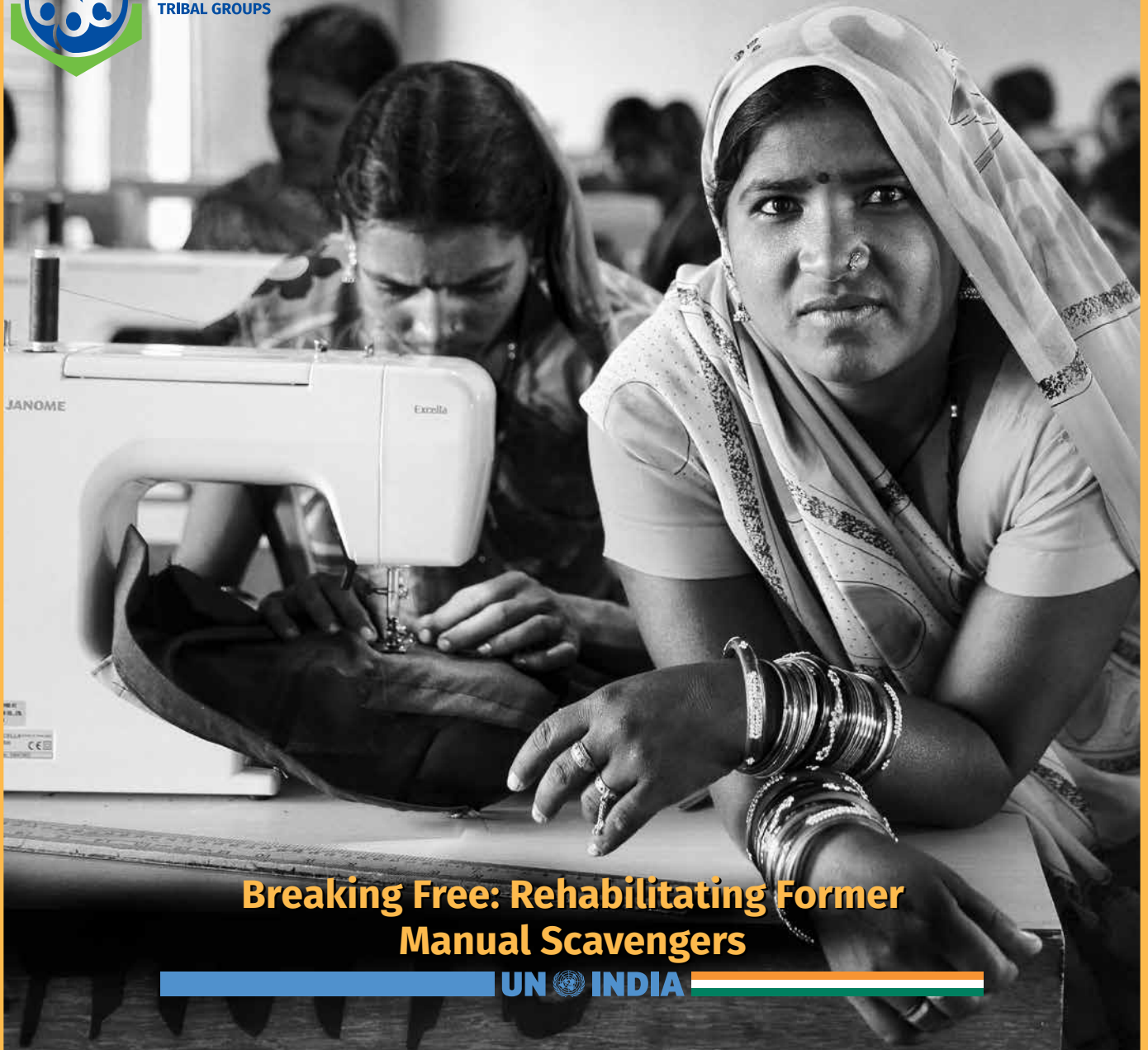




SCHEDULED  
CASTES AND  
TRIBAL GROUPS



## Breaking Free: Rehabilitating Former Manual Scavengers

UN  INDIA 

## Breaking Free: Rehabilitating Manual Scavengers

Manual scavenging refers to the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling in any manner, human excreta from dry latrines and sewers. It often involves using the most basic of tools such as buckets, brooms and baskets. The practice of manual scavenging is linked to India's caste system where so-called lower castes were expected to perform this job. Manual scavengers are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged community in India.

