

SWEPT ASIDE

**UNDERSTANDING THE MULTI-LAYERED BURDEN OF CONTRACTUALIZATION
AND CASTE IN URBAN SANITATION WORK:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN AHMEDABAD AND SURAT**



**CENTRE FOR LABOUR RESEARCH AND ACTION
SUPPORTED BY ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG – SOUTH ASIA
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Surat**

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Centre for Labour Research and Action

**Supported by
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung South Asia**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Foreword.....	4
Report highlights	6
Introduction	8
Research design and methodology.....	10
Understanding the labour and caste relations within urban sanitation and conservancy work	15
Legal and policy safeguards for sanitation and waste management workers	19
Profile of urban sanitation and waste management workers.....	25
Key findings	29
Increasing contractualization and privatization of municipal work	29
Wages and social security	33
Working conditions and worker health and safety.....	37
Violation of workers' rights and freedom of association	43
Gendered dimensions.....	46
Living conditions in the city.....	48
Socio-economic vulnerability and caste discrimination	49
The Warasdar system	52
Technological shifts.....	55
Discussion and way forward	57
Annexures	62
References.....	69

(i) Abbreviations

AMC - Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation

CLRA - Centre for Labour Research and Action

EPF – Employees' Provident Fund

ERSU – Emergency Response Sanitation Unit

IEC – Information, Education and Communication

ILO - International Labour Organisation

MoHUA – Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

MoSJE - Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment

NGO - Non-governmental Organization

NSDC – National Skill Development Council

PPE – Personal Protective Equipment

RWA - Resident Welfare Association

SBM – Swachh Bharat Mission

SEP - Sewer Entry Professionals

SRMS - Self Employment Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers

SMC - Surat Municipal Corporation

SOP – Standard Operating Procedure

SWM – Solid Waste Management

ULB – Urban Local Body

(ii) List of tables

Table 1 - City profiles.....	11
Table 2: Participants - In-Depth Interviews.....	12
Figure 1: Participants - In-Depth Interviews.....	12
Figure 2: Participant Profile - In-Depth Interviews.....	13
Table 3: Participants - Focus Group Discussions.....	14
Figure 3: Barriers to social protection for sanitation workers - Centre for Policy Research.....	19
Figure 4: Figure depicting urban sanitation workers.....	25
Figure 5: An assessment of number of workers.....	27
Graph 1: Category wise comparison of wages.....	34

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Photos: Minakshi Ambedkar

FOREWORD

Sanitation and waste management work in India is largely carried out by individuals considered to be at the lowest end of the caste hierarchy, under extremely dehumanizing conditions. Over the years, increasing privatization has instituted significant changes to this sector, posing newer challenges for workers. In addition to the existing workers from Scheduled Caste communities, there has been a growing influx of tribal workers into waste management. These workers face challenges and discrimination similar to those of the workers who have historically been engaged in this work. These issues get enhanced with the non-enforcement of existing labour laws, as the workers are embroiled in layers of sub-contracting. While technically they are municipal workers providing an essential service, they are denied the rights and benefits of regular municipal employees, because of the contractualization of the workforce.

In India's caste-based social order, practices involving waste are pushed upon certain communities historically considered "untouchables" and deemed as 'hereditary occupations.' This caste-based division of labour perpetuates systemic violence. This is marked by the active collusion of the Indian social order characterised by caste with the state which primarily represents the interests of dominant castes. The existence of manual scavenging to this day, banned by law but still practised, is a direct consequence of the non-enforcement of existing laws; resulting in a painfully slow pace of deployment of technology to replace as well as eliminate the possibility of human agency. Consequently, violence over the bodies of those from historically oppressed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes continues with impunity.

The assumption that the advent of capitalism would transform a caste-mediated social order into a market/technology mediated system has not been proved true, by and large. Rather we find that the neo-liberal capitalist system has found a staunch ally in the 'republic of caste;' making it far easier to suppress the value of labour much below what a capitalist market would estimate. This is easy to understand, because in a caste-based order, the value of human beings is not based on the cost of reproduction of labour; but on their hereditary location in the purity and pollution continuum. The vulnerability of the oppressed castes (especially of the communities engaged in manual scavenging and waste disposal) results in the social order itself ensuring the non-enforcement of labour laws and policies. This study reveals an alarming reality that even government contractual workers often do not receive minimum wages, suggesting that the condition of informal and casual workers is even more precarious. The bane of a caste-based social order is also the fragmentation of society into multiple castes and jatis, each of which exists as endogamous social units with their hierarchical status determining their relations with other jatis. Even large number of trade unions become oblivious of this reality; and the union leadership, their priorities and their actions are shaped by their caste location, which has primarily been locations of privilege.

By terming workers as "waste warriors", the state tries to hide their identity and working conditions, and does little to address the intergenerational oppression. At a time when discussions about reparations for historical injustices are needed, they remain absent from public and political discourse. We need to think about a long-term inclusive plan for future generations, however, there is a lack of political will towards

that. It is clear that it is important for trade unions to have a sharp analysis of the caste locations of its labour constituencies and its leadership; only this can help the workers' organizations to develop an anti-caste mindset and ideology. Besides class-based organising, it would be important to start with organizing along oppressed caste lines as the nature of the work is intrinsically tied to caste. This has to be universally acknowledged by labour movements, and work towards reclaiming the dignity and personhood of sanitation workers. Organisations working with *safai karamcharis* and waste management workers across India must establish a network of solidarity to forge a collective fight for equal rights. The focus should also be on ending certain dehumanizing caste-based practices while ensuring rehabilitation and social integration of affected workers. This study which highlights the perspectives of workers engaged in sanitation labour in urban Gujarat is an important step in that direction.

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

This report is based on the findings from a qualitative study conducted through interviews and Focus Group Discussions with 93 workers, majorly belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) communities such as Valmiki, Nadia, and Mahar. It captures the narratives and perspectives of workers - permanent, contractual, and self-employed - regarding their socioeconomic conditions, contract system, and caste-based nature of the work.

Urban Local Bodies are increasingly contracting out and privatizing sanitation work, leading to reduced state accountability towards labour rights, job insecurity, declining wages, and access to social security. There is no fixed mandate or protocols regarding contractualization and proper documentation of workers and contracts is not maintained. The study highlights how systemic invisibility and dearth of



comprehensive data is a characteristic of the urban sanitation workforce, also pointing towards growing informality. The lack of data on workers poses challenges in linking them to entitlements and alternative livelihoods.

The study also sheds light on the wage disparities between contractual and permanent workforce, wherein contract workers were found to be paid less than the minimum wages, often 1/4th of what permanent workers receive. Further, waste pickers, though an important part of the waste value chain, are invisibilized from the discourse because of the “self-employed” status accorded to their work. Their earnings have depleted further in the last few years because of the privatized door-to-door waste collection system. Barring permanent municipal workers, social security is absent for all other categories of workers.

Enforcement of health and safety standards is negligible, even for permanent workers. There are mandates in place for mechanization of certain work such as machine hole cleaning, however, implementation is severely deficient. The quality of personal protective equipment provided to workers is of inferior quality making it difficult to work with. Already engaging in risky work, these workers continue working even during extreme weather events such as heatwaves and heavy rains. Overtimes are not compensated, and there is a lack of accountability towards the health of the workers, especially contractual, daily-wage, and informal self-employed workers. Barring permanent workers, all other categories are unorganized, despite

few attempts in the past in both the cities. Waste pickers are troubled by ULB officials through threats of eviction from sorting spaces and confiscation of segregated material. Caste discrimination is rampant, not just through practicing untouchability but through systemically restricting the promotion of Valmiki workers to supervisory positions. Permanent hirings are only done through the *Warasadar* system, by hiring the next of kin of workers after death or injury. Lack of education opportunities and livelihood alternatives perpetuate the caste-based nature of this work.

At the end, the report also provides suggestions which were mostly provided by workers and activists during the study and a dissemination event wherein the findings were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Invisibilization of labor is prevalent in various spheres of our economic and personal life, but takes on a grotesque shape when it comes to the work of keeping a city clean. In our bustling Indian urban landscapes, a section of society works tirelessly to ensure that our public realm remains clean and functional. However, despite scholarly and civil society engagement, their work and realities remain invisible to the general public. These workers remain ignored and undervalued, despite being key actors in the work of safeguarding public health and the conditions necessary for economic life to continue unhindered in the city.

Sanitation and waste management have become the most critical and pressing issues of our time, given their importance in maintaining public health. The increase in production and consumption and growing urbanization exacerbates this issue. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), around 1% of the urban workforce is engaged in work related to handling solid waste. In India, the issue gets compounded under the Brahmanical social order whereby laborious work, especially that which is considered ‘dirty,’ has been historically pushed upon oppressed castes. The same systems persist even today, as caste oppression is turned into waged “occupations” under modern systems (Majumdar & Shruti, 2021). By valorizing the work and only talking about its utility to the general populace, the societal and governance systems ensure that the caste system on which this labor is built is obfuscated.

Some studies indicate that there are around 50 lakh sanitation workers in India, out of which around 20 lakhs engage in high-risk activities such as cleaning septic tanks and sewers (Gupta, 2022; Dalberg, 2017). However, as per government data, there were only 63,246 manual scavengers as of March 2020 based on a survey in 18 states, which was mentioned by activists to be gross underrepresentation (Paliath, 2021). Workers engaged in the work of cleanliness are the oft-ignored actors working and living under precarious conditions without recognition and in violation of their labor and human rights. For instance, the work of manual scavenging, i.e., the removal of human waste from dry toilets, is performed by workers from the lowest in the hierarchy amongst the Scheduled Castes. Their condition is interlinked with poverty, which has close ties with the caste system in India, considering factors such as the lack of landholding of those from oppressed castes. According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011 around 1.8 lakh households in India rely on manual scavenging as a source of income, despite it being outlawed. Teltumbde (2014) emphasized how the Government of India’s country-wide “Swachh Bharat Mission” will merely remain rhetoric unless caste culture and ethos are eradicated. The responsibility of sanitation and waste work is relegated to certain castes, through stigmatizing such work as “unclean” and treating those oppressed caste workers performing it as “untouchable.” He astutely argues that a few workers from a particular community which has historically held the burden of the work of cleanliness cannot be responsible for the waste generated by a large population of 1.3 billion people in India. However, instead of finding a way forward within the state apparatus, Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) have taken the path of privatizing or contracting out this work, severely impacting the workers. While waste pickers have always been in the informal realm, even workers hired by the ULBs are increasingly contract-based under neoliberal urban governance.

