

**Sewer, Struggle and Livelihood**  
**National Convention on Sewer Workers' Issue**  
**21st May | Constitution Club, New Delhi**

*"For our bread, we are forced to put our hands and at times our bodies in toilets and tanks, but nothing is given to us by the government."*

**Press Release**

**New Delhi, May 21st:** The Convention titled "Sewer, Struggle and Livelihood: National Convention on Sewer Workers' Issue" was held on 21st May, 2022.

The aim of the Convention was to bridge the gap between policy makers, implementation institutions, and employees. The Convention was attended by 250-300 sewer workers of the convention includes representatives from government bodies, organisations, trade unions, and legal background.

All the sessions began with sewer workers sharing about their lives and struggles associated their work with the panelists. The workers shared that in addition to the exploitation by contractors, they also face casteism in the form of 'untouchability' when they go to work. Many workers faced the brunt of their hazardous jobs in their lives, few of them are permanently ill and are not in a position to even sustain themselves or their families.

The convention was spread in 4 sessions:

1. First Session: Struggle of Sewer / Septic Tanks Workers and their current conditions.

Panelists: Hemlata Kansotia- Convenor, National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers, Rajasthan, Radhika Bordia- Director India Programme, Missouri School of Journalism, USA, Sanghmitra Acharya- Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Ved Prakash- President, Delhi Jal Board Sewer Department Mazdoor Sangathan, Virendar Gour- Municipal Workers Lal Jhanda Union and Satyam Srivastava- Co Director, SRUTI.

- The workers receive no safety equipment at work place.
- Majority of the workers come from Scheduled Caste / Dalit community.
- Money is deducted from their wage for non-working days such as Saturday, Sunday, and other public holidays.
- A strong demand for ending contractual system as it causes many problems linked to it.
- Despite risking their lives, there is complete uncertainty of the job. As a worker said "For breads we are forced to put our hands and at times our bodies in toilets and tanks, but nothing is provided to us by the government."

2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Session: Role of Trade Unions on sewer / septic tank workers issues.

Panelists: Hannan Mollah- General Secretary, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), Com. Sucheta- All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), Sukumar Damle- General Secretary, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Goutam Modi- General Secretary, New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI).

- The session was centered on the unionization of workers and the role that unions have played and will play in raising the sewer workers issues and demands.
- All unions collectively announced to eradicate caste systems and take up the matters of manual scavengers on their agenda and fight to free sewer /septic tank cleaners from

the contractual system. It was said that due to the fear and uncertainty of livelihood, the workers have not been able to unite, and we are moving rather backwards. Since workers belong from a vulnerable class via caste and economically, their lives are considered less valuable than others, which in turn is one of the primary reasons of the compensation of Rs. 10 lakh instead of making sure that no death takes place.

- The cleaning work is permanent but the one who does this work is temporary and no measures are currently under process which will make the sewer workers status as permanent employees. Despite risking their lives for years, don't they deserve at least a permanent employee status?
- Questions were raised about the availability of sewer cleaning machines and why in 2022, the person has to go inside a sewer / septic tank or open drainage and clean it manually.

### 3. Third Session: Institutional and legislative perspectives towards sewer / septic tank workers.

Panelists: Sanjay Gahlot, Chairperson, Delhi Safai Karmchari Commission, Ajay Dutt- MLA, Ambedkar Nagar, Rohit Kumar- MLA, Trilokpuri and Umesh Babu, Sr. Economist & Adviser - DASAM

The panellist recognised that there are many families today who have lost their family members to the sewer.

All legislatures unanimously announced to support the implementation of Hon'ble Court's order "we will free sewer / septic tank workers from the clutches of the contractual system and ensure their permanent employment under government".

It was also observed by the panellists that budget of Delhi Government spent on contractor is enough to give permanent employment status to sewer / septic tank cleaners working under contractual system. In the Year 2018-19 Rs. 535 Cr, In the Year 2019-20 Rs. 523 Cr, in the Year 2020-21 Rs. 825 Cr were spent and in the Year 2021-22 Rs. 825 Cr is also likely to be spent on contractors.

Legislatures ensured to raise the issue in the assembly at the disposal of union leaders and other organizations of the Safai Karmachari.

They promised the sewer workers that adequate steps will be taken for the issues which were raised at the convention and will be raised in the Legislative Assembly.

### 4. Fourth Session: Status of Sewer / septic tank workers under judicial provisions.

Panelists: Arkaja Singh- Centre for Policy Research (CPR), C Adhikesavan- Advocate Supreme Court of India, Advocate Kawalpreet Kaur, Dharmendra Kumar- Secretary, Janpahal.

- Only when the deaths happen, the law comes in. The safety equipment is pseudo and there has been no testimony of that. Then, why do we keep talking about the safety equipments?
- This is also a problem of engineering design; the way sewers are made, they are like death chambers. Their basic science is faulty.

- We need to establish accountability. The responsibility should be taken by the government and outsourcing should be stopped.
- The Legal aspect should not become a limitation but rather should be used more.
- The question of the compensation is also kept flexible and very few are paid the full amount.

Immediate Demands which raise from the Convention:

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 with retrospective dates.
2. The process of outsourcing sewer / septic tank / open drains cleaning work from private contractors should be restrained from immediate effect.
3. In case of sewer worker's injury, treatment should be done under Employees' State Insurance Fund till complete recovery.
4. Hiring authority or person should be held responsible in case of any accident and should be convicted under law.
5. Rehabilitation of sewer / septic tank / open drain workers and better education and employment for their children should be guaranteed.

*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*

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