

Mapping In(dignity) Within the NAMASTE Policy Framework

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Abstract

The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE, hereinafter) scheme launched in 2023 was formulated by subsuming the erstwhile Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS, hereinafter) to ensure rehabilitation of persons engaged in manual scavenging. The policy attempts to signal a significant shift from ‘rehabilitation’ to an ‘enabling ecosystem’ aimed at targeting fatalities of workers engaged in ‘hazardous cleaning’ of sewers and septic tanks. However, it forsakes an opportunity for a radical policy shift in transforming mechanization of sewage. The paper posits that there is a significant ‘dignity deficit’ in the language of NAMASTE policy document, among issues like paternalistic gaze and privatization of risk. Aiming to ‘ensure safety and dignity’ of workers, it ironically identifies the objective as ‘systemizing human entry into sewers and septic tanks through the organization of well-trained and appropriately equipped’ workers. The analysis delineates a casteist model of techno-solutionism instead of resolving technological injustice in urban sanitation governance. With a heavy reliance on framing workers as ‘sanipreneurs’ and ‘sewer entry professionals’, the state effectively relinquishes accountability to private contractual arrangements between workers and employers, simultaneously shifting the burden of abolishing hazardous cleaning onto affected workers from intergenerationally marginalized communities, including legal formalization of caste-based allocation of labour. A critical discourse analysis approach is employed to examine the policy as a legal text while using qualitative empirical data from interviews, observations and field notes focussed in Delhi and Noida as a political field.

Keywords: NAMASTE, human dignity, hazardous cleaning, caste, policy.

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1 Introduction

The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment provided data from National Commission for Safai Karamchari in reply to an unstarred question on deaths in sewers and septic tanks in the Rajya Sabha; 2023 saw 63 workers' deaths and in 2024, the number was 50 (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2024). The documented persistence of fatalities exposes the lethal gap between official policy and ground reality. This is in spite of repetitive judicial interventions by the Supreme Court (Bakshi, 2025). By June 2025, at least 42 manual scavengers had already lost their lives across the country, and in the capital alone, the six workers died during manual scavenging of sewers and septic tanks by September 2025 (Sathuluri, 2023). These routine violations point to the systemic failure of the policy mandate and expose the claim of 'zero fatalities' (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023). Such wide enforcement gap between the policy promises in the NAMASTE scheme and the ground realities (Kumar, 2025), absence of institutional mechanisms part of implementation and weak monitoring are symptomatic of legal instruments pertaining to manual scavenging, as admitted by the Supreme Court (Balram Singh v. Union of India, 2020, para. 14).

1.1 Rationale

Notably, there are some deeper structural concerns that appear in the form of a perpetual theme of patronization of communities engaged in such work, lack of abolitionist language towards the practice and symbolic treatment of the human right to dignity, equity and right against discrimination in the NAMASTE scheme. A similar treatment is also seen in the NAMASTE scheme. Rather it goes a step further and undertakes the project of rebranding workers as 'sanipreneurs', thereby, allowing the government to effectively evading its own responsibility while leaving sanitation workers' safety to be handled through 'formalized' private contracts. This moves the burden of ending dangerous practices onto marginalized communities while diminishing state accountability, and risks legally entrenching the historical nexus between caste and its hierarchically graded occupational linkages.

1.2 Policy Rationale and Intent

The policy guidelines under NAMASTE aim to address specific gaps in the SRMS and shift the policy focus from mere welfare-based rehabilitation to a technological and ‘enabling ecosystem’. The policy promises the safety and dignity of India's sanitation workers by building a supportive system that recognizes workers as essential to infrastructure maintenance, and improving access to occupational safety and health through capacity building by providing training, equipment, and machinery. It offers financial support to reduce sanitation workers’ vulnerability by providing capital subsidies for ‘sanitation related projects’ to enable them to become sanitation-based entrepreneurs. The functional transition is made to offshoot the limitations of SRMS. As per the guidelines, the need for a new framework was the persistence of hazardous cleaning of sewage resulting in 1,056 workers dying between 1993- 2023 and failure of safety protocols. It marks a distinction from its precursor by highlighting the unfinished mandate of SRMS which was focused on rehabilitation of identified manual scavengers and the critical need for ‘full mechanization’ of sewage cleaning procedures. While considering mechanization imperative and acknowledging that most Tier II and Tier III towns lack underground drainage systems, and even urban spaces with such systems are not fully equipped for mechanized cleaning, the policy necessitates provisioning of specialized machinery, thereby justifying the shift to a comprehensive ‘enabling ecosystem’ (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, p. 2).