Through centering the narrative and voices of workers, this qualitative study aims to provide a view into the socioeconomic conditions of sanitation workers - permanent, contractual, and self-employed in Ahmedabad and Surat, two major cities in Gujarat. It is imperative to understand the working conditions

and life course of these categories of workers together, as often the informal workers' contributions towards the running of the urban cleanliness work gets ignored. Of specific importance is understanding workers' perspective regarding the impact of contractualization and privatization on their daily lives and struggles, including the increasing health hazards and social stigma they face. The study also aimed to understand the contradictions between the demand for permanent jobs with the municipal corporation, and the demand for eradication of caste-based labor in the context of sanitation work.

Through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary research, this report aims to shed light on the changing nature of urban conservancy and sanitation work in urban Gujarat; and the impact on workers because of that transformation. It reflects on how the precarity of livelihood under these shifting urban governance systems affects their labor rights and welfare. Especially understanding the intersection of caste and labor in shaping their experiences, this report will shed light on the systemic inequalities faced by the workers along with their aspirations for the future, revealing the “human” and the “social” behind what it takes to keep urban Gujarat functional. This report hopes to add to the discussion on improving the dignity, safety, and economic position of the workers, along with shedding light on the perspectives pertaining to de-casteification of the workforce.

The report is divided into seven sections. The next section looks at the methodology undertaken by the research team, followed by a literature review on interlinkage between caste, urban sanitation work and contractualization. This is followed by understanding the legal and policy safeguards for sanitation workers and waste pickers and asking the question whether this work can be contractualized. After this, a profile of workers in Ahmedabad and Surat is presented. Chapter 6 looks at the key findings of the study in depth, and the report concludes with a discussion and way forward.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Given that multiple groups are working in the sanitation and waste management sector, it is important to understand the diverse perspectives and experiences to get a comprehensive picture of the political economy of sanitation and waste management under specific local contexts. It is hoped that bringing together all the groups of workers engaged in sanitation work will also promote collectivization as some of the groups have a history of organizing for their demands. The focus of the research is on understanding the working conditions of sanitation and waste management workers in Ahmedabad and Surat within the context of the move towards privatization and contractualization of municipal services in urban areas. Using mixed qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of secondary data and reports, the study aims to understand these emerging systems of sanitation and waste management, working conditions, and the demands of the workers. The study will draw upon theoretical frameworks of caste and labor relations and informality, along with empirical data and insights to connect the study to the grounded experiences of the workers.

Research question: Understanding the labor and caste relations that guide the sanitation and waste management systems in Ahmedabad and Surat, and the impact of shifts in urban governance systems.

Objectives:

- Analyze the caste composition and unionization status of the workforce engaged in different categories of sanitation and waste management work in Surat and Ahmedabad;
- Understand the challenges faced by the workers and the factors that lead to them;
- Document the demands and aspirations of the worker groups;
- Initiate discussion on key themes such as working conditions and labor rights, human rights and dignity, and caste discrimination, under the current sanitation and waste management system
- Discuss the way forward through multi-stakeholder dialogues concerning systemic and policy-level changes to ensure the dignity of work. This includes demand for fair wages, equal pay for equal work, social security, regularization of the workforce, prioritizing health and safety of workers, and recognition of informal workers.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to reach out to participants through organizations and activists already working with sanitation and waste collection workers in Ahmedabad and Surat. Category of work, nature of employment contract, caste, and gender were kept in mind while reaching out to participants. The team held initial meetings with the workers to introduce the scope and intent of the study, along with discussing the risks of participants engaging in the study. After receiving their informed consent, the team conducted eight FGDs and 29 in-depth interviews of workers across Ahmedabad and Surat, reaching 93 workers in the process. Apart from this, eight interviews were conducted with key informants including activists and municipal officials to gain their perspective.

The tools used for the research included separate interview guides for workers, activists, and government officials. The conversations were recorded, with consent, and later replicated into detailed transcripts for analysis. The conversations were focused on deriving an understanding of the contractualization system, the emergence of private companies directly receiving tenders from the urban local body, and workers' opinions of the intersection of labor and caste relations, apart from talking about their working conditions. Note-taking was employed, especially during informal meetings and field observations, and on occasions wherein some workers did not consent to be recorded. Thereafter a thematic analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken to bucket the responses under various themes and issues. We ensured that the voices and narratives of the workers were not diluted in the process of analysis. The key findings from the study have been thematically divided into (i) perceptions on increasing contractualization and privatization of municipal work, (ii) disparities in wages and social security, working conditions and worker health and safety, (iii) perceptions on violation of workers' rights and freedom of association, (iv) gendered dimensions of the work, (v) living conditions in the city, (vi) socio-economic vulnerabilities and caste discrimination, (vii) perception on the *Warasdar* system, and (viii) technological shifts and just transition.

Using a qualitative approach for action research provides an opportunity to explore deep insights from participants, capturing the nuances and contradictions of their lived experiences, which is essential while moving towards any intervention. It enables the researchers and participants to sit together, deliberate and discuss to identify issues and suggest relevant interventions rooted in their contexts. CLRA envisions this study as a step towards the collectivization of sanitation and waste management workers in Gujarat to strengthen advocacy efforts.

City profiles

	Ahmedabad	Surat
Area in square kilometers (sq. km.)	466	462
Population	Over 63 lakhs	Over 60 lakhs
Population Density (per sq. km.)	Approximately 13,500	Approximately 13,781
Decadal Growth Rate (between 2001 and 2011)	Approximately 23%	Approximately 55.29%
Zones	7	8
Wards	48	29
ULB	Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC)	Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC)

Table 1: City Profiles

Research participants

In-depth interviews

An interview guide (with separate question sets based on the category of work) was used for conducting interviews with workers across categories in Ahmedabad and Surat. Key details pertaining to the workers' profiles have been tabulated below.

Work category	Male	Female	Total
Safai Kamdars - Permanent	3	3	6
Safai Kamdars (Street Sweepers) - Contract	3	0	3
Machine Hole Worker - Permanent	1	0	1
Machine Hole Worker - Contract	2	0	2
Toilet Cleaners	2	0	2
Waste Pickers - Self employed	0	12	12
Scrap dealer	0	1	1
Private Cleaners	1	1	
Total	12	17	29

Table 2: Participants - In-Depth Interviews

Participant profile

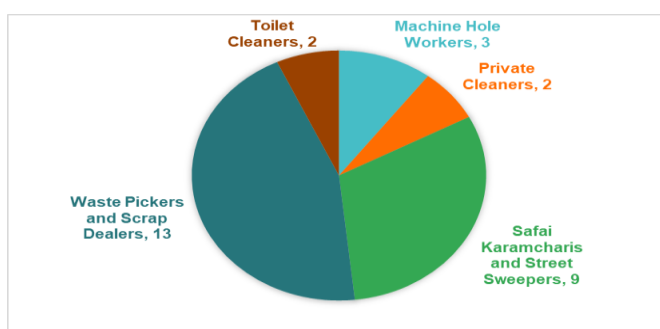


Figure 1: Participants - In-Depth Interviews



Figure 2: Participants Profile - In-Depth Interviews

Seven FGDs were conducted across work categories and employment status, in both cities. Details pertaining to FGD participants have been added below:

Location	Work category	Caste	Number of participants	Women participants	Permanent	Contract	Self-employed / daily wage / informal
Ahmedabad	Machine Hole workers	Valmiki (SC) ¹	9	0	6	3	0
	Street sweepers, waste pickers, private complex cleaners	Valmiki (SC)	8	4	0	4	4
	AMC Safai Kamdars	Valmiki (SC)	6	2	6	0	0
	Waste Pickers	Nadia (SC) ²	10	10	0	0	10
Surat	Street Sweepers - Day	Mixed - SC, OBC, General	8	8	8	0	0
	Street Sweepers - Night	Mahar (SC) ³	10	9	0	10	0
	Waste Pickers	Mahar (SC)	6	6	0	0	6

¹ Valmikis are a Scheduled Caste community associated with the profession of sanitation and cleaning, particularly in the context of sweeping streets and cleaning latrines. Faced significant social discrimination but has also been active in movements seeking better social and economic conditions

² The Nadia (Hadi) community is recognized as a Scheduled Caste (SC) in Gujarat. They have traditionally been involved in occupations like manual labor, sanitation work.

³ Mahars are a Scheduled Caste community with significant populations in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Historically, the Mahars were considered "untouchables" and were subjected to various forms of social and economic discrimination. In Gujarat, the community is often associated with occupations such as manual labor and sanitation work.

Location	Work category	Caste	Number of participants	Women participants	Permanent	Contract	Self-employed / daily wage / informal
	Waste Pickers	Mahar (SC)	7	7	0	0	7
Total			64	46	20	17	27

Table 3: Participants - Focus Group Discussions

Limitations and challenges

While CLRA has been working with informal sector workers on their rights and entitlements for over two decades, sanitation work is a new area for CLRA. This posed few difficulties in reaching out to workers across categories, although efforts were made to reach out through existing organizations and activists working in this domain. The team also faced challenges in reaching out to workers at their workspaces, especially when AMC officials were present. At public toilets, the team was outrightly denied the opportunity to speak to workers on various occasions. Some of the permanent *safai kamdars* were interviewed after taking permission from AMC officials. This might have affected certain responses by workers. Thus, most of the interviews and FGDs took place at the *bastis* of workers. At the end, the categories of work were limited to *safai kamdars*, machine hole workers, cleaning staff at private complexes, toilet cleaning workers, and waste pickers. The precarious nature of work and working hours made it challenging to request workers to sit for longer interviews, however, those who agreed were willing to give time and share valuable insights.

