2017; Ganguly 2022). Dalit women sanitation workers, in particular, face compounded vulnerabilities, earning 20 to 30 percent less than their male counterparts and frequently performing the most hazardous and least mechanised tasks (United Nations Development Programme 2023). These realities underscore the embeddedness of caste and gender in the allocation of sanitation labour and the limits of policy reform in the absence of broader structural transformation.

3.3 Policy Gaps and Institutional Breakdown

Despite progressive legislation and judicial directives, implementation remains weak. The 2023 MSJE report noted that high-burden states reported zero manual scavengers despite ongoing fatalities (MSJE, 2023). These omissions shield local authorities from statutory accountability. Budgetary and governance failures further impede reform. More than 60% of funds under the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers were unused in several

states in 2022–23 (NCSK, 2024). Many municipal agencies either lack the capacity or the willingness to follow through on statutory obligations. Legal scholar Upendra Baxi described this as a “spectacle of legality,” where laws exist in form but fail in substance (Baxi, 2012).

3.4 NAMASTE Scheme and the Limits of Technocratic Reform

The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme was launched in 2022 as a collaborative initiative between the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. Its primary objective is to eliminate hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks by transitioning sanitation work to fully mechanised systems, while simultaneously ensuring the rehabilitation and welfare of sanitation workers. NAMASTE aims to create a structured ecosystem that includes skill development, livelihood linkages, safety training, and access to financial assistance for mechanised equipment. The scheme responds to persistent failures in the enforcement of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, and acknowledges the overwhelming caste-based concentration in sanitation labour. According to government data, over 92 per cent of identified sanitation workers belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Other Backward Classes, with Scheduled Castes comprising the majority at 68.9 per cent, followed by OBCs at 14.7 per cent and STs at 8.3 percent (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2023). NAMASTE thus represents both a policy and symbolic shift, recognising sanitation labour not just as a labour issue but as a site of historical caste oppression requiring systemic redress.

Despite its intent, NAMASTE has not displaced caste-based labour structures. Mechanisation often reproduces occupational segregation under informal contracts. Persistent stigma and economic coercion limit transitions to safer work. Many beneficiaries report distrust or unawareness of scheme provisions due to historical exclusion (Kumar, 2022; UNDP, 2023). Budget variances, unequal PPE distribution, inconsistent mechanisation, and continued sanitation fatalities illustrate the scheme’s implementation fragility (Bezwada, 2020).

3.5 Structural Violence and International Commitments

The caste-based structuring of sanitation labour contradicts India’s obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966), ILO Convention No. 111 (ILO, 2022), and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979). Despite legal reforms, caste and gender continue to determine who performs India’s most hazardous sanitation work.

Unless policies embed caste-conscious rehabilitation, education access, and community empowerment, technocratic schemes will not dismantle the caste-labour nexus. Persistent manual scavenging reveals the gap between constitutional promise and institutional reality, a gap that can only be bridged by social justice frameworks rooted in democratic morality and egalitarian labour governance.

4 EVALUATING THE NAMASTE SCHEME: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Manual scavenging continues in India despite formal prohibition, driven by caste-based labour structures and institutional failure. The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), launched in 2022, seeks to end this practice by replacing manual cleaning with machines, providing skills training, and supporting the rehabilitation of sanitation workers (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2022).

This section draws on official responses received through the Right to Information Act from the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC) in June 2025. It critically examines the scheme's implementation and uses comparative insights from international sanitation systems to assess its operational scope, equity impact, and reform potential.

4.1 Policy Design and Institutional Architecture

The NAMASTE scheme focuses on three main areas: cleaning septic tanks and sewers, training for safety and technical skills, and financial help for workers to move into safe and respectful jobs. The program also aims to connect with urban development and social security programs, including working with PM SVANidhi to encourage entrepreneurship.

It includes counting workers, providing protective gear, offering training for using machines, and assisting with buying equipment. The goal is to move away from disjointed welfare methods and create a unified rights-based system that supports both workers' dignity and public health. However, RTI-based data indicates that progress is uneven. While enumeration efforts are strong, with over 80,000 workers validated, delivery of key entitlements such as occupational training and capital subsidy remains limited and regionally inconsistent.