The scheme attempts to standardize service delivery to regulate these services through SRUs and licensed Private Sanitation Service Organizations (PSSOs) hoping that it would prevent any informal worker to be engaged in hazardous cleaning (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, p. 12). In its attempt to create this ‘enabling ecosystem’, the scheme envisages an economic empowerment via ‘sanipreneurship’ offering transitioning roles from that of a worker to that of a contractor. While recognizing that workers aspire to a more dignified life, it seeks to do so by transforming sanitation workers engaged in sewage cleaning from manual labourers into owners of sanitation-related enterprises while providing upfront capital subsidies for purchasing mechanized equipment. Yet, what is strikingly similar between the SRMS and NAMASTE policy is their approaches of

rehabilitation with one of the prominent means being extension of the scheme through subsidised loans for sanitation-related projects to manual scavengers, sanitation workers, and their dependents (National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation, n.d.).

2 Literature Review

Dignity Deficit in NAMASTE policy

2.1 Paternalism and performative dignity

Human beings possess qualities, a distinctive value or worth which the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) called ‘inherent dignity’ that could not be allowed to be sanctioned by either the state, any social organ, or derived metaphysically or religiously and, hence, cannot be socially stripped away or rescinded in any way, making the rights and freedoms emanating from the human sense of dignity ‘inalienable’ (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations General Assembly, 1948, pmb.). However, there have been attempts by the state to impose dignity from above, as opposed to its intrinsic nature and misalign its meaning with a ‘performative’ perception of dignity. Such understanding of dignity is in contradiction to its conception under the UDHR and the Indian constitution to one that is relational and patronizing. One instance of this attempt was the 2019 Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj served as a televised stage for the Prime Minister’s ritualistic washing of the feet (Charan Vandana) of sanitation workers, a spectacle that perfectly encapsulates the state’s preference for performative dignity over substantive rights. This act was immediately challenged by Dalit activists like Bezwada Wilson, founder of the Safai Karamchari Andolan, who dismissed the event as a ‘gimmick’ rooted in mere optics (Puniyani, 2019).

NAMASTE is both a consequence and reinforcement of that paternalistic project that covers up manual scavenging and normalizes it under a ‘Gandhian model’ (Chhachhar, 2025) of sanitation governance tying certain marginalized at the lowest rung of the caste ladder to sanitation work in name of ‘sacred duty’ and ‘karma-dharma logic of varnashram’ (Ramaswamy, 2005, p. 86). By framing sanitation workers as ‘sani-entrepreneurs’ or ‘sewer-entry professionals’, the state adopts a paternalistic gaze that effectively infantilizes a marginalized group historically burdened by the inhumane repercussions of practice of manual

scavenging. While Gandhi's logic purportedly aimed to universalize sanitation work, it simultaneously rendered such labour optional for the upper castes while cementing it as a 'sacred' and 'noble' duty for the marginalized - a 'spiritual necessity to wash away the sins of a previous birth'. This phenomenon is not a contemporary political anomaly but can be traced back to the Gandhian project of envisioning the 'Ideal Bhangi' (Ramaswamy, 2005, p. 89).

The 'sanipreneur' initiative represents a contemporary manifestation of such exploitative and performative perception of dignity that fundamentally fails to bridge the existing dignity deficit but instead widens it. True dignity for discriminated and exploited communities at the margins implies the freedom to exist without being tethered to any caste-based and historically imposed occupation, even if the work is formalized, mechanized and regulated on paper. It requires the substantive presence of social mobility and the unencumbered choice of livelihood and not the 'social empowerment' model following neo-liberal market mechanisms while advocating a sanitation-based entrepreneurship for members of these communities. Instead, the policy omits the social context of human dignity of oppressed and discriminated communities that are systematically denied their right to dignity and right to choose one's vocation freely due to pervasive caste inequality, 'untouchability based economic discrimination' (Thorat, 2025, p. 185) while simultaneously appearing benevolent in creating 'alternatives' like turning workers into private contractors and entrepreneurs. Thus, it does away with a model of independent or a caste-liberated hiring process in urban local bodies rather considers turning existing pool of those engaged in manual scavenging to become are collectivized into self-help groups, become 'sanipreneurs' by 'empowering them to run sanitation enterprises' (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, p. 5-6, and 22).