UNDERSTANDING THE LABOR AND CASTE RELATIONS WITHIN URBAN SANITATION AND CONSERVANCY WORK IN INDIA

BR Ambedkar's essay on 'Untouchability and Lawlessness', published in 1989 highlights how 'the scavenger's work is beneath the dignity of the Hindus'. Thus, the work of waste and sanitation has remained the responsibility of oppressed caste communities in India (Singh 2014; Doron 2018). Coercive caste-based power relations dictate this labor arrangement along with the fact that the State is letting this work move towards informality (Surekha, et al., 2021). It



has been argued that feudal relations still dictate contemporary labor markets, especially when it comes to conservancy work (Gavhane, 2015). Around 92% of workers cleaning urban sewers and septic tanks were found to be from SC, ST, OBC groups, as per government data of 38,000 workers from 3,000 ULBs across 29 states and Union Territories. Of the profiled workers, 68.9% were SC, 14.7% were OBC, 8.3% were ST, and 8% were from the general category (Lakshman, 2024).

Lowest Dalit sub-castes have been involved across the sanitation value chain, namely communities such as Valmiki, Bhangi, Mehtar, Chooda in northern and western India; Bassfor, Dom, Ghaasi in eastern India; and Thotti, Arunthathiyar, Madiga in southern India. These communities reportedly comprise of around 6 million households, of which, around 40 to 60% engage in sanitation work (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Between 2020 and 2023, 97 incidences of deaths of sanitation workers were reported in India while working in sewers, septic tanks, and drains, involving 302 workers, out of which 80% of the workers died. Majority of the deaths were of workers under 40 years of age (Malhotra, 2024). Other estimates suggest that three sanitation workers die every five days in India. (WaterAid, 2019). Thus, Bezwada Wilson's terming of these deaths as 'political murders' aptly underscores the State's denial and complicity (Salam, 2016). According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2014) incidences of forced labor and discrimination in accessing health and education are rampant for manual scavengers. The 'force' also operates in the form of boycotts and physical violence, if Dalits refuse to perform this work. This situation is worse for women, as their involvement in manual scavenging is relegated to the private sphere, thus entirely hidden from public view (Pais, 2021).

A 2005 study indicated that Valmiki families in Gujarat, are the third largest Dalit group in the state, predominantly belonging to landless rural backgrounds, having increasingly migrated to cities. Further, Ahmedabad was indicated to have a large majority of Valmikis at around 21.8% of the total Valmiki population in Gujarat. Out of these, around 22% were indicated to have been born in Ahmedabad, while the remaining migrated from rural areas. The study also highlighted the “communities within community” of Valmikis in Ahmedabad since they migrated from different socio-cultural regions in Gujarat. Many older generation Valmikis who initially migrated for work in the textile mills of Ahmedabad, eventually moved to sanitation work once the textile mills were shut down. Scavenging continues to be the predominant “occupation” which absorbs Valmiki migrants, both in permanent roles with the AMC as well in the informal urban economy. Thus, the urbanization process has reinforced caste-based occupations, through the support of the State and the civil society establishing the identity of Valmikis as *safai kamdar*, albeit only as Class IV employees. (D’Souza, 2005).

Thus, caste permeates all aspects of the socio-political and economic life of citizens, taking a form and nature suited to the urban context. The process of urbanization and modernization has not transformed the conditions of SC communities. However, opting for the identity of “Valmiki” giving up earlier caste names such as “Harijan” given by Mahatma Gandhi and “Bhangi” which is considered a derogatory term, also points towards assertion by the community. The older generation of migrants were also provided with housing by the AMC, while the newer migrants have found it challenging to secure decent housing, mostly ending up residing in slums across the city. According to a study, 52% of the Valmikis in Ahmedabad were residing in slums, 13% managed to get homes in better residential areas, and 29% reside in residential quarters provided by the AMC (D’Souza, 2005). Caste based residential segregation has also played a role in enforcing and deepening exclusion, even if it may have helped in preserving the close-knit ties and interactions within the community. The state has aided in this process of segregation by creating residential colonies solely for permanent Valmiki sanitation workers, rather than creating more heterogeneous urban settlements through government housing colonies.

Despite progressive schemes and programs for technological changes and rehabilitation of manual scavengers, breaking the close ties between caste identity and sanitation work, specifically for Valmiki workers, has not worked in Gujarat. Further, labor rights and identity-based organizations have not been able to reconcile their demands when it comes to the caste-based labor of sanitation work and link it to the larger social movements’ viz. Dalit movement in the city. Thus, it is important to understand the distinctions between articulation of manual scavenging as a labor rights issue versus a critique of the caste system (Iyer, 2019). For instance, the terming of this work as “noble” was rejected by Ambedkar, and he simply termed it “dirty.” He argued that “Dalit community were constantly constrained to take on this work as a “hereditary profession” to serve society as a whole” (Ambedkar, 2019, p. 196, 292, 296, as cited in Alves, 2022).

Scholars have also reflected on the concept of the *Warasdhar* system which is still prevalent, both in Ahmedabad and Surat. While scholars have argued that it reproduces the caste-based nature of sanitation

work, it is also highlighted that given the absence of alternative occupations, it remains relevant and an important recourse for the workers (D'Souza, 2005; Iyer, 2019). Further, apart from systemically ensuring that Valmikiis largely remain in sanitation work, the State, through its changing role has also ensured further systemic marginalization of the community through casualization of the sanitation workforce. Scholars have highlighted a “social hierarchy of labor” exhibited by the poor working conditions and discrimination that Valmikiis are subjected to in ULBs and other public institutions. Through increasingly reducing permanent hirings and regularization of the workforce, specifically in the realm of sanitation work, Valmikiis are now predominantly relegated to contractual roles, with contractors mostly belonging to non-Valmiki castes. (D'Souza, 2005).

The hierarchy also permeates in the way in which the “upper castes” have entered the sanitation and waste management system, but largely in supervisory roles or as contractors. Thus, the caste diversification in this occupation could also be leading to unchecked caste discrimination (Jain, 2020; Pais, 2021). According to Jan Haq Sangharsh Samiti, a Mumbai based organization, around 80-90% of the contractors involved in cleaning of stormwater drains in Mumbai are from “upper caste” groups, while the workers are from Vimukta, Buddhist, Dalit, and Adivasi communities. (Minj, 2024). In 1995, Surat Municipal Corporation advertised for the posts of sweepers from the non-Scheduled Castes, to end the caste related occupation of street sweeping. However, the non-Scheduled Caste workers who were hired, outsourced these jobs to Scheduled Castes and gave them half or less than half of the salary (Pais, 2021).

The economic marginalization as well as stigmatization of the waste picker community has also been explored in-depth by various scholars. (Harriss-White 2020; Doron 2018; Kornberg 2019; Shankar and Sahni 2017). Scholars have highlighted the need to look at the ‘waste economy’ as a whole. (White, 2020; Gidwani and Reddy, 2011; as cited in Garimella, Surekha, et al., 2021). In India, while the Twelfth Schedule puts the onus for maintaining and keeping the streets on to the ULBs, formal systems reportedly process only 30% of the waste, while relying on informal waste pickers to fulfill the remaining requirement (Surekha, et al., 2021). Waste pickers, though unrecognized, support the municipalities in handling about 80% of recyclable waste (Harriss-White 2020, as cited in Surekha, et al., 2021).

To say that informal labor holds the waste economy and the work of cleanliness in the city, would not be an overstatement. Apart from the crucial contribution of informal waste pickers, increasingly the growing informality even within the earlier formal roles of street sweeping, drain and sewage cleaning, and public toilet cleaning in the city, the workers who keep the city functioning by keeping it clean are being relegated to invisibility, stripping them away of all protections. In fact, despite supporting the state, quite visibly so, informal waste pickers often face harassment from state institutions, urban residents, and the police (Shankar and Sahni 2017).

Analyzing the changes in the system of sanitation and waste management in urban India, Gidwani's (2015) research focused on the waste pickers in the informal economy who were impacted because of the contractualization of waste recycling work by handing it over to private entities. He linked it to the idea of

“primitive accumulation,” wherein the workers are alienated from the means of production. Gidwani terms waste work as “infrastructural labor” - part of the “infra-economy” which creates the conditions for other production in the city. Within this infra-economy, there are hierarchies which determine who become a manual scavenger placed at the lowest end of this social stratum, and who handles both dry and wet waste i.e. *kooda*, thus facing more stigma than those who only handle dry waste i.e. *kabaad*. It was highlighted that “hierarchies permeate the self-perception of waste collectors” (Gill, 2010, 113 as cited in Gidwani, 2015). Wittmer (2021) has explored the compounding social impacts of caste and waste work on mental and physical well-being of workers. Studies have also highlighted how migrants are often absorbed into the work of waste, given their economic vulnerabilities (Kornberg 2019; Shankar and Sahni 2017). This was explored by CLRA in its 2023 study with tribal migrant workers from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, who, while earlier migrating for construction work moved to waste collection work specially during Covid-19 when construction work was halted (Singh and Mane, 2023). Both privatization of waste management systems and waste storage by energy-recovery waste incinerators have had a strong impact on informal waste collectors and recyclers, as per their representatives from 22 countries, including India (Burcea, 2015).

When the violation of labor laws for the permanent municipality workforce is rampant, it is critical to understand the conditions of those hired on a contract basis for the same work. Contractualization of the workforce invariably leads to decline in accountability of the principal employer, in this case the ULB, along with deepening job insecurity as they can be fired at any time. Workers hired on a contractual basis are not entitled to the same benefits and pay as permanent workers with the municipal corporations. Given that regulatory oversight is weaker over contractual labor, workers end up working in poor conditions without access to safety equipment. Unions have filed cases of labor law violations when it comes to contract workers who enroll as members. However, most workers not affiliated with unions continue facing undignified working conditions (Johari, 2014). Thus, the privatization process has further marginalized already vulnerable caste communities. This systemic issue puts a question on the entire system of contractualization which is increasingly becoming the mode of hiring workers for municipal jobs.

