

Manual scavenging in western India: A series of reports on the implementation of the law against manual scavenging in the cities of Maharashtra and Gujarat

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In 2013, India passed a law not only prohibiting the employment of manual scavengers but also expanding the definition of manual scavenging to include the manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. Nearly ten years since the law came into effect, thousands of sanitation workers are still forced to clean sewers, drains and toilets manually, and hundreds continue to die after breathing in toxic gases on the job.

In mid-2022, through a grant supported by the Thakur Family Foundation, Scroll.in filed queries under the Right to Information Act with 30 municipal corporations in Maharashtra and Gujarat, to find out how urban centres in western India have – or have not – implemented the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Of them, 14 cities responded. Most of them claimed to have eliminated manual scavenging.

Based on those responses, reporter Aarefa Johari, accompanied by photographer and videographer Ayush Prasad, visited five of these cities to interview sanitation workers, union leaders, lawyers, citizens and municipal officials and verify the claims of each city's RTI responses. Johari then wrote a five-part series of reports that were published in Scroll.in during January and February 2023.

The [first report](#) examines the blatant denial of the prevalence of manual scavenging deaths in Mumbai, a metropolis known for its alarmingly high number of such deaths. An independent civil society organisation has records of at least 19 deaths between 2017 and 2022, but for the same period, Mumbai's municipal corporation claims there were no manual scavenging deaths. The report included interviews with the families of several men who had died cleaning septic tanks during this period, and their struggles to get the compensation due to them.

The [second report](#), from Ahmedabad, explores not just the undercounting of deaths but also the absence of true justice in cases of manual scavenging. When criminal cases are filed against the people who employ workers to clean sewers and septic tanks manually, the accused rarely include municipal officials. And almost every case ends in illegal, out-of-court settlements that effectively allow perpetrators to go scot-free while silencing the voices of Dalit families.

The [third report](#) examined how the municipal corporation of Dhule, a small city in Maharashtra, submitted false data to the central government in its official survey of manual scavengers in 2013. Even though 450 workers declared themselves as manual scavengers in the survey, the corporation claimed the number was zero. To this day, the corporation persists with this claim even though it helped several workers access the central government's rehabilitation money for manual scavengers in 2018.

The [fourth report](#) was from Gujarat's Rajkot city, where the municipal corporation did possess a large fleet of vehicle-mounted machinery to clean sewers and septic tanks, as per its claims in the RTI response. However, at least three sanitation workers in the city claimed that they are still made to clean sewers manually, without safety gear, indicating that Rajkot still has a long way to go.

The [final report](#) was from Vasai-Virar, a relatively new city formed north of Mumbai. There, funds from the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge – a revamping of the 2013 law – helped the municipal corporation buy machines for cleaning sewers and septic tanks. But despite the corporation's attempts to publicise the machines, workers claimed that they still clean gutters manually. Meanwhile, families of seven men who died cleaning septic tanks in 2019 and 2020 are still waiting for compensation and justice from the corporation.

A short documentary video featuring the findings from these five cities will be published on Scroll.in by the end of February 2023.