

TRUTH TO POWER

A Booklet on the Rights and
Safety of Sanitation Workers





ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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A special thanks to all the sanitation workers for providing essential services to society, and for allowing us to amplify their voices and experiences. Through this booklet, we aim to garner attention of funders towards the important focus areas of the sector, and humanize sanitation workers across the sanitation value chain.

We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the Urban WSH team at Dasra for providing comprehensive feedback throughout the ideation of the project, and the curation of its content. We hope this product proves to be a window to draw the attention of key stakeholders towards the needs of the sanitation sector by bringing the voices of sanitation workers to the forefront.

Recognizing Sanitation Workers Under Regulatory Systems

01

India is the world's fastest growing economy and is home to **6.36 crore enterprises**, **99.7%** of which form the country's informal economy. Among these informal workers are **5 million sanitation workers**, who play the crucial role of bridging the gap between sanitation infrastructure and sanitation services.

However, they continue to remain on the fringes without any safety nets and recognition for their work. While collaborative efforts towards providing safe working environments are strengthening, the on-ground realities are a reminder of what can be improved.

Identity, Dignity and Safety:

What's at Risk For Sanitation Workers?

- Sanitation workers remain unrecognized for their work, most of which is hazardous and exploitative. It also leads to violence in the workplace, exploitation and social discrimination.

36%

Experienced violence

50%

Experiencing untouchability and discrimination

According to a report titled 'The hidden world of sanitation workers in India', published by Water Aid in collaboration with World Health Organization and International Labour Organization.

- Most sanitation workers belong to **marginalized communities** and suffer from **lower incomes, longer working hours, hazardous work conditions, deprivation of the right to education for their children** and lack collective **bargaining rights**. Despite providing one of the most essential public services, their identity, dignity, occupational safety and economic stability is heavily compromised.

- Due to them being a part of the informal economy^[1], sanitation workers do not have access to basic employment documents such as **job cards**^[2]. In their absence, they are unable to open **bank accounts**, apply for basic **social and financial upliftment** opportunities such as bank loans, access government schemes, apply for ration cards or enroll for health insurance cover. They are also not entitled to fixed remuneration, pensions and medical support.

^[1]The informal economy is the **diversified set of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state.**

^[2]A document that ensures sanitation workers can access socio-economic government schemes, health benefits, avail loans and get insurance cover.

Certification and Formalization: *The Way Forward*

- **Recognition** as **certified sanitation professionals** through government interventions shall provide sanitation workers with a dignified identity in the communities they serve, ensure their safety at work and reduce the discriminatory situations they are subjected to.
- Prioritizing **formalization** for easier access to upliftment schemes and

safer working conditions is important. It shall also bring sanitation workers under the ambit of regulatory bodies, secure their employee rights and ensure fixed minimum pay. Some government schemes and organizations have taken initiatives to provide safer working conditions for, and support, sanitation workers in accessing relevant identity and employment documents.



Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS) collaborated with the Sathanai Unorganized Labour Welfare Association for an initiative to support sanitation workers with access to job cards in Tamil Nadu. As of March 2022, **368 informal sanitation workers** were **enrolled** under the Labour Department of which **300 beneficiaries** have already been issued with the **job cards**. They also became entitled to many welfare measures like **maternity support, education support, medical support**, access to **life and health insurance**, and accident insurance.





A Moment Of Dignity And Recognition:

Babuli's Sewer Entry Professional Certificate

I entered the profession of sewage cleaning and maintenance at a young age, and today at 55 I'm the **senior most employee** of the **Water Corporation of Odisha (WATCO)**. I am also a certified **Sewer Entry Professional** after I cleared the necessary assessment test; this certificate is my pride.

My name is **Babuli Nayak** and I belong to a district in Odisha. The sudden death of my father when I was 13 brought a lot of adversity, and I had to leave school to financially support my family. I migrated to the city in search of a livelihood, and took the first job I found. After working for 13 years when I returned to my hometown, I faced a lot of neglect and stigma from my community. My identity was invisible, and my family never felt a sense of pride in disclosing my profession to our relatives or friends. But I have never been ashamed of my work; I believe it is an essential service to society. My faith in the idea of work is

worship has been my strength all these years.

