

Beyond Cleanliness: A study of the working conditions and social security of village sanitation workers in Dindigul District

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Abstract

Sanitation workers are among the most essential yet least recognized contributors to public health and environmental sustainability. Their daily responsibilities include collecting and disposing of waste, cleaning streets and public spaces, maintaining drainage systems, and supporting sanitation infrastructure in rural communities. Despite their significant contribution to society, sanitation workers continue to face numerous occupational, economic, and social challenges. This study examines the welfare benefits, working conditions, and problems faced by village sanitation workers in Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu. The research adopts a mixed method approach and is based on primary data collected from 50 sanitation workers through structured questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal that sanitation workers encounter multiple challenges, including inadequate safety measures, occupational health risks, low wages, limited awareness of welfare schemes, and insufficient social security support. Although sanitation awareness and waste management practices have improved considerably due to government initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat Mission, the welfare and working conditions of sanitation workers require greater attention. The study concludes that comprehensive policy interventions, improved occupational safety standards, and enhanced welfare measures are essential for ensuring the dignity, health, and well-being of sanitation workers.

Keywords: Sanitation Workers, Occupational Health, Rural Development, Public Health, Welfare Schemes, Waste Management, Dindigul District.

INTRODUCTION

Sanitation is a fundamental requirement for public health, environmental protection, and sustainable development. In rural India, sanitation workers play a critical role in maintaining cleanliness and preventing the spread of diseases. They are responsible for collecting household waste, cleaning public roads and community spaces, managing drainage systems, and ensuring the proper disposal of solid and liquid waste. Their work contributes directly to creating healthier living conditions and improving the quality of life in rural communities. The importance of sanitation workers became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they continued to provide essential services despite facing significant health risks. Their contribution to maintaining public hygiene helped communities manage the spread of infectious diseases and ensured the continuity of essential sanitation services. Nevertheless, sanitation workers often remain invisible within society and receive limited recognition for their contributions.

The Government of India has implemented several initiatives aimed at improving sanitation and protecting sanitation workers. Notable among these are the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, and the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. While these initiatives have improved sanitation infrastructure and public awareness, many sanitation workers continue to experience unsafe working conditions, inadequate wages, health hazards, and social discrimination. In rural districts such as Dindigul, sanitation workers serve as the frontline workforce responsible for maintaining environmental cleanliness. However, little empirical research has been conducted to understand their occupational conditions, welfare benefits, and socio-economic challenges. This study seeks

to address this gap by examining the experiences of village sanitation workers in Dindigul District and assessing the effectiveness of existing welfare measures.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Village sanitation workers perform essential services that directly contribute to public health and environmental sustainability. Despite their importance, they continue to face a range of occupational, economic, and social challenges. Many workers perform their duties without adequate protective equipment such as gloves, masks, and boots, exposing them to serious health risks. Frequent contact with waste materials, contaminated water, and hazardous substances increases their vulnerability to respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, infections, and other occupational health problems. In addition to health related concerns, sanitation workers often experience low wages, irregular salary payments, limited employment security, and inadequate access to welfare schemes. Many workers are unaware of their legal rights and available government benefits. Furthermore, social stigma associated with sanitation work affects their social status and psychological well-being. These issues highlight the need for a comprehensive examination of the welfare benefits and challenges experienced by sanitation workers in Dindigul District.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyse the working conditions and occupational health risks faced by sanitation workers.
- To assess the awareness and utilization of welfare benefits and government schemes.
- To identify the major challenges affecting the quality of life of sanitation workers.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design using a mixed-method approach. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the working conditions and challenges faced by sanitation workers. The study was conducted in selected villages of Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu. A sample of 50 sanitation workers was selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from different categories of workers engaged in sanitation-related activities. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, personal interviews, and field observations. These methods enabled the researcher to gather detailed information regarding the respondents' socio-economic background, occupational experiences, health conditions, and awareness of welfare schemes. Secondary data were collected from government reports, policy documents, academic journals, books, and official publications related to sanitation and labour welfare. The collected data were analysed using percentage analysis and descriptive statistical techniques to identify trends and patterns.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents reveals that the majority of sanitation workers belong to the economically active age group. Among the 50 respondents surveyed, 66 percent were between 36 and 45 years of age, indicating that middle-aged individuals constitute the largest segment of the sanitation workforce. The predominance of this age group suggests that sanitation work often becomes a long-term occupation due to limited alternative employment opportunities.

