

Study Exposes Alarming Reality Of Manual Scavenging In Tamil Nadu: 43 Deaths In 18 Months, Most Victims From Dalit Community

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Over the past year and a half, Tamil Nadu has recorded 43 fatalities resulting from manual scavenging, with a significant majority of the victims belonging to the Dalit community. A recent study by the Social Awareness Society For Youths (SASY) revealed that only 25 of these fatalities were officially reported, leaving many cases unaccounted for. These manhole deaths in Tamil Nadu have raised serious concerns about the safety and rights of workers engaged in manual scavenging.

These manhole deaths in Tamil Nadu has raised concerns about the credibility of the much-hyped Dravidian Model that the DMK government prides itself on.

Most of the victims of these tragic incidents belong to the Dalit community, emphasising the alarming social implications of this grave issue. Despite the existence of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, the local authorities have failed to effectively implement the law, resulting in continued hazardous conditions for manual scavengers. In response to this distressing situation, SASY took a proactive step by organising a public hearing in Coimbatore. During the hearing, victims of manhole deaths courageously came forward to share their heart-wrenching stories and submitted formal complaints. The panel, comprising social activists and legal experts, attentively listened to the accounts, aiming to shed light on the plight of these affected families.

VA Ramesh Nathan, the director of SASY, revealed the disheartening findings of their study. Out of the 34 incidents related to manhole deaths that they investigated, a staggering 43 deaths occurred, but only 25 were officially reported. Only 20 individuals have been arrested out of the 12 reported cases, and surprisingly, no charge sheets have been filed so far. The majority of the victims in these incidents belong to the Dalit community. Addressing the victims directly, Ramesh Nathan expressed his concern and vowed to push for action. He emphasised that the state government must strictly enforce the law and ensure the proper rehabilitation of affected families, especially considering the majority of the victims are from the marginalised Dalit community.

One of the heartrending accounts came from B Vasanthi, a 49-year-old widow from Red Hills near Chennai. She tearfully narrated the tragedy of losing her husband, Baskar (53), on 15 May 2023, due to asphyxiation while cleaning a septic tank. With her husband being the sole breadwinner of the family, Vasanthi and her surviving family members, including her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren, are now left struggling for survival. Despite two months passing, they have not received any favourable response from the government regarding financial assistance.

Henri Tiphagne from People's Watch, who was part of the panel, offered guidance to the grieving families regarding the legal avenues available to seek justice and compensation for their irreplaceable loss.

As the public hearing concluded, the urgent need for action and reform in Tamil Nadu's approach to manual scavenging became painfully evident. The testimonies of the victims and their families serve as a poignant reminder of the grim reality they face daily and the pressing responsibility of the authorities to address this deeply rooted issue promptly.

On July 30, 2023, the [Times of India](#) reported that the day after the Social Awareness Society For Youths (SASY) public hearing, a case of manual scavenging was witnessed in Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu.

It is notable that Ma Venkatesan, Chairman of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis said that [Tamil Nadu ranks first](#) in the manhole deaths. From 1993 to till now, the official government data reveals that nearly 225 sanitation workers died due to manhole cleaning.

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