However, over the years, systems have changed to make sanitation work a dignified profession, and provide recognition to many sanitation workers like me. The government launched the **Garima scheme** under which we sanitation workers received training to use machines and equipment; rest houses called **Garima Grihas** have been made for us where we can now rest and store our personal things safely. Our socio-economic situations have improved with such initiatives, and availing these benefits keep me motivated to work. I was extremely happy when, for the first time after years of service, I was rewarded for my work with the **Best SafaiMitra Award**.

Story Source:
**Urban Management
Center (UMC)**



Recognition of sanitation workers for their services to communities plays an essential role in uplifting the dignity of their work. The first few steps include creating awareness for their work, removing the social stigma, creating safe working environment and rest spaces, access to welfare schemes, capacity building on usage of technical equipment and timely recognition for their services. Public-private partnerships and community level interventions can collectively sustain these efforts, and safeguard the dignity of sanitation workers.





A Trans Self-help Group's Journey from Discrimination to Identity and Empowerment

“ I was named Chandan at birth and was brought up as a male in a joint family in a village in Odisha. My sense of identity was always in question; I lived like a man under house arrest, but in my community, I lived like a woman. In 2019, I contested the general elections; while I did not win, the response I received from the city was overwhelming. I went on to form ‘Bahucharamata’, a **trans-Self-Help Group**, for the transgender community, the same year.

My name is **Sheetal Bastia**, and I am the Secretary of Bahucharamata. Our SHG started off with the production of home-based phenyl and soap and went on to volunteer with NGOs to raise awareness on health and sanitation. Our work earned us recognition from the Cuttack Municipal Corporation (CMC), and we were selected by them to operate and maintain the Septage Treatment Plant (SeTP) in the city. This responsibility is like a crown on our SHG and our biggest achievement. It provided us with financial stability, dignified livelihood and recognition. All my life I had faced abuse, discrimination and isolation; being in the sanitation

sector and our collaboration with CMC became a massive validation of my potential and identity.

Under this opportunity, we underwent rigorous classroom and on-site training to understand the importance of the Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (FSSM) value chain, operational components of the plant, and its functioning, periodic and daily maintenance activities for operation and maintenance, etc. We were also trained in sustainable business models, leadership, communication, and problem-solving, which have really helped us in our work. Today, each member of this SHG is financially independent, and is capable of leading their lives the way they want. We consider this group as a voice of solidarity through which we can empower ourselves. We hope that with a regular source of income, we will be able to improve our standard of living and help other transgender community members as well.

Story Source:
Ernst and Young (EY)



The sanitation sector provides various livelihood opportunities to members of marginalized communities such as women, trans people and urban poor. Beyond this, it is also essential to provide them with training and workshops on usage of technology and innovation, leadership skills, communication, understanding of the sector and urban sanitation. Together, these aspects help them become sanitation professionals and build an identity of their own. Recognition of their work, and acknowledgement of their services builds their confidence and creates an inclusive space for them to earn a livelihood, make their own decisions and grow financially independent.

The Road To Dignity At Work:

From Sanitation Workers To Sanitation Professionals

02

40-45

Average life expectancy
of sanitation workers

70

National
life expectancy



Sanitation workers are involved in categories of work like cleaning septic tanks, operating and maintaining community toilets, emptying sewers, operating sewage treatment plants etc. and are heavily exposed to hazardous gases and faecal sludge. As a result, they suffer from respiratory issues, skin infections, eyesight problems, other life-threatening diseases and even premature death. According to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, **631 informal sanitation workers died** in the country while cleaning septic tanks and sewers, between 2010 and 2020.