Educational attainment among the respondents was relatively moderate. Nearly 64 percent had completed secondary education, while 20 percent had studied up to the higher secondary level. However, 16 percent reported having no formal education. The relatively low educational background of some workers may limit their employment opportunities and awareness of welfare schemes. The study found that 80 percent of respondents were married, indicating significant family responsibilities. The economic burden associated with supporting family members often compels sanitation workers to continue in demanding occupations despite poor working conditions and limited financial rewards. Regarding waste management practices, 60 percent of respondents reported that household waste is collected through municipal services, while 30 percent used garbage bins for waste disposal. Only a small proportion continued to rely on environmentally unsafe disposal

methods. These findings suggest that public awareness regarding proper waste management has improved considerably in rural areas.

A significant majority of respondents reported the availability of waste collection services and household dustbins. Approximately 80 percent indicated that waste is collected from their homes and that they maintain dustbins within their households. This reflects the positive impact of government sanitation initiatives and awareness campaigns. However, environmental challenges remain prevalent. An overwhelming 94 percent of respondents reported experiencing waterlogging problems in their localities. Poor drainage systems and inadequate infrastructure continue to create sanitation challenges and increase the risk of disease outbreaks.

The study further found that public toilet usage was evenly distributed among respondents, with 50 percent regularly using community toilets. Notably, all respondents expressed a preference for community toilets over open defecation, indicating a significant shift in sanitation attitudes and practices following government awareness programmes. Occupationally, 74 percent of respondents had less than five years of work experience, suggesting recent recruitment or workforce expansion in sanitation services. Furthermore, half of the respondents reported working more than six hours per day, highlighting the physically demanding nature of sanitation work.

Environmental awareness among sanitation workers appeared relatively high. Approximately 90 percent reported engaging in plastic recycling activities, reflecting growing awareness regarding environmental sustainability and waste management practices. Despite these positive developments, interviews revealed several persistent occupational challenges. Workers frequently reported inadequate access to personal protective equipment, exposure to hazardous waste, low wages, insufficient health insurance coverage, and limited awareness of welfare programmes. Many respondents expressed concerns regarding occupational health risks and the absence of regular medical check-ups.

The findings suggest that while sanitation infrastructure and public awareness have improved substantially, worker welfare and occupational safety have not advanced at the same pace. This imbalance highlights the need for targeted interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and overall well-being of sanitation workers.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed. First, local governments should ensure the regular supply of personal protective equipment, including gloves, masks, boots, and protective clothing. Second, periodic health examinations should be conducted to identify and prevent occupational illnesses among sanitation workers. Third, wage structures should be revised to ensure fair compensation and timely salary payments. Fourth, awareness programmes should be organized to educate workers about their rights, welfare schemes, and social security benefits. Fifth, greater investment should be made in mechanized cleaning equipment to reduce workers' exposure to hazardous environments. Finally, policymakers should strengthen social security measures by expanding access to health insurance, pension benefits, accident compensation, and other welfare programmes specifically designed for sanitation workers.

CONCLUSION

Village sanitation workers are indispensable to the maintenance of public health, environmental cleanliness, and rural development. Their efforts contribute significantly to preventing disease, improving sanitation standards, and enhancing community well-being. Despite their valuable contribution, sanitation workers continue to face numerous occupational, economic, and social challenges that adversely affect their quality of life. The findings of this study demonstrate that sanitation workers in Dindigul District face inadequate safety measures, health risks, low wages, and limited awareness of welfare benefits. Although government initiatives have improved sanitation infrastructure and public participation in waste management, substantial gaps remain in worker welfare and occupational protection.

Ensuring the dignity, safety, and well-being of sanitation workers requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving government agencies, local authorities, civil society organizations, and communities. Strengthening welfare schemes, improving occupational health standards, and recognizing the contributions of sanitation workers will not only improve their quality of life but also contribute to healthier, cleaner, and more sustainable rural communities.

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