In 1993, India prohibited the employment of people as manual scavengers. In 2013, landmark new legislation in the form of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act was passed which reinforces prohibiting manual scavenging in all forms and rehabilitating manual scavengers, identified through a mandatory survey.

Despite progress, manual scavenging persists in India. According to the India Census 2011, there are more than 2.6 million dry latrines in the country. There are 13,14,652 toilets where human excreta is flushed in open drains, 7,94,390 dry latrines where the human excreta is cleaned manually. Seventy three percent of these are in rural areas and 27 percent are in urban areas.



Section 2 (1) (g) of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013, defines a manual scavenger as: “(g) a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contract, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces of premises, as the Central Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed.

*Manual scavenging has been prohibited in India since 1993. Yet a significant proportion of India's 2.6 million dry latrines are still cleaned manually, mostly by women.*

According to the House Listing and Housing Census 2011, states such as Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal account for more than 72 percent of the insanitary latrines in India<sup>1</sup>.

The Government of India has adopted a two-pronged strategy that includes eliminating insanitary latrines through demolition and conversion into sanitary latrines, and developing a comprehensive rehabilitation package for manual scavengers through a survey.

However, while manual scavenging for many may have ended as a form of employment, the stigma and discrimination associated with it lingers on, making it difficult for former or liberated manual scavengers to secure alternate livelihoods and raising the fear that people could once again return to manual scavenging in the absence of other opportunities to support their families. Correctly identifying manual scavengers remains a key challenge. A comprehensive rehabilitation package has recently been put together that includes livelihoods and skill development, access to education for children of former manual scavengers and alternate livelihoods.



*A fisherman employed by a group of former women manual scavengers in Madhya Pradesh sits by the pond leased by the group. Fish farming has resulted in a five-fold increase in the incomes of the women and helped them diversify into other livelihoods.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India: <http://socialjustice.nic.in/pdf/SRMSFinalScheme.pdf>





*“It is crucial that adequate resources are provided to enable the comprehensive rehabilitation of liberated manual scavengers. This is the only way these grossly exploited people will be able to successfully reintegrate into a healthier and much more dignified work environment, and finally have a real opportunity to improve the quality of their own lives and those of their children and subsequent generations.”*

Navi Pillai, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

*Rekha bai, a former manual scavenger is learning how to sew at a training centre for women in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, aimed at the economic rehabilitation of former manual scavengers.*

## Legislation in search of dignity

In 1993, the Government of India enacted the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act which prohibited the employment of manual scavengers for manually cleaning dry latrines and also the construction of dry toilets, that is, toilets that do not operate with a flush. It provided for imprisonment of upto a year and a fine. In 2013, this was followed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, which is wider in scope and importantly, acknowledged the urgency of rehabilitating manual scavengers.

Key features of the Act:

- ◆ Prohibits the construction or maintenance of insanitary toilets
- ◆ Prohibits the engagement or employment of anyone as a manual scavenger
- ◆ Violations could result in a years' imprisonment or a fine of INR 50,000 or both
- ◆ Prohibits a person from being engaged or employed for hazardous cleaning of a sewer or a septic tank