4.2 Framing of Research Questions and Their Relevance

To critically examine the implementation and impact of the NAMASTE Scheme on sanitation workers in India, a set of targeted queries was submitted under the Right to Information Act (RTI) [RTI Registration No. NSKFD/R/E/25/00014, dated 09.06.2025]. The following five questions were framed to obtain empirical data directly from the National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC). Each question corresponds to a distinct dimension of policy execution, allowing for a multidimensional assessment.

1. How many Sewer/Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) have been identified under the NAMASTE Scheme? Kindly provide state-wise figures.

Rationale: Identification of beneficiaries is the foundational step for any welfare intervention. This question seeks to evaluate the coverage and geographical reach of the scheme, establishing whether the intended population is being effectively targeted across states.

2. How many SSWs have been provided occupational training under the NAMASTE Scheme? Kindly provide state-wise figures.

Rationale: Training constitutes a critical element of skill enhancement and long-term employability. This question aims to assess the extent to which the scheme facilitates capacity building and transition toward safer, dignified employment.

3. How many PPE Kits have been disbursed to SSWs under the NAMASTE Scheme? Kindly provide a state-wise breakdown.

Rationale: Provision of personal protective equipment is a key indicator of occupational health and safety compliance. This query is intended to measure the scheme's responsiveness to the immediate safety needs of sanitation workers and the consistency of such measures across states.

4. How many sanitation workers have been provided livelihood assistance (support plus subsidy) under the NAMASTE Scheme to procure sanitation-related equipment? Kindly provide state-wise figures.

Rationale: Access to equipment subsidies reflects the scheme's commitment to improving working conditions and fostering economic self-sufficiency. This question probes the extent of financial support extended for equipment acquisition, a proxy for empowerment through asset ownership.

5. What is the total amount of livelihood assistance (support plus subsidy) provided to sanitation workers under the NAMASTE Scheme to procure sanitation-related equipment?

Rationale: The quantum of financial assistance disbursed offers insight into the fiscal prioritisation and scale of investment in sanitation sector reforms. It also serves as a benchmark to evaluate the adequacy of support relative to the number of identified and eligible beneficiaries.

4.3 RTI-Based Empirical Findings

The response from the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC) dated 25 June 2025 provides a detailed snapshot of the NAMASTE Scheme's operational status. As per the official data, 84,298 Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) were surveyed, and 80,188 were validated. This high validation rate, approximately 95 percent, demonstrates effective initial outreach and data mobilisation. However, the delivery of core scheme benefits diverges sharply from these early gains.

Only 45,871 workers received Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits, representing 57 percent of the validated workforce. A closer inspection reveals major regional inconsistencies. For example, states such as Tamil Nadu (6,975 validated workers), Odisha (1,298), and Meghalaya (108) reported zero PPE distribution despite significant validated numbers. Similarly, Karnataka, with 6,278 validated workers, distributed PPE to only 667 individuals, just over 10 percent.

Livelihood support under the scheme also demonstrates severe underperformance. Only 663 workers nationwide received capital subsidies, constituting less than 1 percent of the validated SSWs. High-burden states such as Maharashtra (8,210 validated), Rajasthan (3,863), and Bihar (3,456) reported either negligible or no disbursement of capital subsidies, indicating systemic administrative lapses. The total quantum of financial assistance allocated under the livelihood support component was ₹19.32 crore, disproportionate to the scale of intended beneficiaries.

Even more critically, as of 25 June 2025, no occupational safety training had commenced. This omission directly contradicts the scheme's stated objective to equip workers with technical and safety skills as a prerequisite to mechanised transition.

The state-level breakdown confirms persistent administrative inertia. For instance:

- Uttar Pradesh, with 11,867 validated SSWs, distributed PPE kits to 10,092 workers but reported no disbursed capital subsidy.

- Gujarat, which validated 4,646 workers, recorded 4,295 PPE distributions yet only 20 capital subsidies, less than 0.5 percent.
- Delhi, with 3,626 validated workers, distributed PPE kits to only 135.