LEGAL AND POLICY SAFEGUARDS FOR SANITATION AND WASTE MANAGEMENT WORKERS

Over the years, various acts and policies have been introduced in India which govern the larger sanitation and waste management economy with some provisions for workers' rights and welfare. Apart from this, workers also have recourse to other acts and provisions which are framed for workers in general. Policies have evolved over the years with the intent to recognize the occupational hazards faced by the workers and ensure that their rights are protected. Most of these laws, policies, and schemes, are focused on the safety of workers and access to social security. A 2023 study by the Centre for Policy Research on the barriers to social protection for sanitation workers categorized social protection into four broad groups:

FIGURE 1: Different kinds of social protection measures

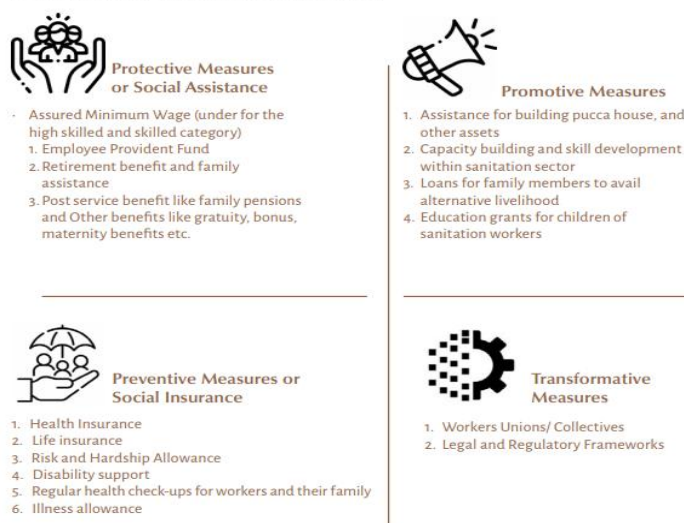


Figure 3: Barriers to social protection for sanitation workers - Centre for Policy Research

The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 was the first legislation to prohibit manual scavenging in India, although the focus was only on dry latrines, which removed various other sites from its ambit, for instance sewers which also required workers to manually enter and clean. After sustained advocacy efforts, **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013** was passed, as a landmark act which both prohibits the employment of people as manual scavengers and also speaks about the rehabilitation of families who have historically engaged in the occupation. It includes a wider range of occupations under the definition of manual scavenging as compared to the 1993 act. Further, the act also creates a link between manual scavenging and the caste system which was ignored by the 1993 act (Iyer, 2019). The act recognizes the practice of manual scavenging as dehumanizing and existing because of the caste system and the existence of insanitary latrines which require human excreta to be handled manually. Further, it recognizes

the need to correct historical injustices through rehabilitating manual scavengers. The act also puts the onus on local authorities to demolish insanitary latrines and construct community sanitary latrines and plan for their hygienic upkeep. Municipalities are also required to ensure mechanized sewage cleaning. Further, local authorities were mandated to undertake surveys of manual scavengers in urban areas. The safeguards for workers identified as manual scavengers includes cash assistance, scholarships for children, allotment of residential plots and financial assistance for construction of a house, training support for at least one member of the family in livelihood skills along with monthly stipend of at least 3,000 rupees, subsidy, or concessional loan for taking up alternate occupations, and other legal and programmatic assistance. However, the law is reportedly difficult to implement, as it does not clearly define “hazardous” or the meaning of “adequate protective gear or safety devices.” (Bordia & Pawar, 2021). The **Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** also lists the appointment of people from SC and ST communities for manual scavenging work as an offense.

National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993 constituted the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis** which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the acts related to safai karamcharis and enquiring into complaints and conveying recommendations and advisories. It also monitors the implementation of the Supreme Court Judgement involving the identification of the families of all persons who have died in sewerage work (manholes, septic tanks) since 1993 and awards compensation of 10 lakh rupees for each such death to the family members (Dwivedi et al., 2023). This amount was increased to 30 lakhs for death, 20 lakhs for severe injury, and 10 lakhs for any injury, in October 2023, as per a Supreme Court judgment (Livelaw, 2023).

Launched on 2 October 2014, **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** is a scheme to promote cleanliness and hygiene. It speaks about mechanized cleaning of toilets instead of hazardous manual practices, and skill development and capacity building of sanitation workers. SBM and Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) Convergence Guidelines were also issued in 2018 which spoke of appointment of Self-Help Group (SHG) members as ‘Swachhagrahi’s’, setting up of City Livelihood Centers for registering informal workers, and establishing City Level Federations to support identification of rag pickers and other marginalized persons. However, the SBM creates a precarious situation for workers as it encourages private participation in municipal cleaning and waste management work, thus allowing for contracting out or outsourcing of this work. This has invariably led to an increase in contractual labor for municipal services especially in waste transportation and processing.

National Safai Karamchari Financial Development Corporation (NSKFDC) was constituted to provide skill development training and promote entrepreneurial opportunities for sanitation workers and their family members. It also disburses loans of up to 15 lakhs at concessional rates and credit linked capital subsidy of up to 3.25 lakh rupees for procuring mechanized cleaning equipment. It implements the Self Employment Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), introduced in 2007, for supporting manual scavengers to transition to other occupations. One-time cash assistance of 40,000

rupees is to be provided to one individual in a manual scavenging household. Skill development training with a monthly stipend of 3,000 rupees are also offered (Paliath, 2021).

National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), introduced in 2022 by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MoSJE) and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) for implementation across more than 4,800 ULBs across India. It spoke about the provision of occupational, social, and financial safety nets for sewer and septic tank workers. The scheme entails profiling of workers, insurance, capital subsidy to turn them into “Sanipreneurs” or Sanitation Entrepreneurs, occupational safety training, Information Education Communication (IEC) Campaigns, and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety devices. Mechanized cleaning of sewers lines and septic tanks was an important component. The NAMASTE programme targets “workers directly associated with sewer and septic tank cleaning including drivers of desludging vehicles, helpers, machine operators and cleaners.” The government is currently carrying out a nationwide enumeration exercise, to identify the number of sewer and septic tank workers. **Emergency Response Sanitation Unit (ERSU)** was introduced to systemize human entry into sewer and septic tanks, in situations where mechanical cleaning is not possible. ERSUs are required to be equipped with all required safety devices and protocols, and only trained Sewer Entry Professionals (SEPs) can enter the sewers.

Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 are responsible for governing the handling, processing, and disposal of solid waste. The rules mention some provisions related to integrating informal or self-employed waste pickers into the formal solid waste management system through issuance of ID cards and ascertaining their identity as workers. It also mandates the provision of safety gear and access to recycling facilities for the workers, and collaboration with NGOs and workers’ collectives. Regular health checkups and health and safety training are also mentioned in the rules. However, the SWM Rules are more focused on the environmental and techno managerial aspects of waste management, although aspects such as segregation of waste at source and reduction of human handling while transporting and processing waste through mechanization can be seen as worker centric provisions. But critical labor rights aspects such as wages and social security are not discussed. The **Plastic Waste Management Rules 2016** also places the responsibility for plastic waste management on to ULBs, concerning the segregation, collection, processing, and disposal of plastic waste.

As a consequence of introduction of the SWM Rules, **Gujarat State Urban Solid Waste Management and Sanitation Policy** was introduced in 2018. The preamble to the policy “endeavors to make its cities and towns open defecation free and zero waste in a sustainable manner with a special focus on the needs of urban poor and women.” The policy speaks of ten goals to achieve this including 100% - segregation of residential and commercial waste, collection, transportation, processing, recycling of construction and demolition waste, door-to-door collection, waste treatment, decentralized processing of biodegradable waste, and recycling of non-biodegradable waste. The policy also defines agency/agent/contractor/service

provider as those appointed by the ULB to act on its behalf. Further, the policy speaks of “mainstreaming” informal waste pickers and dealers into the formal SWM systems.

Gujarat Safai Kamdar Development Corporation (GSKDC), like the NSKFDC, was instituted to promote skill training, provide financial assistance, and loan subsidies for alternative livelihoods to *safai kamdars*. Further, it aims to provide vocational and educational support to the children of manual scavengers. Financial support for housing is also a key mandate of the GSKDC under Gujarat government schemes such as the Dr Ambedkar Awaas Yojana and the national level Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana.

Apart from laws specific to sanitation workers, key applicable labor laws also need to be highlighted. **Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code (2020)**, while being a general code for all workers, speaks of sanitation workers’ rights to have access to safe equipment, safe working conditions, and regular health checkups considering it as a high-risk occupation. It also recognizes contractual work within this domain and puts the onus on contractors for providing protective equipment to workers, along with safety training. **Social Security Code (2020)** extends some benefits to contract workers such as health insurance and pensions, however, does not specifically mention anything regarding municipal sanitation workers and informal waste collectors. Under the **Minimum Wages Act (1948)**, central and state governments are required to fix the minimum wages for workers engaged in scheduled employment within their jurisdictions. There are 45 scheduled employments at the center and in Gujarat there are 46 - categorized into ‘skilled’, ‘semi-skilled’, and ‘unskilled’. As per the revision in March 2023, the minimum wages for sweepers and scavengers for municipal work in Zone I is 452 rupees per day (Government of Gujarat, 2023).

While there seem to be a plethora of legal and regulatory safeguards, and schemes and programs for workers engaged in the work of cleanliness, implementation of a majority of these laws and schemes is highly unsatisfactory. Further, with increasing contractualization of the sanitation workforce and privatization of the urban solid waste management systems, more and more workers are being pushed out from the ambit of these safeguards, left to the whims of private contractors. Growing informality of the sanitation and waste management workforce is a pressing concern, affecting the rights of workers with declining accountability of the ULBs. Thus, while the work of sanitation and waste management is essential, the legal framework surrounding it is inefficient including the weak enforcement of existing labor laws and codes and the sanitation and waste management specific legal interventions, especially for contract and informal workers which is becoming the dominant labor regime in this work.

The complexities surrounding the outsourcing of urban sanitation work

Article 243W of the Indian Constitution, which was inserted by the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992, puts the direct responsibility of ‘public health, sanitation conservancy and solid waste management’ on to ULBs (Shankar and Sahni 2017: 55, as cited in Surekha, et al., 2021). Despite this, the increasing privatization and contractualization within this realm makes it imperative to look at labor laws and municipal laws in conjunction to understand the legal position regarding contracting out of

essential municipal services such as sanitation and waste management. Seventy-seven percent of sanitation workers in India work without a formal contract (Thorat, 2021). Contractual sanitation workers reportedly earn between one-half to one-fourth of permanent workers' salaries. Outsourced daily wage workers end up earning less than one-fourth (Bhattacharjee, 2019).

Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 regulates employment of contract labor in case a contracting party employs more than 20 workers. The contractors need to hold a legal license to act as contracting parties, and the principal employer should also register itself as such. According to the act, contract workers are entitled to fair wages, safe and proper working conditions, and access to drinking water, toilets, and restrooms. If the contractor fails to provide these, then it is the obligation of the principal employer. This should ideally be applicable to municipal sanitation workers as well. Further, the act mandates that in cases where certain services are essential and perennial in nature, there is sufficient work to employ a considerable number of whole-time workmen; and finally, is being done ordinarily through regular workmen in that establishment or a similar establishment, then hiring contract labor for such work can be prohibited.