2.2 Oppression of caste and contractualization

As discussed earlier, while the de jure position does not afford absolute abolition of hazardous cleaning, and providing partial justification for manual entry into sewers and septic tanks under PEMSAR 2013 and further diluted prohibition due to policy interventions, the de facto situation produces a reality far from even such conditional prohibition. Caste inequality is reproduced in urban India through the

corrupt nexus of contractualization and caste (Sharma, 2025). The proliferation of private contracting of casual labour for septic tank cleaning by households, commercial enterprises, and the systemic shift toward informalization and contractualization within urban local bodies exacerbate caste inequality for those engaged in sewer work, who are predominantly drawn from intergenerationally marginalized communities. This rising contractualization functions as a mechanism of state distancing from its responsibility, where the legal and financial liabilities of hazardous cleaning are outsourced to private entities that operate with minimal oversight. Replacing secure public employment with precarious, short-term contracts, authorities like Jal Boards effectively formalize a regime of disposable marginalized workers stripped off their rights and institutional protections working routinely in acutely hazardous and undignified conditions. Similar structural reliance on a flexible, caste coded workforce through ‘formalization’ of this contractual mode of sanitation governance is observed in NAMASTE. Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche call this ‘re-entrenching of identity based social oppression’ in a neo-liberal social order as the process of ‘conjugated oppression’ (Shah et al., 2018, p. 21) affecting workers at the margins due to the ‘enduring nature of caste discrimination in the economic sphere’. This reinforces and results in the inseparability of caste-immobilized class and market having grave implications on the right to dignity and a dignified livelihood of those engaged in the urban sanitation supply chain.

Notably, this problem of ‘dignity deficit’ is not a peculiar attribute of the scheme in question but a symptom across governmental ‘reforms’ of the practice. Critics such as Wankhede & Kahle (2018), Khanna (2019) and Koonan (2021) have been underscoring the same issue in PEMS Act 2013. Although Article 17 explicitly abolishes untouchability and practices derived from it in any form (Constitution of India, 1950, art. 17), the persistence of manual scavenging reveals how this practice remains a fundamental manifestation of caste-based oppression within the sanitation labour governance. Sanitation work is deeply rooted in the historical structures of untouchability, exclusion and inequality and continues to function as a caste ordained practice that imposes distinct gendered roles - hazardous and undignified manual cleaning of sewer and septic tank for Dalit men and manual scavenging of dry latrines and public toilets for Dalit women. The perpetuation of

the neo-liberal market mechanisms manifesting as contractualization coupled with undignified labour, the state fails to uphold constitutional promises of dignity instead permitting the continued iniquitous treatment and exploitation of intergenerationally marginalized communities. Though the policy adopts an ‘integrated approach of convergence of the programmes for safety and dignity of sanitation workers’ (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, p. 8), it follows an approach that in effect prioritizes safety over dignity of workers.