Such disparities expose systemic inefficiencies and the absence of uniform delivery mechanisms across regions. The data reveals a disjuncture between central planning and local implementation, echoing critiques from prior evaluations of sanitation policy in India (Human Rights Watch, 2014; UNDP, 2023). The following table illustrates key gaps between intended objectives and actual outcomes (See Table 3).

Table 3: State-wise Distribution of Validated Workers, PPE Kits, and Capital Subsidies under the NAMASTE Scheme (as of June 2025)

State	Validated SSWs	PPE Kits Distributed	Capital Subsidies Disbursed
Uttar Pradesh	11,867	10,092	0
Gujarat	4,646	4,295	20
Karnataka	6,278	667	0
Tamil Nadu	6,975	0	44
Maharashtra	8,210	7,135	Not specified
Odisha	1,298	0	0
Rajasthan	3,863	3,299	5
Delhi	3,626	135	0

Source: National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), RTI Response, 2025

This granular evidence substantiates the finding that while enumeration has succeeded, the delivery of tangible benefits such as safety training, capital support, and uniform PPE distribution remains significantly underrealised. The RTI-based empirical insights confirm that the scheme's structural intent has yet to translate into transformative outcomes on the ground.

Research Gaps

The empirical data collected and findings analysed do not comprehensively outline the caste segregation of the NAMASTE workforce but the same has been recently presented in the parliament by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, on 3rd February 2026. The data also revealed that as of January 23 of this year, urban local bodies had profiled and validated a total of 152,000 rubbish pickers as part of this initiative. Among these, approximately 48.7% are women (74,427), 51.3% are men (78,374), and 0.007% are transgender individuals (12). Social category statistics indicated that among the total workers profiled, 60.3% belonged to the SC communities (92,089), 13.7% to the OBC communities (20,954), and 10.5% to the ST communities. It also said that 16,329 waste pickers (10.7%) originated from communities categorised as General.

4.4 Systemic Challenges Revealed by RTI Data

The Right to Information (RTI) data reviewed in this study highlights that while initial worker enumeration under the NAMASTE Scheme was relatively successful, the delivery of tangible benefits remains deeply inadequate. As of June 2025, over 84,000 Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) had been surveyed, with more than 80,000 officially validated (NSKFDC, 2025). However, less than 1 per cent of these validated workers received capital subsidies for mechanised sanitation equipment. Similarly, only 57 per cent were provided with basic Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), a critical safety necessity (NSKFDC, 2025). Beyond material shortfalls, a more serious concern lies in the total absence of occupational training across the states. Despite its centrality to the scheme's objectives, no formal training had commenced for SSWs as of mid-2025. This omission reflects not just administrative delay but a systemic disregard for occupational safety and the principles of dignified labour. In countries with more developed sanitation systems, such safety training is considered foundational and non-negotiable (ILO, 2015; WHO, 2019).

Financial underutilisation also remains a critical concern. During the financial year 2022 to 2023, nearly 60 per cent of the funds earmarked under the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) remained unspent in several high-burden states (National Commission for Safai Karamcharis [NCSK], 2024). This underutilisation cannot be explained by fiscal constraints alone; rather, it signals bureaucratic inertia, weak interdepartmental coordination, and an absence of political accountability. Municipal bodies often lack both the administrative capacity and the institutional incentives required to implement mechanisation on a scale or to rehabilitate workers meaningfully.

The findings further confirm the fragmented nature of the scheme. In key urban states like Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, PPE distribution remained negligible, and no capital subsidies were reported. Such disparities reveal a serious lapse in monitoring and suggest that the central government's policy intent has not been operationalised uniformly across jurisdictions (NSKFDC, 2025). These systemic challenges spanning financial disbursement, technical training, and material provisioning indicate that while NAMASTE may appear progressive in structure, it falls short in execution. The scheme has not moved beyond its identification phase into the delivery of dignified, safe, and formalised sanitation work. If these limitations persist, there is a real danger that the programme will simply reinforce the structural marginalisation it aimed to dismantle. In contrast, global sanitation models have demonstrated how decentralised implementation, robust enforcement, and comprehensive worker protections can translate policy into effective practice.