Gujarat Provincial Municipal Corporations Act, 1949 also known as the Bombay Provincial Municipal Corporations Act, 1949 governs municipal corporations in Maharashtra and Gujarat. It is pertinent to note that scavenging or cleansing streets or premises, maintaining, repairing, cleansing, or flushing drains, removing, or disposing of excrementitious or polluted matter from houses, latrines, privies, urinals, or cesspools, and removing carcasses are listed as 'Class I' essential services under the act. Further, it lists the following services, among others, as "Obligatory and discretionary duties of the Corporation":

- (i) the watering, scavenging, and cleansing of all public streets and places in the city and the removal of all sweeping therefrom;
- (ii) the collection, removal, treatment and disposal of sewage, offensive matter, and rubbish and, if so, required by the 2 [State] Government, the preparation of compost manure from such sewage, offensive matter, and rubbish 3 [and solid waste management];
- (iii) the construction, maintenance and cleaning of drains and drainage works, and of public latrines, water-closets, urinals, and similar conveniences
- (iv) the construction and maintenance of residential quarters for the municipal conservancy staff.

Thus, reading the municipal act and contract labor act together, ideally, the essential and obligatory service of sanitation and cleaning, which is perennial in nature, cannot be contracted out. However, there is a tendency to employ contract labor even in core activities mainly with a view to lowering the costs as contract workers have weak bargaining power as compared to permanent workers. Most contract workers are also found to be employed by establishments or contractors which employ workers below the law's coverage limit of 20 workers, thus sidestepping provisions of the act. Initially, employers were fearful about contracting out core work, however, various judgements over the years have dissipated this fear. The

current situation is that contract labor can be employed in any operation unless specifically prohibited by the appropriate governments. It is also pertinent to note that the Rule 25 of the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Central Rules states that, “if a contract worker performs the same or similar kind of work as is being performed by regular workmen, in that case s/he will be entitled to get the same wages and other service conditions as are available to the regular workmen” (Saini, 2010).

PROFILE OF URBAN SANITATION AND WASTE MANAGEMENT WORKERS

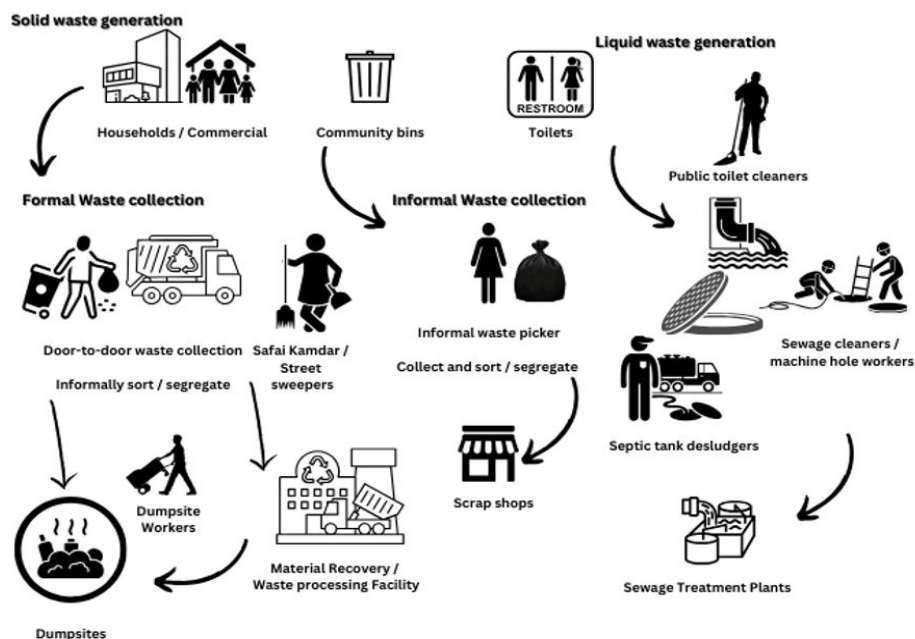


Figure 4: Urban sanitation and waste management workers

Like all urban areas, Ahmedabad and Surat also employ various categories of workers involved in ensuring cleanliness, especially in the sanitation and health departments of the ULBs. Public sanitation work involves garbage collection from households and institutions across a municipal area, dumping the city's garbage in zonal dumping sites, street sweeping, cleaning drains, school, community and public toilets, sewer lines, sewage treatment plants, septic tanks, and cleaning fecal matter from railway tracks, platforms, train toilets and platform toilets (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Apart from those engaged in municipal cleaning work, there are also self-employed or informal workers who do not come under the ambit of the municipal corporation and are unrecognized as sanitation workers. The workers covered under this study are explained below:

1. **Sanitation workers or Safai Karamcharis or Safai Kamdars - Permanent, contractual, and daily wage/casual:** Their work revolves around street sweeping, waste collection, and maintenance of public spaces. The permanent workers are entitled to benefits such as pension, provident fund, health insurance, and paid weekly off. These workers are supervised by Health Inspectors and Medical and Health Officers of the municipal corporations. While undertaking the same work as permanent workers, contractual workers are hired through private contractors - either individuals or entities, predominantly for street sweeping and waste collection

from the streets. Being on contract, their wages are lower and they do not receive benefits such as health insurance, provident fund, pension, and paid leave. Thus, these contractual and daily wage workers can be considered as unprotected informal workers within the formal sector of urban conservancy work. Workers predominantly belonged to the Valmiki community in Ahmedabad, and Valmiki and Mahar communities in Surat.

2. **Machine hole workers - Permanent and contractual:** For cleaning manholes (now known as machine holes), septic tanks, and sewers. Machine hole work is mostly performed by men belonging to the Valmiki community in Ahmedabad.
3. **Informal waste pickers:** Typically operate in an informal capacity and are not formally recognized as workers by municipal corporations, including AMC and SMC. In some cases, efforts have been made in Surat and Ahmedabad, to provide ID cards to the workers through NGO advocacy. In Ahmedabad, workers predominantly belonged to the Nadia community and in Surat to the Mahar community. Women were found to predominantly be engaged in this work.
4. **Private cleaners:** Mainly belonging to the Valmiki community in Ahmedabad, these workers are hired by private apartment complexes by RWAs, or by private commercial complexes. They are either hired as contract workers who regularly go to one place, or they are casual workers who find work at private apartment complexes as required. Workers are also able to recover waste from private complexes which they can sort and segregate to sell to scrap shops for additional income.

Attempts to collect data on the number of workers engaged in the work of cleaning in urban India has its limitations. Systemic invisibility and dearth of comprehensive official data is a characteristic of the sanitation workforce. The lack of data and definitional challenges are a key reason for weak enforcement of seemingly progressive laws and programs (Singh, 2024; Salam, 2016). In fact, the lack of reliable data is a strong indicator of the growing informality within this realm. We made attempts to gather estimates, based on existing studies, discussion with workers and activists, and information obtained under the Right to Information Act, 2005. However, it needs to be reiterated that no official data is available, specifically on contractual and informal workers, making the below numbers a gross underestimation.

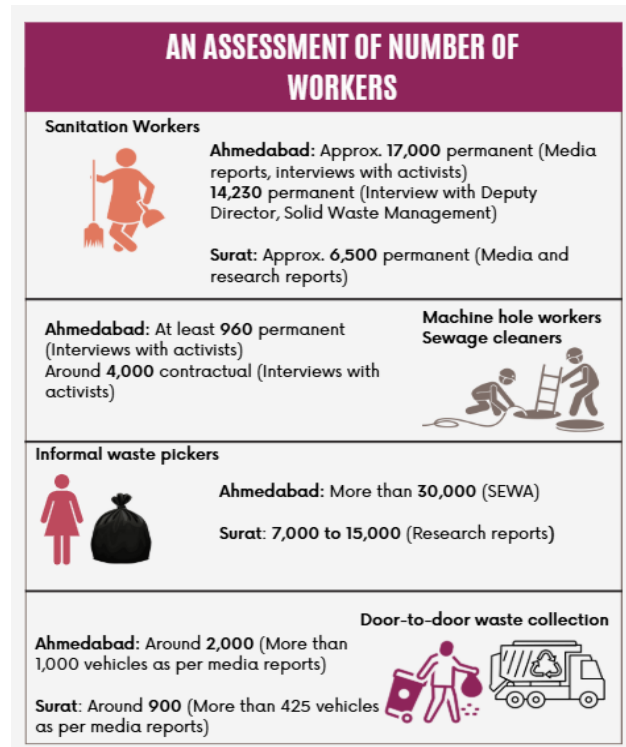


Figure 5: An assessment of number of workers

According to a report from 2022, there were 17,374 sanitation workers in Ahmedabad, which indicates around three workers per 1,000 population (John & Dave, 2022). This was corroborated by an activist from Ahmedabad, who indicated the number of permanent *safai kamdars* in Ahmedabad to be around 17,000. The number reported by the Deputy Director SWM in Ahmedabad indicated the number of permanent *safai kamdar* to be 14,230, out of which 13,013 are generally present. He added that 1,210 positions are vacant. Each worker was assigned a responsibility for maintaining a 300-meter stretch of road, with the total road length amounting to 5,705 kilometers. Based on this standard, the required workforce should exceed 19,000 workers. According to the Deputy Director additional workers, apart from the permanent workers, are hired from Sakhi Mandali and Valmiki Association if required, however, he did not indicate any specific number. He added that there are no regular contract workers, and they are only hired as per requirement. According to a document on the website of AMC's SWM department, there are 12,500 street sweepers in the city. RTI response from the East Zone office reported 1,550 permanent and 968 contractual *safai kamdars*. 1,052 permanent *safai kamdars* were reported in the South West Zone, along with 13 contract workers. In the North West Zone, the number was indicated to be 1,985 permanent workers. In Surat, there are 6,250-6,500 sanitation workers, as per recent reports. Further, 1,690 workers reportedly sweep bridges, flyovers, and Bus Rapid Transit System routes at night. (Times of India, 2024; R-Cities, 2024).