3 Discussion

3.1 The problems with ‘Sanipreneurship’ model of governance

Legal Formalization of Caste based Labour and Symptoms of Techno-solutionism

In 2019, the Delhi government adopted a similar patronizing stance while launching a fleet of 200 vehicles fitted with sewer-cleaning machines. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal through his public rhetoric took part in shifting the burden of safety onto the workers themselves, urging workers not to be ‘careless’ while announcing the distribution of ‘free safety gear’(Ahmad, 2021). His stance effectively reframed systemic infrastructure failures as matters of individual negligence. Such paternalistic plea suggested that sewer deaths are primarily a result of worker behaviour rather than the state's failure to provide a full mechanization, a legally compliant sewerage infrastructure and an abolitionist framework instead of one that links caste and sanitation labour. By focusing on safety gear as a gift from the government, the administration obscures the technological injustice where such equipment is often insufficient for the actual physical conditions of Delhi's narrow sewer networks. Such discourse of ‘carelessness’ allows the state to maintain a performance of concern while simultaneously giving up accountability for the material realities of caste-based labour. The patronizing attitude was also found in the framing the allotment of cleaning machines as a form of social empowerment when this policy results in a policy-based formalization of caste roles. By specifically targeting the families of sanitation workers for machine ownership the state reinforces the intergenerational link between the Valmiki community and the city's waste, thereby, ensuring that the identity of the worker remains tethered to their caste. This initiative marked a transition to the ‘sanipreneur’ model - a

sanitation based entrepreneurship model for empowerment of those engaged in manual scavenging.

Furthermore, in 2019, the Government of India issued an advisory to all states to constitute 'Emergency Response Sanitation Units (ERSU). The advisory issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs was meant to deal with 'extreme situations when a sewer gets blocked and no mechanical equipment can offset human intervention causing overflow of sewage onto roads and public spaces exposes citizens to serious health hazard' and to solve this public health crisis, it recommends establishing such ERSUs. It further remarks 'as is noted from practices across the world, trained sanitation workers, termed sewer-men, are employed to undertake repairs and physical removal of chokes from public sewers and septic tanks on such rare occasions when doing so lies beyond the capability of machines'(Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2019, pp. 3-4).

To further elucidate the point, the NAMASTE policy guidelines, borrowing key terminologies and ideas from the 2019 ERUSU guidelines, introduce a structured 'ecosystem' designed to 'professionalize and regulate' sanitation work through specific roles and institutions. At its base are Sewer and Septic Tank Workers(SSWs), a broad category of labourers engaged in cleaning operations across both public and private sectors. Workers on the payroll of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), parastatals (like Jal boards, cantonment boards, public work department, development authorities, etc), or those engaged through private contractors and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) involved in emptying septic tanks or maintaining sewerage networks (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, p. 6). Within this group, the policy identifies Sewer Entry Professionals (SEPs) as a specialized, certified subset authorized to perform manual entry under strict safety protocols, only in exceptional cases. These services are delivered through Private Sanitation Service Organizations(PSSOs), which are licensed private entities or 'sanipreneur' enterprises empanelled to manage sanitation contracts (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023, pp. 3-4). The entire framework is overseen by Sanitation Response Units (SRUs) or Emergency Sanitation Response Units (ERSUs) which are state-mandated bodies at the local level that act as centralized hubs for regulating private contractors, managing mechanized equipment, and enforcing safety standards to prevent fatalities. This governmental

body not only regulates PSSOs but also authorizes the entry of SEPs into sewers and septic tanks.

However, the problem with such a functionalist approach is that it treats the problem from a ‘techno-solutionist’ (Morozov, 2013) standpoint and uses words like ‘systemizing sewer entry’, ‘sewer entry professionals’ and ‘sewer-men’ justifying the use of such terms as it is also used in ‘practices across the world’ (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2019, p. 10) while failing to grasp the desensitized, decontextualized and problematic manner of such phrases in a policy document within India where members of discriminated and marginalized castes have been historically forced into manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning of sewage, the practice perpetuates and state is found to be invisibilizing and normalizing it often (Karan, 2025).

While technological solutions are required to combat the issue, the complexity of the social practice of manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning also requires addressing and resolving the ‘technological injustice’ in the form of failure of specialized and cost-effective innovations, contractual mode of mechanization in urban local bodies like DJB, absence of large scale penetration and scaling of mechanization, regulation and maintenance of dilapidated and legally non-complaint sewerage networks, inter alia. However, the techno-solutionist approach attempts to apply a seemingly innocuous ‘techno-fix’ by avoiding the more difficult social engineering of decoupling caste from sanitation and overlooking the resolution of technological injustices perpetuating the practice. Government data confirms that majorities of sewer and septic tank workers are from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, reflecting deep socio-economic structures that underlie sanitation labour in India (“67% of sanitation workers are from SC community: Govt data”, 2024). India struggles with some especially challenging aspects of its sanitation system like the caste character of the practice (Human Rights Watch, 2014) that has in effect sustained the extremely dehumanizing nature of the practice. Within its graded hierarchy, the caste system assigns all sanitation jobs deemed ‘menial’ to the lowest castes. It applies the notion of ritual purity and impurity which extends beyond physical conditions of dirt; it is also a social construct (Sakthivel et al., 2019).