The next section examines these international frameworks to situate NAMASTE within a broader comparative perspective and to evaluate the scope for cross-national learning. To explore alternative approaches and identify potential pathways for reform, it is essential to examine how other countries have structured and implemented their sanitation governance frameworks.

5 COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK: GLOBAL AND REGIONAL SANITATION GOVERNANCE

Following the empirical findings on NAMASTE's limited operational success, this section situates India's sanitation reform within broader international and regional contexts. It juxtaposes India's experience with global high-income country models and regional parallels in

Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, offering lessons for more inclusive and equitable sanitation policy.

5.1 Mechanisation, Legal Reform, and Institutional Innovation

The global literature confirms that effective sanitation governance requires legal reform, decentralised administration, technological innovation, and inclusive labour practices (UNEP 2018; OECD 2022). High-income countries such as Sweden, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the Netherlands offer diverse yet aligned frameworks delivering both environmental and social gains. In Sweden and Germany, municipal autonomy enables local adaptation of national legislation. Sweden achieves over 99 per cent recovery from household waste through waste-to-energy infrastructure (Statista 2023; Avfall Sverige 2020), while Germany's Extended Producer Responsibility scheme, including the Green Dot system and automated material recovery, yields recycling rates exceeding 67 per cent (European Environment Agency 2021; Eurostat 2023).

Japan employs rigorous household waste sorting across as many as 45 categories (MOE Japan 2021), supported by community initiatives achieving nearly 80 per cent recyclability (Zero Waste Japan 2020). AI-enabled robotics processes hazardous e-waste, removing human risk (Yoshida et al. 2020). South Korea's Volume-Based Waste Fee system uses RFID-enabled bins and behavioural incentives, while vocational training supports waste workers transitioning to formal technical roles (Kang 2020). Recycling performance surpasses 60 percent nationwide (World Bank 2018; OECD 2022).

Singapore and the Netherlands embed sanitation within circular economy frameworks. Singapore's Zero Waste Masterplan integrates industrial innovation, recycling targets, and household segregation while formally integrating informal workers through certification and outreach (NEA Singapore 2019). The Netherlands emphasises material circularity, social enterprise inclusion, and public-private partnerships (Government of the Netherlands 2019; European Environment Agency 2021).

By contrast, South Asia, including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal, relies heavily on informal caste-based sanitation labour, weak regulatory enforcement, and limited occupational protections (Human Rights Watch 2014; ILO 2015). In Pakistan, sanitation job postings sometimes specify religious identity, reinforcing entrenched exclusion (Amnesty International 2020).

5.2 Worker Training, Formalisation, and Social Inclusion

Leading sanitation models prioritise worker training and formal employment. Countries like Japan, South Korea, Germany, and the Netherlands have institutionalised vocational pathways and cooperative governance models, integrating informal workers into policy ecosystems (Chaturvedi et al. 2019).

In contrast, RTI data from India shows stark deficiencies: as of June 2025, no occupational training had been delivered, only 57 percent of validated workers received PPE, and capital subsidy reached fewer than 1 percent of beneficiaries (NSKFDC 2025). Over 90 percent of India's sanitation workforce belongs to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Other Backward Classes, with almost 69 percent representing Scheduled Castes alone (MSJE 2023). Despite this demographic reality, caste sensitive metrics and formal labour protections remain weak in policy implementation.

5.3 Regional Parallels in South Asia

Comparative insights from South Asia reveal structural exclusions in sanitation labour that mirror India's caste-bound constraints. In Bangladesh, manual scavenging persists among Hindu Dalit communities, who engage in septic tank cleaning under informal and unsafe conditions. Women workers from Harijan communities in Dhaka face entrenched pay disparities and widespread exclusion from public services (CSE, 2022; Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, 2021). These practices remain largely unregulated, with limited state intervention or formal labour protections.