For waste pickers, the figure would be more than 33,861 in Ahmedabad, as that is the number of workers that SEWA and International Alliance of Waste Pickers were able to organize. A few wards did report the

number of waste pickers in their RTI responses, however, these numbers seemed extremely underestimated. For instance, the entire East Zone was indicated to have 26 waste pickers, South West Zone was indicated to have eight waste pickers, and the North West Zone had 19 waste pickers who have been included for waste segregation at Refuse Transfer Stations (RTS).

Discussions with a member of the Machine Hole Workers Union in Ahmedabad indicated the presence of at least 20 permanent machine hole workers in each of the 48 wards, taking the number to more than 960 permanent machine hole workers. According to an activist working against manual scavenging in Gujarat, there are around 1,200 permanent machine hole/manhole workers, and around 4,000 on contract. As per the RTI reply from Isanpur Ward in South Zone, there were 21 permanent machine hole workers, and every month, as per requirement the Standing Committee of the AMC is approached for hiring workers from the Valmiki Samaj Mandali. Khokhara Ward in the South Zone reported 14 permanent workers and no contractual workers. The East Zone ward of Amraivadi responded that there were 32 permanent machine hole workers and none on contract. The Bapunagar Ward in the East Zone reported 40 permanent workers and 65 contractual workers. The number of permanent workers was found to be much less in Vastral Ward, East Zone, which responded that it has only two permanent machine hole workers and 16 contractual machine hole workers. Ramol Hatija Ward in East Zone responded that they have five permanent machine hole workers and none on contract. A media report from 2024 indicated the presence of at least 12,000 Valmiki households engaged in manual scavenging in Ahmedabad (Aswani, 2024). Since manual scavenging is outlawed, this figure is difficult to corroborate.

KEY FINDINGS

Increasing contractualization and privatization of municipal work

Both Ahmedabad and Surat have been increasingly relying on hiring contractual workers for municipal services, leading to job insecurity, reduced wages, and declining access to social security and benefits. Discussions with machine hole workers in Ahmedabad indicated that the government has not paid attention to hiring *kayamik* or permanent workers for machine hole cleaning. As of date, the system is entirely contractualized. The number of contracts given out differs across the 48 wards in Ahmedabad with the number of contracts ranging from five to even 12 in certain wards. There does not seem to be a fixed mandate, protocol, or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) regarding the system of contractualization. This creates a situation where there is no proper record or documentation of the number of workers and their working hours, because of which minimum wage provisions are also flouted.

Large private companies are hired as primary contractors for door-to-door waste collection, toilet management, managing treatment plants, and material recovery facilities. Labour supply agencies or individuals for hiring street sweeping workers and machine hole workers. Resident Welfare Associations, local cooperatives, and caste-based *mandalis* also approached for hiring contract workers as per requirement.

The workers shared that in general three workers are hired under each machine hole contract - together known as a 'contract *mandali*' or 'Valmiki *mandali*.' There are around seven members in each *mandali* and then they align with the municipal corporation as a trust. This trust is required to take insurance of 10 lakh for the workers, in case of death because of working inside the gutters. It was indicated that the corporation takes no responsibility for these workers and the *mandali* is solely accountable. Many of the workers in the

group have been working for the last more than two decades, with the hope of being made permanent. Some were made permanent workers in 2004 after earlier working on *rojinda* muster i.e. as daily wage workers.

The hiring which is now outsourced was earlier directly handled by the AMC under the daily wage workers' muster roll. AMC onboarded the labor for daily *hajri* and the wage was directly paid by the AMC. If a particular worker completed 900 days



of work over five years, then they were hired as permanent workers. Consequently, a lot of workers who worked for five years under this system were made permanent in 2004. Workers highlighted that the only permanent hiring in machine-hole work in the past 15-20 years has been under the *Warasdar* system wherein the family members of a deceased or incapacitated permanent worker are hired in their place. Workers alleged that the contract system continues as the possibility of corrupt practices during tendering systems is beneficial for officials and contracts are generally given out to close affiliates. It was added that the machine hole workers are not even considered as *Safai Kamdars* as their work is invisibilized. “*Zameen ke upar jo hai woh dikhta hai, humara kaam zameen ke andar hai, use kaam hi nahi maante.*” (What is above the ground is visible. Our work is under the ground, and it is not even considered work). One of the machine hole workers, who has now become a contractor, also expressed that all jobs should be permanent. *200-300 rupay ki hazri se ghar thodi na chalta hai.* (You cannot run a household with just 200-300 rupees).

Multiple permanent safai kamdars with the AMC who transitioned from daily wage roles to permanent roles shared that having the permanent job brings them a sense of security. Their pay has also increased upon being confirmed. Further, they get to be a part of the *Naukar Mandal* union, and are able to get their issues resolved by approaching the union leaders. One of the permanent workers who began working as a daily wage worker with AMC shared that when he joined, he used to get 1,800 rupees per month. As a permanent worker his salary is now more than 30,000 rupees along with medical benefits, Provident Fund (PF), and enrollment in the pension scheme. Moreover, permanent workers shared that they have a weekly off based on the roster along with medical leave, while contract workers indicated that they worked daily without any weekly off. They also have 12 *haq raza* or earned leave during the year.

A worker with the AMC who is currently on probation and will be made permanent within the next two years shared that contractual jobs can be lost anytime, while with a permanent job you can retire and receive pension and gratuity as well. He added that after a few years it will be really difficult to get permanent jobs with the AMC as increasingly most of the hiring is contract-based. He also appreciated the fact that he can be part of a union while holding a permanent job - “*Humko accha lag raha hai ki yahan par union hai. Kuch bhi hoga mujhe pata hai log saath mein khade rahenge. Contract ek jagah aur sarkaar ki naukri ek jagah.*” (I feel good that we have a union here. If anything happens, I know that others would be there for support. Contract is in one place and a government job has its own stature.) Another worker opined that “*Contract workers ke upar itna zulm hota hai ki sabse gandi haalat unhi ki hai. Unka bhi association hai. Lekin agar woh ladne jayenge toh upar ke adhikari unka naam blacklist mein daal denge. Toh kaise kare ladai?*” (Contract workers are oppressed and working under the worst conditions. They also have an association. But if they try to fight for their rights the officials put their names on the blacklist. So how can they fight?). Another contract-based street sweeper in Ahmedabad shared that *jab tak contractor ka mann na bhar jaaye tab tak kaam karate hain. Mehnat hum karte hai aur koi dusra uska fal khaata hai.* (Until the contractor is satisfied, he keeps making us work. We work hard and someone else eats the fruits of our labor). When he moved to the city he got the number of a contractor through his networks, who asked him

to join. There has been no paperwork, only a verbal agreement. He was apprehensive of divulging more because of his contractual status.

One of the workers in Surat, who is also a union leader, shared that she was hired in place of her husband who lost his life in an accident in 2008. For three years, between 2008 and 2011 she was on probation, earning only 2,500 per month. After the probation period ended, she was given a permanent position. She added that the last permanent hiring in Surat was in 2017. This was corroborated by another permanent employee from Surat on probation who shared that he got his mother's job when she took a voluntary retirement 5-6 years back. He has been working on probation ever since. The usual probation period is three years, however, because of missing work for some time, he has not been made permanent yet. On probation he earns only 15,000 per month which is almost half of what permanent workers earn.

The work of toilet cleaning has also been outsourced to private contractors and AMC does not deal directly with the workers. A worker who was engaged in maintaining an AMC mobile toilet shared that he was hired through a contractor and had no interaction with the municipal corporation regarding his employment. There was a supervisor or *muqaddam* whose primary task was to assemble workers for this job and he approached him to take up the work. He did not sign any formal contract for this. He stated that either the contractor or municipal officials would visit the toilet daily and click photos to confirm that he was at work and had parked the toilet in the designated space. He was told that any costs for damage during usage was to be borne by him. Hired at 9,000 rupees per month, he was told that his salary would increase to 15,000 if he continued working, however, that did not happen and he quit the job due to constant abuse.

At a *basti* of Valmiki workers in Ahmedabad, while most were working in private societies as cleaners, some were also working as street sweepers, on contract. Their work day begins at 6 AM, stretching till 12 PM, and again from 3 PM to 6 PM. They sweep the roads and segregate the waste for further collection by AMC vehicles. The workers shared that they have no contact with the AMC as they are hired by private contractors. Earlier, AMC directly hired for this work, however, in recent years most of the street sweeping workers are being hired under private contracts. When they were hired, they signed two documents, however, they do not have access to these documents as they are kept by the 'captain,' their supervisor.

Workers added that the younger generation is only aware of the contract system. Earlier, if workers had completed more than five years, they would be hired as permanent workers by the AMC, but now that does not happen. The government job status ensured that the next of kin of the workers were hired once they retired. One of the workers shared that some of them have been trying to negotiate with their contractor to get permanent jobs with the AMC since the past two years, as they have been working for over five years, however, they are not hopeful about it. They believe if they have permanent jobs, they might receive some benefit from the government such as healthcare, pension, housing, and job security for their children. Permanent jobs would also bring economic security into their lives, as their contractual jobs are precarious and they are constantly threatened of being fired. Some workers, having seen the precarity that comes with contractual roles with the AMC, and the requirement for documentation to get permanent roles, are

preferring to take up roles in private societies instead. There is a sense of “flexibility” in this private work, as compared to contractual roles with the State. Further, with growing informality and low wages, workers are having to pick up multiple jobs linked to cleaning in order to earn a decent living.

The private society cleaners work from 7 AM to 5 PM, collecting waste from each household to be deposited at one location in the society from where the door-to-door waste collectors collect it for further transportation. Thus, these workers are the first in the door-to-door waste collection chain, with no recognition for their labor. Apart from waste collection, they also perform other cleaning and sweeping work within the common areas in the society. Jobs in private areas have increased with the establishment of more gated colonies and because of a decline in permanent jobs by the AMC. Since only the work of cleaning is available to Valmiki workers, they have increasingly started taking up work in private societies, market, and office complexes, a completely invisibilized labor with no intervention from the municipal corporation. One of the workers who resides in a redevelopment society of people from the Valmiki community shared that he has taken up cleaning work within the society because he did not get a permanent job with the AMC after his father, a permanent sanitation worker at a government hospital died. He did not want to take up a contractual job with the AMC as there is no job security and the pay is also less. Thus, through the contractual system, the state is in fact creating more informality by pushing workers into private work. In local parlance this private arrangement is called *uchak*, a system which runs the informal sanitation and waste economy in the city. It creates a system where there is no accountability on the private contractors who keep sub-contracting this work without any paperwork or documentation. The eventuality is that those who pick up the work do not have anything to prove that they are performing this labor in the city.