3.2 Privatization of Risk

The ‘sanipreneur’ paradigm is fundamentally based in the privatization of risk and the relinquishing of state accountability through contractualization. While shifting the identity from a sanitation worker to an entrepreneur, the scheme seemingly also overlooks the shift of accountability from the state to private contractual arrangements. Simultaneously, the responsibility of abolition of ‘hazardous cleaning’ of sewage is also indirectly shifted onto the intergenerationally marginalized workers themselves. In a socially just policy of occupational health and safety, and as per the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the hierarchy of controls which offers a structured approach to identifying and applying controls, prioritized by effectiveness, to safeguard workers’ health and safety, places the reliance first and foremost at the elimination and substitution of the hazards, applying engineering and administrative controls to the risk and at last, it applies the least effective mechanism - personal protective equipment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). In India, the sanitation infrastructural governance in a cultural climate of caste is not fit to rely upon PPE and safety equipment for its effective enforcement. It is not only lowest in efficiency as it puts the entire onus on the worker but is practically and socially inexpedient without the prerequisite sanitation infrastructural and societal transformation.

Functional lens to ‘Emergency’ versus legal definition in Manual Scavenging Rules, 2013

The structural silence within the NAMASTE policy regarding a precise or itemized definition of an emergency situation reflects a profound dignity deficit at the core of its framework. The actual technical definition of ‘exceptional circumstances’ (such as removing concrete obstructions or inter-linking new sewer lines after duly emptying the sewers or pits of sewage) is found in Rule 3 of the Manual Scavenging Rules, 2013. The drafting members of the NAMASTE policy assumes this list as a prerequisite and did not even care to reproduce it. This not only lends to ambiguity but could result in misuse of the discretionary powers of the executive apparatus responsible for its implementation, to determine what constitutes an ‘emergency’ such as CEO of a responsible sanitation authority. Under Rule 3 of the

Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Rules, 2013, manual cleaning is generally prohibited except in five specific circumstances - 'removal of obstructions, inter-linking sewer mains, pump set maintenance, structural repairs, absolute necessity'. As per Rule 3(2), for circumstances involving pump set removal (3) and structural repairs (4), it is a mandatory legal prerequisite that the sewage is totally emptied with the aid of cleaning devices before a person is allowed to enter the sewer. Additionally, in all these exceptional cases, the employer must provide the worker with the full range of prescribed protective gear and safety devices (Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Rules, 2013, r. 3).

By deferring to the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013 and Rule 3 of Manual Scavenging Rules, 2013 for the legal definition of exceptional circumstances, the guidelines operate as a vague implementation document. This is evident in the use of emergency as a functional label through the creation of Emergency Response Sanitation Units and the 14420 helpline, which categorize emergencies merely by the urgency of a service request rather than the nature of the hazard. Furthermore, the policy relies on a negative definition of emergency where manual entry is sanctioned only when a situation is deemed beyond the capability of machines.

Hence, such policy void masks a continued reliance on the bodies of intergenerationally marginalized workers, thereby, entrenching the legal formalization of caste-based labour by 'systemizing human entry' under a vague emergency banner without explicitly delineating even the specific physical conditions to justify such a life-threatening risk, in accordance with the 'conditional prohibition' (Wankhede, 2020) under Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Shomona Khanna, academician and advocate in Safai Karamchari Andolan case calls the 1993 Act 'stillborn' and the 2013 Act compromised due to 'ambiguous illegality of the practice being now watered down with exemptions, exceptions and provisos' (Khanna, 2019, pp. 315-316), thereby, allowing entry of humans into sewers and septic tanks due to the diluted definition of 'hazardous cleaning' (Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, § 2(d)).