In Nepal, the caste-based haruwa-charuwa system continues to enforce intergenerational sanitation labour among Dalit groups, especially the Musahar caste, through mechanisms of debt bondage and hereditary occupation (WaterAid, 2020). Despite constitutional protections and international ratification of labour rights instruments, sanitation labour in both Bangladesh and Nepal remains overwhelmingly informal and caste-assigned, reproducing stigma and occupational segregation. India's sanitation regime under the NAMASTE Scheme reflects similar limitations. Though its objectives mirror international best practices in mechanisation and formalization, actual implementation fails to disrupt caste-based labour inheritance or deliver on inclusive occupational protections. This regional comparison underscores the need to address not only technological deficits but also the embedded social hierarchies that obstruct equitable sanitation reform across the subcontinent.

Table 4: Comparative Overview of Sanitation Governance Models

Dimension	India (NAMASTE)	High-Income Models (e.g. Japan, South Korea, Germany, Sweden, Singapore, Netherlands)	Bangladesh and Nepal
Mechanisation	Partial, urban-focused; reliant on manual labour	Widespread automation, AI, and vacuum-based systems	Minimal, reliant on manual labour
Worker Training	None delivered	Vocational certification, apprenticeships, structured re-skilling	Informal or NGO-led training only
Legal Enforcement	Weak and symbolic	Strong enforcement through municipal and national compliance mechanisms	Very limited; caste and religion influence access
Labour Formalisation	Largely informal; contract-based; caste-assigned roles	Full formalisation with social insurance and unionisation	Predominantly informal; caste-assigned roles
Civic Participation	Limited transparency; weak public accountability	Citizen monitoring, real-time digital dashboards, and social audits	Marginalisation persists; minimal access

Sources: CSE (2022), WaterAid (2020), Government of the Netherlands (2019), NEA Singapore (2019), Avfall Sverige (2020), European Environment Agency (2021), Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (2021), MOE Japan (2021), Park & Lee (2021), UNEP (2018), OECD (2022), Human Rights Watch (2014).

This overview shows that while high-income countries have made sanitation a formal and protected sector, India's NAMASTE scheme is still in a transition phase. It shares commitments

with global standards but lacks the regulations, decentralized infrastructure, and social accountability needed for real change. In Bangladesh and Nepal, similar caste-based exclusions continue, even with legal reforms. This supports the idea that technology alone cannot break down deep-rooted inequalities.

For the NAMASTE scheme to fulfil its structural mandate, it must transcend the current focus on enumeration and equipment procurement. True transformation requires integrating enforceable labor rights, decentralized governance capacity, caste-conscious monitoring, and community-driven accountability. Without addressing these institutional and social fault lines, the scheme will continue to reproduce the very hierarchies it was intended to dismantle at some stage.

5.4 Integrated Reflections and Forward Transition

The comparative matrix reveals a crucial disparity: while the NAMASTE Scheme reflects an intent to align with global sanitation reform paradigms, its operational realities remain fragmented and uneven. Core mechanisms such as worker training, labor formalisation, and equitable equipment distribution have yet to be meaningfully realised. Regional parallels from Bangladesh and Nepal further demonstrate that without dismantling the entrenched social hierarchies underpinning sanitation labor, reforms risk becoming performative rather than transformative.

To move beyond enumeration, NAMASTE must now embody a structurally grounded approach, anchored in decentralised execution, caste-sensitive policy metrics, enforceable safety mandates, and institutional inclusion of sanitation workers. This shift is not merely administrative but foundational for reimagining sanitation as a dignified and protected occupation. These insights lay the groundwork for the concluding reflection, which evaluates the scheme's potential to effect long-term structural change and advance equity within India's sanitation economy.