Impact of privatization of waste collection on waste pickers

Gujarat is yet to provide recognition to informal waste pickers and integrate them into municipal systems, thus failing to implement the state-level policy. For women from the Nadia community in Ahmedabad, waste-picking work is often the sole means of earning for their household. Most of the women were either widows or their husbands were involved in sporadic casual labor, not able to bring in a regular income. These women are often the ones holding the family together, financially. Thus, the impact of the privatization of the waste collection system in the city was felt intensely by these workers. Throughout the research, the team encountered women who were even above 50 years of age, collecting waste since they were in their teenage years, and still not left with any savings or social security to think of retiring, despite it being difficult for the older generation to walk around scouting for waste to earn a living.

The women explained that they leave the house between 7 am and 9 am and mostly walk on foot collecting waste along the way. Earlier, this task was not as complicated as it is now, as they were able to find sufficient waste in the dumpers placed on the roadsides, before the door-to-door collection was formalized. Now the waste is collected directly from commercial and residential establishments and transported in closed

vehicles to refuse transfer stations and material recovery facilities. Increasingly, women have to rely on vendors at marketplaces to retain some of the plastics, cardboard, and other materials that have value for them. However, some women reported that it is difficult now to even get recoverable waste directly from shops as the shop owners also prefer to sell it directly or give it to the door-to-door waste collection workers. Thus, they have to rely on scouting on foot which has led to increasing the amount they spend outside collecting, rather than segregating. This has led to a decline in the earnings over the years.

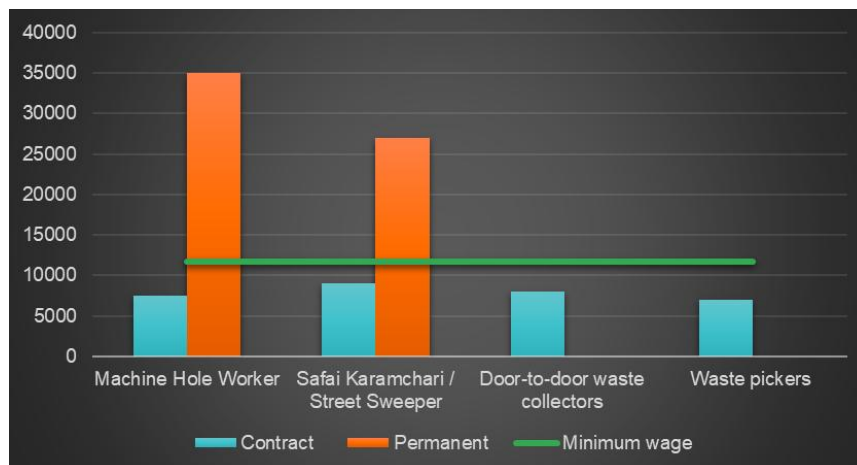
A woman who has been collecting waste for the past 15 years stated that “*Pehle toh kachra ek side mein jamaa hota tha toh milta tha aur chun sakte they, ab toh sab seedha gaadi mein chala jaata hai. Kuch chunne ko milta nahi hai. Bahut ghumna padhta hai.*” (Earlier the waste was collected on the roadside, which made it easier to sift through and collect. Now it straightaway goes into the collection vehicles. We do not find much to sift through, and have to roam around a lot). A woman who earlier worked as a waste picker but now has a scrap shop since the last three years also shared that earlier she was able to pick waste from the roadside dumpsters, however, now that is not possible. They were promised ID Cards on multiple occasions by representatives of various organizations; however, it still has not materialized. In one of the bastis with around 500 waste pickers, only 10-12 had received an ID Card around 2021.

Describing the importance of the informal waste economy, the women shared that once they collect and sell the waste, they help in recovering valuables from discarded waste and reduce the waste on the streets, which also helps those further along the supply chain. However, they were excluded from this decision regarding implementing the door-to-door waste collecting system and nor were they hired for it because they would be unwilling to work at the low rates which Adivasi migrant workers have no option but to accept. They expressed that if they get a job for 15,000-20,000 rupees per month, they will leave this work. Currently, if they want to keep even a day off, they end up losing 300-400 rupees. The entire burden of loss is individualized. However, multiple women shared that they would not want to take up jobs at the cost of the flexibility they currently have in terms of the time they want to spend at work. *Koi humara Seth nahi hai, hum khud hi hein. Bas humein pareshan na karein AMC waley.* (We do not have a boss; we are our own boss. Just that AMC should stop bothering us). Discussion with the Deputy Director of SWM indicated that the AMC does not operate with a profit-making motive and the only reason door-to-door waste management is privatized is because it is the most efficient system.

Wages and Social Security

Discussions with machine-hole workers indicated that the per-day wages for experienced permanent workers are around 1,300 to 1,400 rupees. New workers receive around 14,500 per month which keeps increasing by 600 to 700 rupees every year. The workers receive wages on time into their bank accounts. They also receive 400 rupees for rest allowance, washing allowance, dust allowance, and medical allowance per month. The situation differs for contract workers. Each contract *mandali* receives the tender for 54 days of work, for which 1,475 rupees are paid per day to the contractor. The contractor then hires three workers, paying them around 200-250 rupees each. The

remaining 700 rupees is kept by the contractor. Neither do contract workers receive the wages on time, nor do they get the wages they would have received had they also been directly employed by the AMC. One of the workers mentioned that the daily rates have not changed since 2016. Another worker indicated that he worked on 200 rupees *hazri* for 15 years.



Graph 1: Comparison of category-wise wages

The workers also highlighted the drawbacks of the new pension system which was instituted in 2004 which impacts retirement benefits for workers who joined after 2004. As per the old pension scheme, workers received a fixed amount of pension, generally 50% of their last drawn salary. This was assured and fully funded by the government. However, the new pension scheme involves contribution by both employer (14% of the basic salary) and employee (10% of the basic salary) towards the pension fund, which is thereafter invested in market linked schemes. The pension amount they receive upon retirement depends upon the market performance. Hence there is no guarantee on the amount which can be received. The contractual workforce is outside the purview of this conversation as pension and other social security benefits do not extend to them.

Workers engaged in street sweeping on contract indicated that they are able to earn 6,000-12,000 rupees per month through this work. The earnings often fluctuate as there is no formal contract promising a fixed income. Their wages are first transferred to the 'captain' who is the contractor, who then deposits the amount in their bank account after accounting for his commission. Some of the workers shared that if they have been promised 7,000 rupees, sometimes they end up receiving only 6,000 rupees with no explanation provided for the deduction. None of the workers indicated receiving any PF or overtime. One of the workers shared that he recently received a wage hike of 1,000 rupees per month, however, for most people at the *basti* there has been no changes in the salary. None of the workers indicated having an e-shram card or Ayushman card. A street sweeper who earlier used to work as a cleaner at AMC public toilets shared that he was able to earn a salary of 16,000 rupees through that work as he was directly hired by the AMC, however, that stopped during Covid-19. Now if he has to go for toilet cleaning work it is through private contractors

wherein, he is only able to earn 1,000-2,000 per month as the work is sporadic. However, even though he was directly hired by the AMC at the time, he was not a permanent worker, so he was not entitled to PF, and the work hours were often erratic and long especially during Swachh Bharat campaign events.

A street sweeper on contract who migrated four years ago from Mandal to Ahmedabad shared that he earns 8,000 rupees per month for eight hours of duty. This amount might decrease but never increases. There have been no changes in his wages in the last four years, not even to account for inflation. He indicated that he has taken up small acting roles to sustain himself and his family. Most of what he earns goes into expenses such as rent and electricity bills. *Kyunki mein ghar par sabse badaa beta hun, koi samajik kaam hota hai toh udhar bhi main hi jata hun. Aane jaane mein kaafi kharch ho jata hai.* (Since I am the eldest son in my family, if there is any family event I have to go there. I end up having to spend money on such travel)

Women street sweepers in Surat who are hired as permanent workers for the day shift for eight hours, indicated that they are broadly satisfied with their salary of 27,500 rupees per month. The salary is directly transferred to their bank accounts, after a PF deduction of 2,300 rupees. However, some workers feel the need for a salary increase due to their daily travel expenses of around 200-400 rupees as they travel from around 90 kilometers away from the worksite. They have requested either a salary raise or reimbursement for transportation costs. Some of the workers involved in night sweeping in Surat shared that they earn 220 rupees per day, with 20 rupees deducted for PF. At the end of the month, they receive around 5,000 to 5,500 rupees, for around 26 days of work, and are dissatisfied with the wages since they have no savings. Traveling to the work site at night costs them around 50-60 rupees per day, essentially bringing down their daily earnings to 140-150 rupees. Another group of workers indicated that they go together in a tempo, for which they end up paying 800 rupees per person per month.

The condition of permanent workers is slightly better when it comes to wages and social security. A worker in Surat, who was hired in place of her husband in 2008 on probation, was given a permanent position after three years of working, and currently her salary is 28,000 rupees per month. Permanent workers in Ahmedabad also indicated receiving a salary of more than 30,000 rupees. One of the workers shared that now that he is permanent, he is also eligible for the welfare loan for which 9,000 rupees gets dedicated from his account per month. Further, he is part of the new PF and new pension schemes. However, he added that they should also come under the old pension scheme, which is their current pressing demand for the permanent workforce.

A permanent worker who is currently on probation as he joined 10 months back after his mother, a permanent AMC worker, died, shared that under probation he receives 19,100 per month, and this will be doubled once he becomes permanent. Currently, PF deductions are not being made from his account as he is on probation, he has been told that will happen once he becomes permanent. Women permanent workers with the AMC also shared that their monthly salaries range from 25,000 to 30,000 depending on their experience. One of the workers indicated that out of the 29,000 which is her total salary, she gets 12,000 in

hand as the remaining gets deducted for insurance, PF, and loans. One of the other workers shared that she gets 7,000-8,000 in hand as she has taken two loans from the AMC including one for housing, which totals around 20,000 deductions from her salary per month. What they get in hand is not enough as at least 100 rupees per day just goes in commuting, however, they are happy that they are able to utilize the housing loans.

