

India: What it takes for a city to end manual scavenging

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Banning manual scavenging isn't enough. Cities make progress when they receive funds to purchase machines, as Vasai-Virar in Maharashtra shows.

India prohibited manual scavenging in 1993. But it took another 20 years to expand its legal definition to include the manual cleaning of drains, sewers and septic tanks. Nearly a decade after the 2013 law was passed, how well has it been implemented?

To find out, we filed Right to Information requests with 30 municipal corporations in western India, of which 14 replied. Most claimed to have eliminated manual scavenging. But when we visited five cities, we found an altogether different picture on the ground.

When the [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act](#) was passed in 2013, the city of Vasai-Virar was four years old. Given its burgeoning population as a “suburb” north of Mumbai, the government of Maharashtra had decided, in 2009, to combine four towns and 53 villages and create the Vasai-Virar City Municipal Corporation, or VVCMC.

The new city had limited sanitation infrastructure: a tiny drainage network, just one sewage treatment plant and plenty of open gutters. Up until 2021, it was as if the law prohibiting manual scavenging did not even exist. “Before 2021, our gutters were cleaned manually, we had no [suction-cum-jetting] machines,” Manali Shinde, the assistant commissioner of VVCMC’s solid waste management department, said.

Almost all buildings in the city had septic tanks to collect toilet waste from nearly 12 lakh residents, but just four desludging machines were available to clean them. Even after seven privately-hired workers died while manually cleaning septic tanks – three in 2019 and four in 2020 – no immediate measures were taken to address the prevalence of manual scavenging.

Then in 2021, there was a flurry of activity at the VVCMC. With funds received from the central government, the corporation bought 10 suction-cum-jetting machines for cleaning sewer lines and stormwater drains. It also bought five new desludging machines to clean septic tanks, ensuring there was one machine for each of the nine wards in the city. It set up a toll-free helpline number and a WhatsApp number through which citizens could complain about drains or tanks in need of cleaning, and call for the municipal machines to redress their complaints. According to the VVCMC’s response to a Right to Information request by *Scroll*, it also set up an Emergency Response Sanitation Unit, a team responsible for ensuring there is no “hazard caused at the workplace”.

These new developments were neither a response to the 2013 law nor to the deaths of seven workers – they were a response to the [Safamitra Suraksha Challenge](#). Launched in November 2022, the central government initiative invited cities across different population categories to compete for awards – and prize money worth Rs 52 crore – by increasing mechanised cleaning, training their sanitation workforce and raising public awareness.

The aim of the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge - or the challenge to protect sanitation worker "friends" - is exactly the same as that of the 2013 law against manual scavenging: to ensure that no human lives are lost due to the "hazardous cleaning" of sewers or septic tanks, and to therefore promote the mechanisation of sanitation work. In fact, the union ministry of housing and urban affairs launched the Challenge precisely because the 2013 law had not been successful at stopping manual scavenging deaths.

The VVCMC's response to *Scroll's* RTI request focused almost entirely on its participation in the Challenge. The documents it sent included printouts of social media posts about training workshops conducted for small batches of sanitation workers in 2022 and several newspaper reports from 2021 informing the public about the Challenge, the helpline and the machines. The corporation also claimed it had pasted "more than 10,000 posters in residential complexes, commercial complexes and community and public toilets for awareness purpose" since 2021.

It also claimed it had completely eliminated manual scavenging. "Now everything is totally cleaned with machines," said Shinde.

On the streets of Vasai-Virar, however, sanitation workers told *Scroll* that manual cleaning of sewage continues to persist across the city. The grieving families of the workers who died in 2019 and 2020 said they are still waiting for justice from the civic authorities.

'Machines don't reach everywhere'

The 10 suction-cum-jetting machines in Vasai-Virar cost the municipal corporation a total of Rs 3.8 crore. But their use is limited to three northern wards connected to the city's drainage network. Most of the city - 95% of it, according to Shinde's department - continues to rely on septic tanks to collect and dispose of toilet waste. Even in the northern wards, several sanitation workers claimed they have to clean some drains and sewers by hand, particularly before and during the monsoon.

"The machines do not reach everywhere. Even today, the contractors make us enter the big drains," said Sumeet (name changed), a 36-year-old worker in Virar who - like all the other workers *Scroll* met - spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The drains are full of geela kachra [wet waste]. Sometimes we have to climb inside till the waste reaches our chest, and sometimes we have to remove blockages by putting the entire arm inside."