6 CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study critically examines the NAMASTE Scheme using official data gained under the Right to Information Act. It looks at how India is working to eliminate manual scavenging. The results show that even though the scheme presents a strong vision based on mechanization, training, and rehabilitation, its implementation is limited and varies greatly from state to state. As of June 2025, more than 80,000 workers had been identified and verified, but only 45,871 received basic protective gear, and fewer than 700 got help for their livelihoods (NSKFDC, 2025). In reply to an unrelated inquiry in Lok Sabha on 3rd February 2026, the Social Justice Ministry reported that 859 individuals have perished owing to perilous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks nationwide since 2014, with 43 of these fatalities occurring in 2025. These gaps highlight not only slow administrative actions but also the deep-rooted inequalities in the Indian sanitation sector (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

The scheme's limited success is connected to ongoing caste-based job divisions, informal work conditions, and the lack of enforceable accountability from local governments. Manual scavenging continues to be reproduced through a nexus of local governance failures, exploitative subcontracting systems, and the social acceptability of degrading labour assigned to historically marginalised communities (Bhatia & Bhabha, 2017). Despite legal prohibitions under the 2013 Act and judicial interventions, implementation frameworks remain fragmented

and reactive, lacking the institutional coherence and urgency required for systemic transformation (Government of India, 2017).

Moreover, these failures place India in potential violation of its international legal obligations. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and ILO Convention No. 111, India is bound to eliminate discriminatory labour practices and ensure equal access to dignified, safe employment (ILO, 2022; United Nations, 1965, 1966). The continued existence of manual scavenging thus not only undermines domestic constitutional guarantees but also India's credibility within the global human rights regime.

A comparative policy analysis underscores that international best practices offer a viable roadmap. Countries such as Sweden, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, and Singapore have successfully transitioned hazardous sanitation work into regulated, dignified employment through decentralised planning, technological integration, civic participation, and labour formalisation (World Bank, 2020). These models demonstrate that waste governance can be both efficient and equitable when rooted in inclusive policy design and enforceable accountability structures (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

To align the NAMASTE Scheme with these international standards and address its structural deficiencies, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

6.1 Policy Recommendations

Caste-Sensitive Monitoring, Social Audits and Civic Participation: Integrate caste-disaggregated data into all stages of the scheme to detect exclusion. Mandate regular anti-discrimination audits at the state and local levels to prevent caste-based bias in implementation. Allow citizen participation with mobile application-based real-time monitoring and social audits (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

1. **Decentralised Governance:** Assign legal and financial responsibility for implementation to Urban Local Bodies. Establish independent grievance mechanisms to enable workers to report exclusion or unsafe conditions (Government of India, 2017).
2. **Formal Employment:** Convert all sanitation work into formal municipal jobs with fixed pay, legal rights, and social protection rather than informal, contract-based assignments and caste-assigned roles. Eliminate subcontracting practices that perpetuate informality and unsafe labour. Ensure that all the sanitation workers receive proper vocational training, certification and apprenticeship before being put to work (ILO, 2022).
3. **Universal Safety Measures:** Ensure that all validated workers receive PPE, safety training, and health coverage. Link scheme funding to verified delivery of these entitlements (NSKFDC, 2025).
4. **Digital Transparency:** Develop a central digital platform to track beneficiaries, fund use, and service outcomes in real time. Ensure public access to promote oversight
5. **Contextual Mechanisation:** Invest in localised, low-cost sanitation technologies. Promote domestic innovation through public-private partnerships and research support (World Bank, 2020).

6. Global Compliance: Institutionalise reporting aligned with India's obligations under ICESCR, CERD, and ILO standards. Engage with global bodies to improve rights-based governance (United Nations, 1965, 1966; ILO, 2022).
7. Recognition of Rights: Reframe sanitation work as a matter of human rights and development. Integrate sanitation justice into national planning and ensure equal citizenship for workers (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

This paper's central finding is that NAMASTE is currently operating as an identification-and-kit distribution programme rather than a transition-to-mechanisation and rehabilitation framework. The RTI evidence shows a stark implementation pattern: high worker validation, uneven PPE delivery, negligible capital subsidy reach, and no occupational training as of June 2025. These gaps are not peripheral administrative delays; they are the mechanism through which caste-structured sanitation labour is reproduced under a new policy label. International sanitation systems demonstrate that hazardous sanitation work disappears only when mechanisation is institutionalised through enforceable compliance, formal labour pathways, and worker-centred welfare safeguards. If NAMASTE is to meet its statutory purpose and constitutional promises, it must move from enumeration to enforceable delivery, and from technocratic design to caste-conscious accountability.