- ◆ Offences under the Act are cognizable and non-bailable
- ◆ Calls for a survey of manual scavengers in urban and rural areas within a time bound framework
- ◆ Correct and timely identification of insanitary latrines and manual scavengers
- ◆ Implementation of provisions regarding prohibiting 'hazardous cleaning' of sewers and septic tanks
- ◆ While the Act is encouraging in that it focuses on the responsibility of officials to ensure its implementation, it does not outline administrative measures beyond conduct rules, that can be imposed if officials do not implement the Act

*The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013 provides for time-bound comprehensive rehabilitation of manual scavengers. Measures to be taken include photo identity cards for manual scavengers; initial cash assistance to support families; scholarships for children of manual scavengers; residential plot allotments or built houses within the framework of relevant schemes; training in livelihood skills; and concessional loans to take up alternative occupations*

There remain several challenges in implementing the legislation to ensure that manual scavengers can work and live with dignity. These include:

- ◆ Time frame within which land is to be allotted as part of the rehabilitation package<sup>2</sup>



*Former manual scavengers learn how to sew at a training centre for women in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, aimed at the economic rehabilitation of former manual scavengers. Close to 150 women are being trained at the Centre, after which they work at a local production centre for 'Dignity&Design', an apparel label run by former manual scavengers.*

<sup>2</sup>Provision of land or ready built houses is to be made under the relevant housing schemes.

## Towards comprehensive rehabilitation

Manual scavengers are at a double disadvantage. They are members of lower caste groups and as such, face enormous discrimination in society, and second, are disadvantaged because they are manual scavengers who clean human excreta. The challenge of rehabilitation is urgent, and requires a comprehensive approach that moves beyond expanding income generation opportunities or providing loans, to focus on various aspects crucial to secure the future of the next generation of liberated manual scavengers.

A comprehensive rehabilitation package should:

- ◆ **Ensure discrimination free, secure and alternate livelihoods** by providing skill development and livelihoods training to women, linking them to government employment schemes and entitlements as well as ensuring their land rights. Vocational training linked to employment for young people, and support to liberated manual scavengers in building alternate livelihoods could go a long way in ensuring steady, stable livelihoods for the future.
- ◆ **Create a favourable environment** through community awareness and sensitization of local administration
- ◆ **Build the capacity of the community** to promote rehabilitation efforts and self-reliance and also build leadership in the community with a particular focus on Dalit women



*Former women manual scavengers from the Dalit community in a village in Madhya Pradesh have increased their income five-fold by leasing a local pond and fish farming. The income has helped women diversify into other livelihoods.*



Baadam bai is known as the neta or leader in her village in Neemach district. Baadam bai began manual scavenging as a young girl, and continued after she got married. After meeting civil society activists in 2011, she summed up the courage to quit the job. “I hated having to make a living as a manual scavenger, and my biggest regret is that I made my son help me till he was 20, but I had no other choice”. She became a Garima or Dignity Fellow for women in her community, going door to door spreading awareness, undertaking marches to spread awareness about ending manual scavenging, and liaising with the district administration to secure rights for her community. Her biggest victory came in 2011 when she fought a battle to remove encroachers from 32 acres of land allotted to former manual scavengers to cultivate land. Today she walks through the village, a proud neta and powerful advocate for change.



Fifty-five year old Shakuntala Bai from Siddhiganj village in Madhya Pradesh was a manual scavenger for more years than she can remember. Widowed 13 years ago, she along with 20 other former manual scavengers formed the Anusuchit Jaati Machhua Samooh or the Scheduled Caste Fish Group in 2013. With support from UNDP, they leased a local pond for fish farming. Despite enormous odds and resistance from members of the upper caste in the village, the women have managed to generate a steady income from fish farming and are looking to the future. “Whatever little we have made since we began fish farming has helped”.



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**Image Credits : Ishan Tankha/ UNDP India**

Cover page: *Rani Bai is learning how to sew at a training centre for women in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, aimed at the economic rehabilitation of former manual scavengers. Close to 150 women are being trained at the Centre, after which they work at a local production centre for 'Dignity&Design', an apparel label run by former manual scavengers.*