

## **Sewer, Struggle and Livelihood**

### **Convention on Sewer Workers' Issue**

#### Introduction

In the first four months of the year 2022, around 10 people have already lost their life inside sewers in the area of Delhi NCR. Not all sewer/septic tank deaths are recorded every year. To what extent do deaths really occur in India?

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment said in Parliament on February 1, 2022, that 340 people died while cleaning sewers in the last five years. In response to another question, Shri Ramdas Athawale, Minister of the Government of India, gave a statement in the Parliament that in the last five years, not a single worker died in the sewer. The statements reflect an unfortunate contradiction on the floor of Indian Parliament .

The sanitation workers are exploited in every aspect of their life. They work under exploitative private contracting agencies appointed by the government. Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM) is committed to stand with the Sewer / Septic tank Workers in their fight against all socio-economic exploitations. In the incidents of death in sewer or septic tank, DASAM has worked tirelessly to bring justice to the kin of the deceased and also provide assistance to seek relief from the government and the agency concerned for seriously injured employees. DASAM has established a network of sewer workers in different areas of Delhi, listened their concerns, enabled them for opinion building for appropriate action.

DASAM is active in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Delhi and has conducted Round- table meetings in different parts of Delhi where direct interaction was established amongst sewer workers, government officials, and representatives of Safai Karamcharis Commission and Union leaders. Such round tables were organized at Tahirpur in East Delhi, Hyderpur in North Delhi, and Malviya Nagar in South Delhi. These workers are Safai Karamcharis as defined in the law. They work under contractors of the Delhi Jal Board, New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), Delhi Cantonment Board, Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Public Works Department and Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC). In Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Patna, necessary actions were taken with the concerned departments for the justice of sewer workers who faced unfortunate accidents. Despite the provisions of laws, rules, and guidelines, conditions of these sewer / septic tank workers are worsening every day. The government, separating itself from its core obligation, is handing over basic work like sewer cleaning to contractors where the lives of sewer workers have become slavery and hell. Neither safety equipment is provided nor are minimum wages paid.

Due to contractual system an uncertainty always looms in the head of sewer workers about their livelihood. This uncertainty is getting worse. Due to the fear of this uncertainty of livelihood, they are exploited in inhuman ways. Despite toiling for years, they do not receive proper wages and the facilities that are available to any private or government employee. From the Supreme Court to the lower courts, it has been decided that work of permanent nature cannot be done under contractual system, but unfortunately, these orders are not being followed.

Thousands of sewer workers are working under contractors in Delhi. This number will increase manifold when we include NCR region. Working under hazardous and deadly gases is a perilous job for sewer cleaners. Most of the workers fall ill and get injured due to continuous exposure to the gases and do not receive any kind of compensation, health facility or help in any other form. Yes, if an employee dies while working in a sewer / septic tank, there is a provision of compensation of Rs 10 lakh. After many efforts,

laws were made for the welfare of these workers, but due to lack of political will, these laws are not implemented in spirit.

### What should be done?

1. Government should make direct recruitment of workers and regularize the works of sewer / septic tank and open drains. All the workers should get a mention in payroll / muster roll by the concerned departments of the government.
2. The process of outsourcing sewer / septic tank / open drains cleaning work from private contractors should be restrained immediately.
3. Emergency response sanitation units should be set up by the government in every one lakh population area.
4. In case of sewer worker's injury, treatment should be done under Employees' State Insurance Fund till complete recovery.
5. Rehabilitation of sewer / septic tank / open drain workers and better education and employment for their children should be guaranteed.

### Why this Convention?

The functions performed by the concerned departments of the government should reflect an understanding of democracy and ethics. These reflections should be visible on to the living and work standards of sanitation workers. However, what we see is that decisions are taken and implemented on the basis of political, social, caste, and religious status which is contrary to the concept of justice. With respect to Safai Karamcharis, work is being done against the concept of justice, morality, democracy, and even business.

This convention organized by researchers, unions, social organizations, political activists, academics, advocates, journalists and grass-root activists is an initiative aimed to bridge the gap between policymakers, implementation institutions, and employees. To discuss and reflect on all these issues, **'Sewer, Struggle and Livelihood; Convention on Sewer Workers' Issue is being organized on 21st May, 2022 from 10:30 am to 5:00 pm, Saturday at Constitution Club of India, Rafi Marg, Sansad Marg, New Delhi** in which your participation is crucial.

*Organised by Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM) in collaboration with All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM); Ambedkarwadi Lekhak Sangh (ALS); Basti Suraksha Manch (BSM); Delhi Jal Board sewer Department Mazdoor Sangathan; Delhi Solidarity Group (DSG); DJB Employees welfare Association(Regd.); Institute for Democracy and Sustainability (IDS); Janpahal; Jal Mal Kaamgaar Sangharsh Morcha; Magadh Foundation; Municipal Workers Lal Jhanda Union (CITU), National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM); National Domestic Workers Union; National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers (NCDRSAW); People's Resource Center (PRC- India); Peoples Media Advocacy & Resource Centre (PMARC); Sewerage and Allied Workers Forum (SSKM); Workers Welfare Foundation (WWF).*

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