The key finding of this study is simple: NAMASTE is identifying workers, but it is not delivering the steps needed to actually end hazardous sanitation work. RTI data shows uneven PPE distribution, very low livelihood support, and no training as of June 2025. Because these basics are missing, manual scavenging is likely to continue even under a new policy name. Ending this practice requires not only machines, but also enforcement, formal employment, and caste-sensitive accountability.

References:

- Ambedkar, B. R.** (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. India: Self-published.
- Ambedkar, B. R.** (1945). *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*. Bombay: Thacker & Co.
- Amnesty International.** (2020). *Pakistan: Discrimination in sanitation work*. London: Amnesty International.
- Avfall Sverige.** (2020). *Sweden's waste-to-energy and recycling statistics*. Stockholm: Avfall Sverige.
- Baviskar, A.** (2011). Caste matters: Poverty and the politics of knowledge. *IDS Bulletin*, 42(2), 59–66.
- Baxi, U.** (2012). Lawless law and the spectacle of legality. In *Restoring Title Deeds to Humanity: Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial Lecture 2013*. Ambedkar University Delhi.
- Bezwada, W.** (2020). *Cleaning human waste: "Scavengers" speak*. Delhi: Safai Karmachari Andolan.
- Beteille, A.** (1991). *Caste, class and power: Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bhan, G.** (2016). *In the public's interest: Evictions, citizenship, and inequality in contemporary Delhi*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Bhatia, S., & Bhabha, J.** (2017). Structural exclusion and sanitation in India. *Journal of Social Exclusion Studies*, 3(1), 23–45.
- Chaturvedi, B., Raman, S., & Mohanty, P.** (2019). *Circular economy in sanitation: Policy pathways and institutional setups*. New Delhi: TERI.

- Clarke, J.** (2008). What's the problem? Precarious youth: Marginalisation, criminalisation and racialisation. *Social Work & Society*, 6(2). <http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/62>.
- CSE.** (2022). *Dalit sanitation in Bangladesh: An unequal burden*. Centre for Science and Environment.
- Desai, R., & Sanyal, R.** (2012). Urbanizing subjects: Regionalization in the slums of Delhi. *Development and Change*, 43(6), 1313–1336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01798.x>.
- Drèze, J., & Sen, A.** (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
- D'Souza A.** (2015). *Social Development through Social Work*. Niruta Publications.
- European Environment Agency.** (2021). *Recycling rates in Europe: 2021 report*. Copenhagen: EEA.
- Farmer, P.** (2003). *Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor*. University of California Press.
- Ganguly, S.** (2022). Exposing the invisibility: Caste, sanitation work, and institutional denial. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 57(30), 45–52.
- Government of India.** (2005). *Right to Information Act, 2005*. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Government of India.** (2013). *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Government of India.** (2017). *Policy framework for sanitation reform implementation*. New Delhi: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
- Government of the Netherlands.** (2019). *Circular economy implementation programme 2019–2023*. The Hague: Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.
- Gupta, D.** (2000). *Interrogating caste: Understanding hierarchy and difference in Indian society*. Penguin Books.
- Harriss-White, B.** (2015). *Dalits and the state: Welfare and exclusion in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Human Rights Watch.** (2014). *Cleaning human waste: Manual scavenging, caste, and discrimination in India*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste>.
- ILO.** (2015). *Safety training in sanitation work: Global standards and practice*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- ILO.** (2022). *Eliminating discrimination in sanitation work: Global perspectives*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- Ilaiah, K.** (2001). *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture, and political economy*. Calcutta: Samya.
- Iyer, V.** (2018). Sanitised injustice: The persistence of manual scavenging in India. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 10(2), 200–213.
- Jodhka, S. S.** (2012). *Caste*. Oxford University Press.
- Jodhka, S. S., & Shah, G.** (2010). Comparative context of discrimination: Caste and untouchability in South Asia. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 45(48), 99–106.
- Kang, M.** (2020). Smart bins and clean cities: Waste innovation in South Korea. *Asian Journal of Innovation and Policy*, 9(1), 45–66.
- Kumar, A.** (2022). Caste, city, and sanitation: Mapping manual scavenging in contemporary India. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 16(1), 22–39.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Verso.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE). (2022). *NAMASTE Scheme design and structure*. Government of India.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE). (2023). *Annual report 2022–2023*. Government of India.