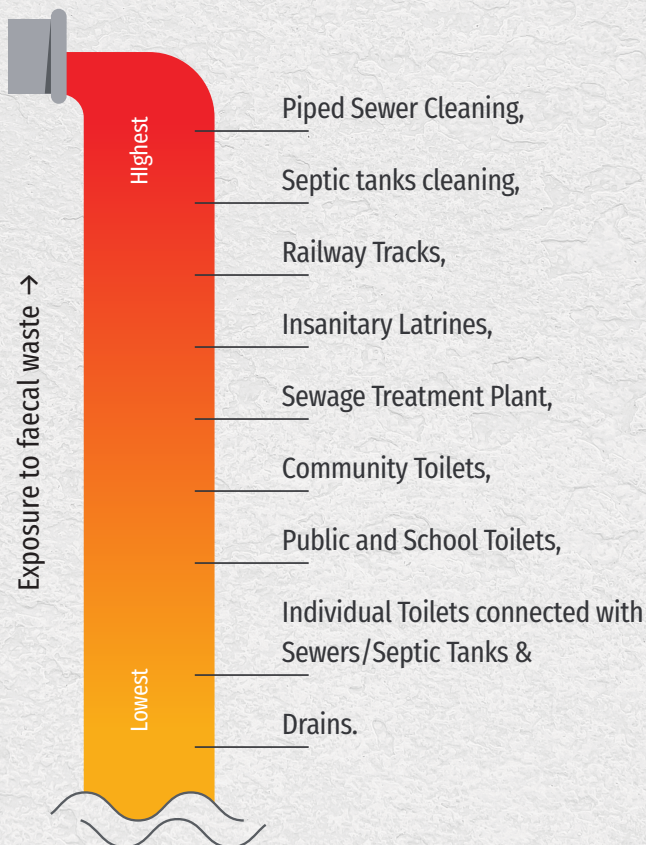
Discrimination, Unsafe Working Conditions and Economic Crisis: *The Challenges to Achieving Dignified Sanitation Work*

- The vicious cycle of unsafe working conditions, **increased fatalities** and **shortened life expectancy** also affects the socio-economic development of their family. It is important to prioritize **technology** and **innovation** to evolve solutions that reduce human involvement in hazardous jobs, and create a safety net for sanitation workers.
- Women sanitation workers in the absence of **inclusive rest houses** at work are exposed to the dangers of **violence, exploitation** and **harassment**. According to a **study** conducted by Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI India) and South Asian Labour Network (SASLN) b/w 2017 and 2021, more than **3,189 women sanitation workers** reported experiencing **violence, sexual assault** and **exploitation** at **work**. The work environment is also not suited to their menstrual needs, making it difficult for them to manage their personal hygiene.

- **Standardized** or **poorly designed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)** kits add to the existing health hazards sanitation workers are subjected to. Beyond ensuring access to safe machinery for sanitation workers, rigorous **training** and **capacity building** is needed to support them to become professionals in operating it.
- **Sanitation enterprises** do not have the funds to either invest in **safety machinery**, or if they manage to purchase it, the resources for its maintenance are limited. Due to lack of registration and recognition of informal enterprises, applying for loans is also a far-thought-out option for them.

Did you know?

Dalberg Advisors during a study in 2018 identified nine types of sanitation work across the sanitation work, illustrated below.



The Inclusive Approach for Sustainable, Safer Sanitation Work

- **Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)**, an **inclusive** and **multi-faceted** process to **reduce the health risks** sanitation workers are exposed to by providing them with **specialty designed PPE kits**, strengthening **mechanized scheduled desludging**, creating **safe working environment** and conducting timely **capacity building**, should be adopted. For example, PPE kits should be designed with an inclusive approach and should differ basis on the basis of important factors such as gender, considering the menstrual needs of women sanitation workers and India's **climatic spread** that differs tremendously across regions.
- Different stakeholders such as **government bodies**, **private bodies**, **funders** and **philanthropists** should collaborate to create opportunities for **sustainable finances** for sanitation enterprises. This shall strengthen the scope for **micro-enterprises** in the sector, support them to sustain **life-saving machinery** and boost **investment** in safety equipment. Collectively, these factors shall form a strong network of sanitation practices.

Click to read:

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Report



BORDA worked with the Municipal Committee in Leh to design an **inclusive Municipal WASH Facility** to provide a safe working environment for sanitation workers. The facility is equipped with **clean toilet** and **bathing facility** units for both men and women, **laundry room** with **washing machine** and **common recreational area** with TV. Based on the climatic conditions in Leh, the facility is also insulated to conserve heat with **air-lock entries** to regulate temperature and has a **central heating system** with radiators to ensure that a temperature of 18 degrees is maintained.



Chandan's Micro-enterprise:

Significance of Financial Support to Sanitation Workers

“ When I had started working as a sanitation worker, I had no access to safety equipment and PPE kits. The

private contractors forced us to clean the septic tanks **manually**, which exposed us to the risk of hazardous diseases and skin infections. Today, I proudly **own a cesspool vehicle** for desludging, work in safer conditions and am financially stable.