Sumeet's colleague Nilesh (name changed) explained why the vehicle-mounted sewer-cleaning machines don't reach everywhere. "In some areas, there are no proper roads on which to drive the vehicles inside," said Nilesh, 37, a member of Shramajivee Sangathana, a union for sanitation workers in the city. "Those of us who are active union workers can say no if the contractor tells us to climb down a gutter, but many other workers cannot refuse."

Putalaji Kadam, the head of the Shramajivee Sangathana in Vasai-Virar, claimed that the corporation's new machines are often not successful at removing all the muck or garbage clogging drains. "So workers have to climb down at times, zabardasti, by force, with no safety gear at all," said Kadam. "If they don't agree to do it, the contractor will threaten to fire them."

According to Kadam, all of the 3,200 sanitation workers in Vasai-Virar are hired on contract rather than being given direct employment with the municipal corporation. The workers, he said, were paid barely Rs 4,500 a month up till 2016, when the VVCMC finally gave into the union's demands and made contractors pay the workers a minimum wage of Rs 17,300 a month.

The topic of manual cleaning inevitably brings up complaints about the lack of proper safety gear - body suits, masks, boots or gloves - a problem facing sanitation workers in every city that this series

has reported on.

“We climb down into the drains in our own clothes. Bohot baas aata hai - it stinks a lot,” said Sumeet. “They give us boots and gloves only when a minister or some official is visiting, or when there is an inspection. And the quality of those gloves and boots is very bad.”

Unlike other cities, where workers who sweep the streets and those who clean sewers are different, the sanitation workers in Vasai-Virar do all kinds of cleaning work: street sweeping in the morning, and cleaning sewers and septic tanks for the rest of the day. As a result, workers like Sumeet are familiar not only with the stink of wet sewage, but also the hazards of handling dry waste from the streets.

“People throw bottles and all kinds of things in the trash, so sometimes I have been cut on my hands and feet,” he said. “But we don’t get medical leave or any other help from the contractors.”

Has publicity worked?

While drains are still cleaned manually, Sumeet, Nilesh and other workers that *Scroll* met said that septic tanks in Vasai-Virar are now largely cleaned by desludging machines. According to the VVCMC, this is because citizens are aware that calling for a municipal desludging machine is the cheaper option.

“Hiring our machine costs Rs 1,000 for one visit, and if the machine is available, it is sent immediately. The maximum waiting time is two days,” said Manali Shinde, the assistant commissioner. Hiring a group of labourers for manual cleaning would not only cost much more, she said, but also not be as effective as cleaning with a machine.

Despite this, Vasai-Virar saw seven deaths of manual septic tank cleaners in the years after the 2013 law came into effect. In its response to *Scroll*’s RTI request, VVCMC provided the names of the deceased men, but made it a point to claim that they were all “informal workers”. “There is no such case identified regarding VVCMC’s employees or contractual employees as manual cleaning of sewer line is totally prohibited,” the RTI response said.

When asked about these deaths, Shinde admitted that some people do get septic tanks cleaned by private workers, but that “no incident had happened before the 2019 and 2020 incidents”. After 2020, VVCMC officials expressed pride in their success in the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge.

“Now we get one or two calls a day on our toll-free helpline for septic tank cleaning, and more calls at the local ward offices,” said Deepali Patlekar, the city coordinator of the VVCMC’s solid waste management department.

According to Shinde, the corporation’s publicity campaign under the Challenge has successfully raised awareness among citizens about the need to get their septic tanks cleaned every three years. “We have put up posters, banners and stickers about it all over the corporation limits, even in housing societies where there is no septic tank,” Shinde said. “We have also issued letters to many societies about the machines that are available.”

Conversations with residents of several housing societies and citizens, however, revealed that the corporation’s publicity efforts may not have drawn as much attention as it believes.

“No one has come to put any posters in our society in recent years and I have not seen any hoardings about cleaning of gutters or septic tanks outside either,” said the board member of a housing society with over 100 flats in Vasai, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “I have only

seen general Swachh Bharat Abhiyan hoardings about not throwing garbage on the streets.”