Mandal, S. (2008). Through the lens of pollution: Manual scavenging and the legal discourse. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 1(1), 91–102.

MOE Japan. (2021). *White paper on the environment, recycling and waste management in Japan 2021*. Tokyo: Ministry of the Environment.

National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), Press Release, PIB, 4 Feb 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2223180®=3&lang=1>.

National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NSCK). (2024). *Status report on sanitation workers*. Government of India.

National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC). (2025). RTI Response, NSKFD/R/E/25/00014, dated 25 June 2025.

NEA Singapore. (2019). *Sustainable waste management and workforce integration: Annual report 2019*. National Environment Agency Singapore.

Newman, J., Glendinning, C., & Hughes, M. (2008). Beyond modernisation? Social care and the transformation of welfare governance. *Journal of Social Policy*, 37(4), 531–557.

OECD. (2022). *Global sanitation outlook: Mechanisation, regulation, and inclusion*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. (2023). *Safe sanitation for all: International models and innovations*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Pais, R. (2021). Sanitation and Unchanging Role of Caste. *Indian Anthropologist*, 51(2), 57–69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27139732>.

Park, J., & Lee, S. (2021). Comparative sanitation governance in South Asia. *Regional Development Review*, 5(2), 81–102.

Pathak, B. (1991). *Sanitation and caste in colonial India*. Kolkata: Academic Press.

Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India, W.P. (C) No. 583/2003 (India).

Srinivas, M. N. (1976). *Caste in modern India and other essays*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Statista. (2023). *Recycling rates by country: 2023 data for Sweden and others*. Hamburg: Statista.

Still, C. (2017). *Dalits and the making of modern India*. Routledge.

Supreme Court of India. (2025). *Dr. Balram Singh v. Union of India*, W.P. (C) No. 324/2020 (India, Jan. 29, 2025).

Thomas, C. (1993). Deconstructing concepts of care. *Sociology*, 27(4), 649–669.

Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (2012). Caste and economic discrimination: Causes, consequences and remedies. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 47(36), 49–56.

UNEP. (2018). *Towards equitable sanitation governance: Global environmental perspectives*. Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme.

United Nations. (1965). *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>.

United Nations. (1966). *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against>.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). *Inclusive sanitation in urban India: A roadmap*. New Delhi: UNDP India.

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). (2022). *World cities report 2022: Envisaging the future of cities*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

World Bank. (2018). *Waste management and worker health: Lessons from East Asia*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank. (2020). *Inclusive sanitation for sustainable development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Health Organisation (WHO). (2019). *Sanitation workers: A global call to action*. Geneva: WHO.

Yoshida, H., Gable, J., & Kurisu, K. (2020). Japan's waste management and recycling policies for sustainable development. *Sustainability*, 12(10), 4167. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104167>.

Zero Waste Japan. (2020). *Household recyclability rates by city*. Tokyo: Zero Waste Japan.

Author's Address:

Dr. Sudipta Roy Choudhwry, Assistant Professor I
Amity Law School, Amity University, Noida
Uttar Pradesh
sudipta.r.choudhwry@gmail.com

Author's Address:

Dr. Varun Srivastava, Assistant Professor III
Amity Law School, Amity University, Noida
Uttar Pradesh
vsrivastava1@amity.edu

Author's Address:

Dr. Ashmika Agrawal, Assistant Professor I
Amity Law School, Amity University, Noida
Uttar Pradesh
agrawal.ashmika@gmail.com

Author's Address:

Aayush Tripathi, Assistant Professor I
Amity Law School, Amity University, Noida
Uttar Pradesh Address
atripathi3@amity.edu