My name is **Chandan Naik** and I have been in the sanitation sector for many years now. Previously, sanitation workers were not recognized for their work, and our income was very irregular. It was in 2021 when I, and many other sanitation workers, attended a **SafaiMitra training** where we were told about safety at work and the Garima scheme. I was trained to use PPE kits and operate a mechanized cesspool vehicle. Later, I also attended a **Loan Mela** was also organized by the Bhubhneshwar Municipal Corporation

and some other organizations. We were explained some loan schemes to purchase cesspool vehicles and the procedures for it, and were informed about the subsidy on the loan.

I had in the past tried multiple times to apply for a loan, but no bank sanctioned it. However, this time when I applied for it through the government, my **loan for 15 lakhs** was **processed** in two months. The BMC Commissioner handed over the keys of the cesspool vehicle to me, along with a government contract for desludging at a fixed rate per household. It was the happiest moment of my life and I felt all my hard work was finally rewarded. I now clean five to six septic tanks every day, and my financial situation has improved. Such opportunities support many sanitation workers like me, and ensure a dignified livelihood for us.

Story Source:
*The Centre for Advocacy
and Research (CFAR)*



Sanitation enterprises are an essential part of the sanitation value chain, and require financial support to sustain and build themselves. Access to essential financial services such as loans provides these enterprises with the opportunity to adopt newer technology, sustain it and lead the way for safe sanitation work for all workers. Training on accessing loans, government intervention and public-private sector support opens a plethora of opportunities for safe, dignified and sustainable sanitation work.





Identification of Sanitation Workers:

Kanhu's Journey from Unsafe to Dignified Sanitation Work



I used to accompany my father, who was a sanitation worker at the municipality, to learn sanitation work.

He passed away when I was 8 years old, and I had no option but to join sanitation work to support my family financially. It's been 25 years now since I have been working in the sanitation sector.

My name is **Kanhu Naik** and I belong to Cuttack. I started working as a **public** and **community toilet cleaner** in a hospital, and eventually accompanied other workers to clean **septic tanks manually** in unsafe situations. But my income was never stable and I remember going months with less or **no work** at all. It was difficult to meet my family's expenses, and being the only earning member added to the problems.

I have been in the sector long enough to observe that situations are changing now. Sanitation work is being recognized by the government and many schemes are being launched for making it safe for sanitation workers. Me, and other sanitation workers, were **identified** by the **government** under the **Garima Scheme**; now we are part of a **Self-Help Group** and I work as a loader for battery operated vehicles for door-to-door collection. I am no longer involved in the unsafe manual cleaning of septic tanks, that was a risk to my health and life. After this scheme, I started working in a safer environment and am able to support my family efficiently. I have a **regular** source of **income** and am able to secure my family's needs and future well.

Story Source:
**Urban Management
Centre (UMC)**



Ensuring safer working conditions for sanitation workers is absolutely essential for their upliftment. Schemes such as the Garima launched by the Odisha government in 2022 aim to secure the dignity and safety of core sanitation workers. Identification of many sanitation workers such as Kanhu Naik who either have unstable incomes, or expose themselves to hazardous situations, and further access to safer sanitation work ensures they have a dignified working environment.



Building Avenues for Socio-economic Empowerment of Families of Sanitation Workers

03

Most sanitation workers work in the **informal economy** without the protection of a **regulatory body**, which affects their, and their families' socio-economic development. Private service providers keep them tied to

the **cycle of debts** by depriving them of any necessary documents of identity, which also limits their access to welfare schemes meant to support them.

The Vicious Cycle of Unsafe Sanitation Work:

What Does It Cost the Families?

- Sanitation workers are unable to apply for loans in the absence of relevant documents. It also affects their children's **right to quality education**. If children have access to schools, it becomes difficult for them to pursue higher studies or acquire skills relevant to sustain their livelihood. These factors also keep them deprived of skills such as problem solving, decision making, analytical thinking etc. that are necessary for holistic development.
- Lack of **career counselling** and **capacity building sessions** on alternate source of livelihood for youth limits their knowledge of opportunities beyond sanitation work.

