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## Safai Karamcharis: The Backbone of Urban Hygiene and Health

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### Abstract:

*Safai Karamcharis play a vital yet often underappreciated role in maintaining urban hygiene and public health. As frontline sanitation workers, they are responsible for the collection, segregation, and disposal of waste, ensuring the cleanliness of streets, public spaces, and residential areas. This research article explores the socio-economic conditions, occupational hazards, and systemic challenges faced by Safai Karamcharis in India. It highlights their indispensable contribution to urban ecosystems, especially during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their crucial role, these workers often face social stigma, caste-based discrimination, and lack access to basic safety equipment and social security. The study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms, better working conditions, and public recognition of Safai Karamcharis as essential service providers who form the backbone of urban sanitation and health systems.*

**Keywords:** *Safai Karamcharis, Urban Sanitation, Occupational Health, Caste and Social Stigma, Waste Management.*

### Introduction

Safai Karamcharis often referred to as sanitation workers, garbage disposal staff, or municipal sweepers, form the invisible yet indispensable backbone of India's urban infrastructure. These workers are at the forefront of maintaining public hygiene by managing solid waste, cleaning streets and drains, and ensuring sanitation in residential colonies, commercial zones, hospitals, and

government institutions. Their work is physically demanding, often carried out in hazardous conditions with minimal protective equipment or formal recognition. In the state of Karnataka alone, more than 52,000 Safai Karamcharis are employed across various Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), working relentlessly to keep cities and towns clean. Their contribution becomes even more

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critical during public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, during which they were declared "essential workers" and continued their duties despite heightened risk of exposure. Yet, ironically, these very workers remain marginalized and invisible in policy, practice, and public discourse.

Despite their vital role in preventing the spread of diseases and maintaining public health, Safai Karamcharis face multiple layers of systemic neglect. These include unsafe working environments, inadequate wages, lack of job security, absence of healthcare benefits, and little or no access to protective gear. The issue is further compounded by deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination, as most Safai Karamcharis belong to Dalit communities, historically pushed into sanitation-related occupations through generations of social exclusion and limited mobility. Although India legally abolished manual scavenging through the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, and later strengthened it with the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, the reality on the ground remains grim. Many sanitation workers still engage in manual handling of waste, cleaning of sewers and septic tanks without safety equipment—practices which are both dangerous and illegal. This paper aims to examine the socio-economic conditions, working environment, caste dynamics, and policy frameworks

affecting Safai Karamcharis, with a specific focus on Karnataka. It also seeks to highlight their indispensable contributions to urban hygiene and public health, and to advocate for a reimagined sanitation workforce policy that ensures dignity, safety, and equality for all.

### **Historical Context and Legislative Reform**

A significant milestone in Karnataka's sanitation history occurred on August 15, 1973, when the practice of "head-sweeping" carrying human waste manually was outlawed. This transformation was championed by B. Basavalingappa, then Minister of Housing and Municipal Administration, and D. Devaraja Urs, the Chief Minister. The move marked a decisive step in recognizing Safai Karamcharis Nationally, the 1993 "Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Dry Latrines" Act criminalized this dehumanizing occupation. The 2013 "Manual Scavenging Prohibition and Rehabilitation Act" further reinforced the commitment to eradication by providing for rehabilitation and reintegration of manual scavengers into society.

To practically implement the law and prevent the recurrence of manual scavenging, the Karnataka government launched a plan to construct scientific septic tanks for every household with a latrine. Recognizing that not all families had the financial capacity to build such facilities, the plan included state-sponsored financial assistance for

economically weaker sections to support septic tank construction. This policy ensured that sanitation could be maintained without resorting to caste-based exploitation. This landmark reform, driven by visionary leaders and rooted in the principles of human dignity and equality, remains a critical chapter in the history of labor rights and anti-caste movements in Karnataka. It laid the foundation for subsequent policies aimed at improving the working and living conditions of Safai Karmacharis and remains a beacon of progressive governance in India.

Despite legal reforms, the harsh reality remains unchanged for many. Across India, 600 Safai Karamchari die annually while cleaning sewers or septic tanks—a figure ten times higher than soldiers who die on the borders. In Karnataka, official data from the Safai Karamchari Commission recorded 78 deaths of permanent workers between 2008 and 2020. The actual number is likely higher when accounting for contract and private

workers. These deaths directly violate the rights enshrined in Articles 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, and 23 of the Indian Constitution. In 2014, the Supreme Court mandated ₹10 lakh compensation for families of deceased workers, later increased to ₹30 lakh in 2023.