While Shinde claimed that wards in the Vasai area were not connected to any main sewerage line due to the absence of a sewage treatment plant, the board member of the Vasai housing society said they did not have a septic tank either. “In our neighbourhood the sewage goes by pipes to a gutter nearby,” the board member said. “When we call the VVCMC to unclog our manholes, I have never seen them bring any machines. Workers come and clean them by hand.”

Prakash Thakur, a Virar-based social worker, pointed out that while he has never come across publicity campaigns linked to the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge, the VVCMC has been effective in promoting other aspects of their sanitation work. “Every year during the monsoon, they always publicise their emergency number everywhere, for people to complain about waterlogging or gutters overflowing in their areas,” said Thakur. “There are regular announcements on TV and they also send out municipal vans announcing information on loudspeakers.”

‘Tossed aside like dogs’

While the effectiveness of the VVCMC’s public awareness campaigns may be debatable, the municipal corporation has clearly failed to comply with the 2013 law when it comes to responding to the deaths of manual scavengers.

As per the law, anyone who makes a worker manually clean sewers or septic tanks must be either imprisoned for two years or fined Rs 2 lakh, or both. If a worker dies in the process, the employer must be booked not only under the 2013 law against manual scavenging, but also under section 304 of the Indian Penal Code - culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Families of the deceased, meanwhile, must be paid a compensation of Rs 10 lakh.

In Vasai-Virar, however, the municipal corporation has not paid the Rs 10 lakh compensation to any of the seven families of workers who died cleaning septic tanks in two incidents in 2019 and 2020.

In its response to *Scroll’s* RTI query, the VVCMC claimed that the reason for not paying the compensation was that the workers were employed either by a “private stakeholder” (the builder and members of the housing society in the case of three workers who died in May 2019) or by the “owner of the house” (in the case of four workers who died in April 2020).

In the 2019 case, the municipal corporation claimed to have given jobs to “relatives of the deceased” in July that year. However, activist Rameshwar Tejpal refuted this claim. “Only one widow was given a job with the corporation - none of the relatives of the other two families have got jobs,” said Tejpal, a member of the Safai Karamchari Andolan, an organisation working for the rights of sanitation workers across India.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, Tejpal had helped the three families file a police case against eight accused from the housing society. “They were briefly arrested but let out on bail after a few days. The case has not moved forward after that,” he said. “The accused have paid the families smaller amounts as compensation, but none of them have got the official Rs 10 lakh.”

In the 2020 case, four young Adivasi men died of asphyxiation while cleaning the septic tank of a private homeowner at the height of the Covid-19 lockdown on April 17. The accused in this case - a married couple - were not even arrested. “They were ordered to pay the Rs 10 lakh compensation to each family, but so far they have only paid Rs 4 lakh to each,” said the social worker Prakash Thakur.

When the homeowners claimed they had no more money to pay, the VVCMC - according to its RTI

response - organised an auction of their property in March 2022. "But nobody took part in the auction," the RTI response said. Thakur, however, claimed that the auction was never properly advertised in the first place. "It was all a natak, an act," he said. "The auction was never held in the right manner, and the compensation for the families is still pending."

The impact of this neglect on the four families has been profound.

"My son took up this work [of cleaning the septic tank] to make a little money, because there was no other work available during the lockdown," said Surekha Mukane, the mother of 20-year-old Jayendra, who used to earn Rs 17,000 a month as a cleaner in the Indian Railways before losing his job during the lockdown. The other three men had the same reason for taking up the risky job, but none of their families had any clue about where they had gone or why.

"When my son left that morning, I thought he was going to play cricket with his friends," said Meera Bhoje, whose son Nayan was 24 when he died. Due to the pandemic and the lockdown restrictions, the families struggled to reach the hospital, get access to their loved ones' bodies and cremate them. "We heard that after they were pulled out of the septic tank, their bodies were just piled up into a tempo. And at the hospital, they were just tossed aside like dogs," said the mother of 28-year-old Nilesh Mukane, whose parents did not wish to be identified by name.

Now, nearly three years later, all four families say they are living a hand-to-mouth existence, particularly the 29-year-old widow of Tejas Bhate, who has to support two young children on her monthly wage of Rs 3,000 as a domestic worker.

Nilesh Mukane's parents are angry about the absence of justice: the homeowners who hired the four men has faced no punitive consequences.

"If any rich people had died because of people like us," said his mother, "They would have burnt our houses down."

Aarefa Johari

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