Skill Development and Right to Education:

The Path Ahead

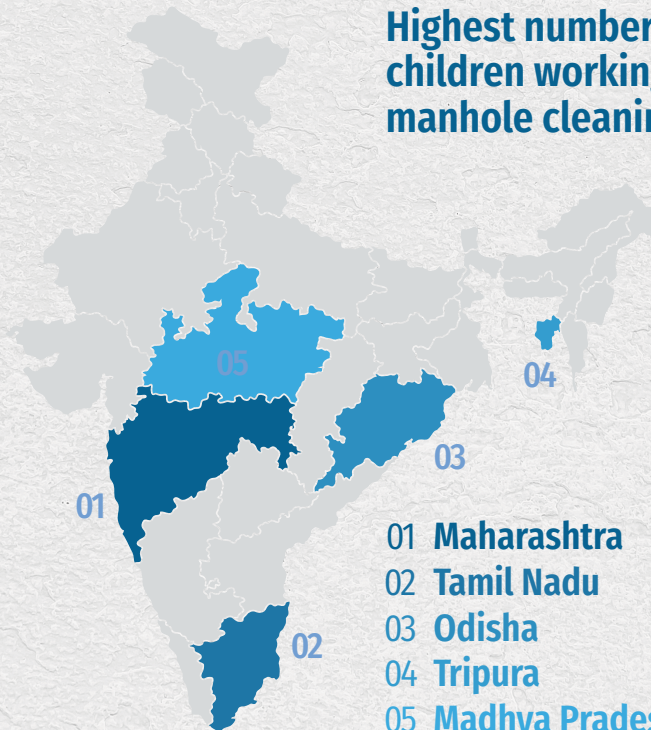
- **Urban Management Centre** started an inclusive and holistic program '**Drishya**' focused on empowering children of sanitation workers by enhancing their **skill sets**, providing career **counselling** to youth and their parents, **reducing school dropout** rates by strengthening access to schools and learning material and enabling them to choose alternatelivelihoods. Initiatives like these ensure their access to all relevant opportunities, and allow them to make their decision.
- Timely **capacity-building sessions** should be conducted with private employers in the informal workspace to highlight the need for relevant documents and decent pay, and sensitize them on **ending** the cycle of **debts**.

- A **sustainable financial system** that provides a support system to sanitation workers for them to access quality education for their children should be set up.
- A sustainable platform for **skill training** and **employment** opportunities for the youth for them to engage in safe sanitation work, and also have access to alternate livelihood opportunities.
- **Community-based** organizations and **self-help groups** should play a major role in mobilizing these efforts in local settlements. Alongside, public and private bodies can collectively facilitate the formation and sustenance of these efforts.

Did you know?

According to a study by Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI India) and South Asian Labour Network (SASLN) across 27 states, children below the age of 12 – especially girls – are being employed for cleaning dry latrines and manhole cleaning settlements in local areas, through unknown middlemen.

Highest number of children working as manhole cleaning assistants





The Power of Education:

A Tale of Two Sister's Dedicated to Empowering Communities

“ We strongly believe that quality education can pave the path towards a dignified livelihood for communities. In our family, only we sisters completed higher education. Our mother has been our strongest support system who always encouraged us to be independent. Today, we are both teachers and are leading a dignified life.

We are **Nikita** and **Sangeeta Hati**, and we live with our family in Cuttack. Most of our lives, we saw our parents work as sanitation workers in hospitals, and our brothers followed in their footsteps. We, however, chose education over the intergenerational profession, and pursued our **graduation** despite all challenges. Being in the sanitation sector **enabled** our parents, especially our **mother**, to provide us with **quality education**. She understood the rights we are entitled to, and motivated us to study and be aware of our rights as citizens.

Education empowered us to support other children in our community in building a safer and dignified future, and we got associated with the **Drishya** project. We now handle two learning hubs under the program and teach 40 children of our community, many of whom lost their right to education during the pandemic. We understand the importance of education for children, and we want them to be educated so they can be **independent**, aware and secure life and are able to make decisions by themselves. To support children in building a safe future for themselves, we are prepared to dedicate all our time and energy.

Story Source:
**Urban Management
Centre (UMC)**



*The Drishya program proposed by **Urban Management Center** was started with the objective to provide adequate learning opportunities to children of sanitation workers, empower them through enhancing skills and provide them with career counseling. Initiatives like these formulate an inclusive and sustainable support system for children of sanitation workers, secure alternate livelihood options for them, and break the intergenerational cycle of sanitation work.*



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About the sanitation sector in India