### Terminology, Identity, and Struggles for Dignity

Historically, caste-based terms such as '*Jalgara*', '*Bhangi*', '*Thoti*', '*Jadamali*', and '*Paura*' were used to refer to these workers. The term "Safai Karamcharis" was popularized by Ugrappa, a leader of the Communist Party in Mysore, who organized protests and awareness programs to restore dignity to these workers.

### Government Initiatives and Welfare Schemes

The Karnataka State Safai Karamcharis Commission, established in 2016, along with the National Commission (1994), oversees several welfare schemes aimed at social and economic rehabilitation:

**Table 1: Welfare Schemes for Safai Karamcharis**

Sl.no	Scheme	Details
01	ISB (Self-Employment)	70% subsidy or up to ₹2 lakh for new units
02	Direct Loan Scheme	₹1 lakh unit cost (50% loan + 50% subsidy) for small businesses
03	Transport Vehicle Subsidy	70% or ₹3.5 lakh for vehicles (autos, goods transport)
04	Women SHG Incentive	₹25,000/member + ₹1.5 lakh seed money
05	Land Ownership	₹15–20 lakh for up to 2 acres near residence
06	Laptop Distribution	For students pursuing higher education
07	Two-Wheeler Scheme	₹50,000 subsidy for work-related use
08	Suction & Jetting Machines	75% subsidy for mechanized cleaning
09	Sputri Yojana	Training in sports for SC/ST youth
10	Unnati Yojana	Startup support for SC/ST entrepreneurs (up to ₹50 lakh)
11	Samriddhi Yojana	5000 SC/ST youth to be trained in income-generating activities

### **Rehabilitation and Welfare Measures for Safai Karamcharis under the 2013 Act**

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 marked a significant step forward in protecting the rights and dignity of one of India's most marginalized communities the Safai Karamcharis. Under this Act, more than 7,000 unemployed manual scavengers were identified and included in a comprehensive rehabilitation program involving multiple welfare services aimed at improving their socio-economic conditions.

Under various central and state government initiatives, several welfare measures have been introduced to improve the lives of Safai Karamcharis and their families. These include the construction of houses under the Griha Bhagya scheme, ensuring stable living conditions, and providing educational scholarships to their children to break the generational cycle of manual labor. Children are also given admission from Class 1 to 12 without entrance exams into reputed institutions like Morarji Desai and Kittur Rani Chennamma Residential Schools, along with a financial support of ₹1,660 per student. In addition, efforts are being made to create alternative employment opportunities and provide skill development training to promote sustainable livelihoods beyond sanitation

work. To uphold their legal rights and protect them from caste-based discrimination, free legal aid services are made available. Safai Karamcharis are also covered under insurance schemes offering up to ₹5 lakhs, safeguarding their families against accidents and health-related crises. Furthermore, official identity cards are issued to ensure formal recognition and seamless access to government welfare services. Under the leadership of M. Shivanna Kote, the then Chairman of the Karnataka State Safai Karamchari Commission, several impactful changes were implemented. His tenure witnessed landmark developments:

Out of the total 52,000 Safai Karamcharis employed across Karnataka, approximately 20,000 workers have been granted permanent appointments, thereby receiving regular salaries, job security, and access to certain social welfare benefits. An additional 26,000 workers have been brought under the Direct Payment system, wherein their wages are disbursed directly by the municipal bodies, reducing dependency on third-party contractors and minimizing wage exploitation. However, a significant portion of the workforce, including lorry drivers, sanitation vehicle operators, and other supporting staff, continues to work under contractual employment arrangements. These contract workers often face irregular payments, job insecurity, and lack of access to essential benefits such as health insurance,

provident fund, and pension schemes, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability and social marginalization.

Shivanna Kote also initiated the observance of “School Joining Day” on November 5, the birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. This day is celebrated as a “Talent Award Day” to honor Safai Karamcharis' children who pass their 10th and 12th standard exams with first class marks, thereby promoting educational achievement within the community. In an effort to document the lived experiences of Safai Karamcharis, two powerful were produced during this period: “Baddu Bavane” and “Dhatri”. Both films are based on real-life stories, shedding light on the harsh realities, resilience, and dignity of those engaged in sanitation work.