4 Field Reflections: Qualitative Insights from the Political Field of Delhi and Noida

4.1 No dignity in life and in death

A DJB field assistant contractually engaged for acting on complaints of sewer overflowing recollected during interview that remarks such as ‘this work is of a bhangi’ are often made to them by service seekers, referring to a dalit sub-caste that has been traditionally discriminated by upper castes and kept bound in allocation of sanitation work inter-generationally (anonymous sanitation worker, personal communication, November 4, 2024). As observed during shadowing and later interviewing DJB workers on work in the field, the workers are forced to come into contact with faecal matter in narrow lanes where no machines reach while using the rudimentary tools like khappachi (long split bamboo sticks), sutli (thread to tie the sticks when they break while removing blockages from the sewer), gaiti (two-sided hammer to open the lid/door of the sewer), kochi/fawda (a long-handled axe to collect silt) and chabi (metal rod with curved end used to open heavy sewer lids with fulcrum). These tools are sanctioned by the DJB itself to workers who themselves split the bamboo sticks and carry them on a bicycle or motorcycle to sewers from where a complaint is received. Such rudimentary tools are unable to safeguard the dignity and health of worker as they cannot avoid direct manual contact with sewage and faecal sludge as required by the definition of cleaning devices under Section 2(1) (b) of the MS Rules 2013. This is a prime example of ‘technological injustice’ even after mechanization explained earlier. Equipment like robotic cleaners has been much famed, but actual deployment is limited outside a few pilot cities. Innovations like ‘bandicoot-mini’ acquired in Kerala and Leh is a step forward in this direction, however, what remains crucial is their affordability and scaling up as they are considered too costly by urban local bodies (Praveen, 2024). Up until 2021, the official nomenclature for the workers in the Delhi Jal Board was ‘sewer gang beldars’ which was re-designated in an attempt to ‘dignify’ the job profile to ‘field assistants’ (Delhi Jal Board, 2021). The same attempt to dignify and formalize the nomenclature addressing contractual workers is seen in the NAMASTE deploying terms like ‘Sewer entry professionals’ and ‘Sanipreneurs’, however, such superficial motivations have shown to do little for safeguarding the dignity of workers on the ground.

In August 2025, a field visit in an incident where two workers died while cleaning a sewage pumping station unsupervised, where the entire city's sewer flows for interception and filtration in Noida Authority(Jal) ("Sewer tank deaths: Noida authority acts against three officials", 2025) revealed that there are attempts to pressurize the family to sign a 'razinama', a compromise agreement stating that victims' families are deciding to settle the matter through monetary compensation and would not in future take any legal action. Under pressure, the agreement was signed by heirs of the deceased, however, afterwards the Investigating Officer did file an FIR (anonymous relative of deceased worker, personal communication, September 18, 2025). This incident demonstrates how justice and rights operate under the elusive nature of accountability subjected to the dynamics of caste, contractualization, and power relations between accused and victims due to.

In a similar incident on November 4, 2024, a 24-year-old contractual security guard cum sanitation worker employed by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) was found dead inside a 21-foot-deep drain chamber in Anand Vihar (Express News Service, 2024). The police official interviewed took part in victim blaming and remarked with an abusive word to the brother of the victim in front of the fact-finding team, "why did he, (curse word) enter without supervision" (anonymous law enforcement officer, personal communication, November 6, 2024), even when the rule under Section (3) (a) and (c) of PEMSAR Rules, 2013 requiring attendance of three employees including one supervisor at hazardous sites and inspection to determine hazardous atmosphere prior to cleaning was flouted openly.

This was a case that occurred at an interceptor chamber site where hazardous manual cleaning without any safety equipment or cleaning devices place during filtration of sewage and blackwater from the Yamuna River and the brother of the victim who reached the site of incident found extremely foul air making it tough to breathe in the interceptor chamber. The police official had yet not added offences under Section 7 and Section 9 of PEMSAR Act related to hazardous cleaning citing the preliminary nature of the investigation. Such lack of awareness and inhumane attitude to the workers' family who had lost their family member, reflects the critical need for training and sensitization of police officials.