#### **Implementation and Local Impact: Mysore Case Study**

The Mysore City Corporation has taken significant steps to improve urban sanitation and the welfare of its Safai Karamcharis. With 1,988 workers employed 474 permanently and 1,514 under direct payment the Corporation ensures monthly wages ranging from ₹17,000 to ₹28,950. Regular health check-ups every six months safeguard workers exposed to hazardous waste. To handle around 500 tons of garbage daily, the Corporation has invested in modern machinery, including jetting, suction, and de-silting machines, along with autos, trucks, and vans. Solid Waste Management Units in Mysore segregate

waste scientifically for recycling and reuse. Additionally, various welfare measures such as safety gear, health care, and sanitation facilities are provided to workers. Public participation is encouraged through awareness programs, video ads, pamphlets, mobile ringtone campaigns, and the distribution of red and green bins to promote household waste segregation. These collective efforts highlight Mysore's commitment to sustainable sanitation and improved working conditions for Safai Karamcharis.

#### **Citizens' Role in Supporting Safai Karamcharis**

The empowerment and upliftment of Safai Karamcharis is not solely the responsibility of the government. While legislative measures and development programs are crucial, the cooperation of citizens plays an equally vital role in improving their working conditions and ensuring their dignity and safety. One of the simplest yet most effective ways citizens can contribute is through the proper segregation of waste. By separating dry and wet waste at the source, households can significantly reduce the burden on sanitation workers. When waste is segregated correctly, it not only speeds up the disposal process but also protects workers from exposure to harmful substances. These is the Citizens Responsibility to cooperate with protector of whole city. So the Swami Vivekananda once stated that Safai Karamcharis are the “real doctors of society” and there are the Guardians of Public Health. While

medical doctors cure illnesses, it is these workers who prevent them by keeping public spaces hygienic. Their contribution to public health is monumental and must be recognized as such.

Moreover, citizens must ensure that hazardous waste such as broken glass, sharp blades, nails, and syringes is carefully wrapped or brought to the attention of the worker before disposal. These items pose serious risks of injury and infection if not handled properly. Similarly, medical and surgical waste should be separated and disposed of with caution. Items like used bandages, needles, or other contaminated materials should never be mixed with household garbage. Plastic waste, which is recyclable, should also be set aside separately to help in both recycling efforts and waste reduction. Even small acts of awareness and responsibility can go a long way. When citizens become conscious of their waste disposal practices, they help create a safer, healthier, and more dignified work environment for Safai Karamcharis. Citizen participation is essential in ensuring that sanitation workers are not exposed to unnecessary risks. By adopting mindful waste disposal habits, each individual can support the government's efforts and play a direct role in enhancing the welfare and dignity of these essential frontline workers. These simple, responsible behavior can protect workers from injury and disease.

## Conclusion

Safai Karamcharis form the cornerstone of India's public health and urban hygiene systems. Their tireless and often invisible labour ensures clean streets, functional sanitation infrastructure, and the prevention of disease outbreaks in rapidly expanding urban spaces. Yet, their lived realities are shaped by generations of caste-based discrimination, occupational neglect, and social exclusion. Despite being at the heart of essential public services, they continue to be marginalized in policy implementation, workplace safety norms, and social recognition. Recent policy efforts, such as the introduction of the Direct Payment system and welfare schemes aimed at skill development and rehabilitation, indicate a positive shift towards formalizing their labour and acknowledging their contribution. However, these measures remain piecemeal and insufficient when viewed against the scale of systemic inequality. Many Safai Karamcharis still operate under exploitative contractual conditions, face life-threatening occupational hazards, and lack access to proper healthcare, protective gear, and secure housing. The social stigma attached to their work, rooted in caste hierarchies, further undermines their dignity and reinforces cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Ensuring justice for Safai Karamcharis demands a holistic and multi-pronged approach. This includes the provision of permanent employment, strict



enforcement of workplace safety **standards, comprehensive healthcare coverage, and inclusive social welfare schemes.** Equally important is the need to foster **public awareness and attitudinal change**, so that the work of Safai Karamcharis is respected rather than devalued. Ultimately, it is the **collective responsibility** of the government, civil society, and every citizen to dismantle the structural barriers that dehumanize sanitation workers. The path to a cleaner and healthier India must begin with ensuring that the lives of those who clean our cities are treated with **dignity, respect, and justice.** Only then can we claim to have built a truly inclusive and equitable society.

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