When two migrant labourers lost their lives when asked to clean the household's septic chamber, a private residence in Noida ("Two sanitation workers die while

cleaning sewage shaft at Noida house”, 2024), the police officers interviewed by the fact-finding team reflected a profound indifference characteristic of both law enforcement and society in general. One sub-inspector referred to the fatalities of the two workers as ‘ittefaqiya,’ suggesting that their deaths were merely coincidental, despite being cognizant that manual scavenging is illegal. This choice of language also suggested a defensive stance qua the owner's liability for the negligence that led to the deaths of the two persons (anonymous law enforcement officer, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

During personal interviews with neighbours of household and the family of the deceased workers where two workers died in a private septic chamber in Old Jasola Village, Sarita Vihar on May 2024 (Express News Service, 2024), the fact-finding revealed that one of the workers had taken a private loan for owning a suction machine but the owner of household was not satisfied with the cleaning work and told workers to enter and remove the faecal sludge from the chamber manually. The workers dived inside the less than one-foot narrow opening of the septic chamber for fear of loss of wages, complying with the instructions and unaware of the dangers. The other worker went inside to rescue the first worker but succumbed to the gases and both men in their 40s lost their lives (anonymous law enforcement officer, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

Such incidents speak in amplitude about the structural failure in safeguarding the right to life with dignity of those engaged in manual scavenging of sewers and septic tanks under the lethal dynamics of caste and contractual mode of urban sanitation governance, despite ongoing solutions for mechanization. This reveals a perfunctory policy approach that prioritizes numerical targets (“66,961 sanitation workers validated under NAMASTE scheme, govt tells Parliament”, 2025) under a neo-liberal regime while the persistence of such primitive sanitation systems ensures that hazardous cleaning remains a burden on the lives and bodies of intergenerationally marginalized communities.

5 Conclusion

The NAMASTE framework is not entirely ill intended as it places renewed focus on mechanisation in the urban sanitation governance, which suffers from ‘technological injustice’ and deep complex nexus of caste and contractualization.

However, the larger problem lies in its approach which makes it a perfunctory policy reform failing to bridge the dignity deficit, but rather appears to be widening it. It prioritizes numerical targets and professionalized labels over the radical abolition of hazardous cleaning. By employing phrases such as ‘systemizing human entry’ and ‘motivated sewer entry professional’, the policy accepts the body of the marginalized worker as a permanent fixture of urban infrastructure. The core criticism of the NAMASTE framework lies in its reduction of a profound social crisis through its paternalistic treatment and a ‘techno-solutionist’ stance. The paternalistic gaze of the policy allows it to employ a clinical language insensitively decontextualized from the Indian reality of caste-based inequity and exploitation of communities engaged in such work. This approach offers a mere ‘techno-fix’ that bypasses the necessary social engineering required to decouple caste identity from sanitation labour.

Rather than resolving ‘technological injustice’ which manifests as a lack of specialized innovation for narrow urban lanes and a fragmented, contractual mode of mechanization, removing engineering hazards and non-maintenance of dilapidated and legally non-complaint sewerage networks, the policy subscribes to and reinforces the existing graded hierarchy under caste. Such selective decontextualization and clinical treatment continues to inform current political and policy discourse. In adopting such an approach, workers are turned into objects of policy rather than autonomous persons with the agency of determining their own occupations without the state's unsolicited influence, with the absolute freedom to negotiate their own vocational priorities and social futures, possibly in a different direction from what the caste system has ordained for them. A fair and just policy must move beyond techno-solutionism and paternalism by decoupling caste from labour by ensuring that the project of mechanization is not a tool for ‘empowerment’ under a model of sanitation-based entrepreneurship but an essential state mandate regulated completely by the state and not private entities or intermediaries benefitting from the exploitation of workers engaged in sewage work under the neo-liberal order. Furthermore, policies must envision urban local bodies or responsible sanitation authorities like Delhi Jal Board, Public Works Department, Delhi Cantonment Board, etc., to adhere to an abolitionist framework that would not ‘systemize’ sewer entry, make it safer or more professional but

would seek to eliminate it through a technologically just and efficient model of mechanization and by ensuring that sanitation work is free from contractualization and performative dignity. Only by removing the state's paternalistic and techno-solutionist gaze can policies move towards technologically just solutions to absolute annihilation of social practices like manual scavenging and restore the 'inherent dignity' inalienable to a human being.

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