Waste pickers shared that on average they can earn around 5,000-9000 rupees in a month. *Jitna pair daudao utna kamaa sakte ho* (The more you run, the more you will earn). If they get 400-500 rupees in a day by collecting, segregating, and selling the waste, around 200 rupees are spent on paying the *pendalwalahs* i.e. the transporters for transporting the collected waste to the segregation site, and subsequently transporting the segregated waste to the scrap shops. Even though the rates have increased over the years, the overall earnings have not changed as the collection has declined. During rains their earnings fall to 150-200 a day. Women in Surat indicated that they sell their collected waste to Navsarjan Trust and earn around 200-500 rupees in a day. However, earning 500 is challenging as that would involve working the entire day without any breaks and covering more areas. Some of the women have taken up other employment such as sewing which helps them on days when they are not able to go for collection.

On being asked, the women shared that their earnings have declined since the introduction of the door-to-door waste collection system, making it harder for them to earn a decent income. They added that they have not witnessed any significant increase in the rates offered by scrap dealers over the years. These factors have led to waste pickers taking up additional jobs as cleaners in private residential and commercial complexes in order to sustain themselves and their families, however, increasing their work burden manifold. Some of the workers preferred being associated with Navsarjan Trust as they felt that they were being cheated at scrap shops. However, others felt that they received better rates outside, especially if they already had a long-standing relationship with the scrap shop dealers. A few waste pickers at one of the *bastis* in Surat shared that they sell directly to private companies who provide them with an advance of 20,000 rupees, which is adjusted from their waste sales. In none of these arrangements did workers indicate receiving any social security.

The rates they receive from scrap shops are also decided informally as the scrap dealers inform them of the prevailing rates verbally and they try to negotiate. They do not have a way to verify these rates. If they ask for more, scrap dealers promise to increase the rates if they receive more from selling it along the chain. The women shared that there are no contractors in between and they manage their own earnings and sales. The dealings are done in cash, with no formal receipts or bills. Most of them do not have any other sources of income. What is earned mostly goes into rent, household expenses, and children's education, with negligible to no savings. Even though their children mostly attend public schools, expenses on books, stationery, and uniforms have to be borne by them. Given that these are self-employed women, the concept of social security is absent.

Some of the women opened bank accounts with the hope of receiving pensions, however, they have not received any benefits through that yet. They mentioned that people have come to speak to them about forming collectives which might help them in securing some of these benefits, but nothing has come out of those conversations. One of the women was waiting to receive support for filling out her widow pension form because they told her that she did not have the requisite documents such as Aadhar, PAN Card, and Election Card. She was also told about a form for housing - but faced trouble in filling that as well because of the lack of documents. Now she has received her Aadhar card, but is still awaiting her election card. She is not aware of any other benefits of schemes by the government. Thus, even if organizations have made efforts to improve awareness of schemes for the workers, access to schemes remains a challenge due to bureaucratic hurdles.

Working conditions and worker health and safety



discussion with workers highlighted the negligible enforcement of health and safety standards, which often disappear especially when it comes to contractual or informal workers. Working without protective gear is normalized and universally accepted. Machine hole workers in Ahmedabad shared that they begin their day at eight in the morning and work until four or five in the evening, often continuously. Their work involved cleaning the machine holes in the ward, with both machines and *sariyas* i.e. iron rods. Sometimes only using the rods is feasible as the design of sewers might not be compatible with the machines. Even using the machines has risks. For instance, with Jetting Machines the flow of the water is high and pipes can burst which can even be fatal. The workers receive complaints throughout the day regarding blocked drains and sewers. Upon visiting the site,

they first check the technical aspects such as the depth of the drain, and identify the blocked sections. Often, they have to join multiple rods together to push the blockage into the adjoining sections and the work is generally performed manually. The workers shared that if the blockage is straightforward then at times it takes only five minutes to clean, but if they come across a complex blockage then sometimes even five hours are spent in cleaning a drain. They have no other option but to complete the work, however challenging it is. Hence, “rest” as a fixed time for breaks does not exist for the workers. They take breaks for tea and water as and when possible. The laborious nature of the work is reflected in the way in which workers have to arrange their eating time in relation to the work. For instance, a worker explained that, “*khane ke baad labor se kaam nahi hota*. (Workers are not able to work after eating). To push the rods into the drain while performing the manual labor of cleaning the drain and enduring the prevalent stench, the muscles of the stomach are stretched. Therefore, it becomes impossible to do this on a full stomach. When it takes hours to clean a drain, the work has to be done continuously without taking a break.

The condition of machine-hole workers was indicated to have improved over the years because of the union of permanent workers. Earlier, the lifespan of these workers was reportedly reduced by 10 years because of the act of getting inside sewers. By 40-45 years of age, severe diseases and bodily paralysis would grip the workers. During this time, the *mandal* of workers collected drainage samples from four gutters and got lab testing done to understand the temperature and composition of the sample which revealed the risk of various diseases including fatal ones. They also surveyed to highlight various cases of skin diseases, eye issues, suffocation, and hearing issues. In private areas, workers are still made to enter the holes manually, despite the outlawing of the practice. However, most workers categorically added that AMC permanent workers are not being made to perform manual scavenging.

However, some of the other workers indicated that while the mandate is that no one can enter the hole manually for cleaning, in certain emergency situations there is no other option. In such cases the rule is that the worker would be provided with an oxygen mask and other apparatus and has to wear a safety belt so that they can be pulled up. Even in such a situation where machines are too big for the hole, the three sections have to be first cleared through applying pressure by water and only after this, the worker can be made to enter, such that there is no impact of the toxic fume on the worker. But the union tries to ensure that the workers are not made to enter manually at all. *“Agar manhole se machine hole naam badla hai toh uska paalan karo”* (If “manhole” has turned into “machine hole” it should be followed). It is imperative to ask the reasons for non-implementation of the requisite technology. The workers added that it is important to ask the municipal commissioner as to why tenders are repeatedly given out to a company that produces substandard machinery which does not work efficiently.

Manual work is still a reality for the workers as the work is not entirely mechanized, given the design of the sewage systems. The workers added that while the corporation has defined safety procedures on paper, that is not generally provided in reality. Of particular importance are hand gloves and masks, to deal with the toxic fumes emanating from the gutters. Despite the mandate, this is not provided to the cleaners who are performing manual labor. What is often called “unwillingness” on the workers’ part to wear the PPE, needs to be rethought in terms of the quality of the PPE supplied to them. *“Agar gloves phatt hi jayenge kuch ghanto mein toh pehen kar kya fayda hai.”* (If the gloves will tear within hours, what is the point of wearing them). One of the workers shared that machine hole workers should be entitled to receive treatment at every hospital in the city, in case of emergency. The last health checkup for permanent workers was held around 5-6 years back. If a new worker is hired then they have a health screening before starting work. Health checkups are mandated under the NAMASTE scheme, however, not followed.

After the 2013 ruling banning manual scavenging, a circular was issued in 2021 regarding setting up ERSUs for sanitation work, as per which gutter workers were named ‘sewage commandos’ and a team of seven had to be constituted. The workers described that activation of ERSU would give them the same status as that of fire brigade workers as their work would be considered emergency work which no one else can perform. However, that is also not being implemented on the ground and no such team has been constituted yet. No

training is provided as mandated, and the workers mostly learn from each other on the job. Permanent workers mentioned that they demanded reflector jackets which are particularly useful during the night. They feel much safer working in the dark now, after they were provided with it. They added that workers should also be provided with hats for working during peak sunlight and raincoat during rains.

Those engaged in contractual arrangements for street sweeping work also shared that they work without any protective equipment, from 7 am to 11 am, followed by 3 pm to around 6:30 pm. One of the workers shared that his contractor has around 7-8 workers under him. They are required to report to him in the morning, however, he is not present in person and takes attendance over a phone call. However, later he visits at around 9-10 am to check if the workers are at the designated spots and takes photographs for verification. If a worker is not present then they cut their *hajri* for the day which is 300 rupees for a full day of absence. If the worker does not report post lunch, then 250 rupees is cut. Often the working hours stretch for longer than 10-12 hours, especially on days when there is any VIP movement in the city such as visits by the Prime Minister and Chief Minister. On such days, the onus falls on these workers to ensure that the routes taken by these ministers are clean, with no concept of an overtime or compensatory leave. Some of the workers shared that they have also been called upon at night to ensure that the roads are clean by morning, and they have no right to refuse. Some of the permanent workers also indicated that often during ministerial visits, they have had to work from 6 am in the morning to 9 pm in the evening. The permanent workers also do not receive any overtime or compensatory off, they just get a fruit packet on such days when they work for extended hours.

The contract workers were not provided with any protective gear, and were only given a broom which was not of good quality, however, they were not provided with a replacement once it became unusable. Even on days with high temperatures, they are not provided with any protective equipment to reduce the harmful impact of exposure to the sun. One of the workers who was asthmatic shared that the constant dust on the roads has caused severe challenges for him and he even had to be hospitalized. He added that this is the situation for a vast majority of street sweepers. Many of them have to often resort to visiting private hospitals as they do not receive the requisite support at government hospitals which are generally overburdened. They do not have any holidays, which means that on the days they are not able to go for work because of illness, their wages get deducted. Workers end up covering an area of around 500 meters to even 2 kilometers at times, and it is tedious and physically draining to ensure that the area remains completely clean at all times. Calloused hands are a common feature with this work, something which multiple workers showed us during the interviews. *“Kabhi minister wagairah aate hain toh showbaazi ke liye pehna dete hein gloves. Photo khichwane ke baad gloves hum office mein jamaa kar dete hein.”* (If some minister is visiting then they make us wear gloves for photo-ops. After photos are clicked, we are required to deposit the PPEs at the office).

A worker who is on a contract with the AMC shared that their work increases during rains as water logging is often due to waste accumulation in drains which they are required to clean. *Baarish ho, thand ho, ya firm*

garhi. Duty par toh jaana padhta hai. Duty pe jayenge nahi toh kya khayenge (Be it rain, cold, or heat, one has to go to work. If we do not go to work, how will we eat?). He added that in the last four years he has not been provided with any safety equipment by the contractor. *“Mere hisaab se jo koshish kar sakta hun surakshit rehne ke liye karta hun. Kayi saaf safayi dost humare aisey bhi hein jinka kaam karte karte jeewan hi khatam ho gaya hai. Naali gutter mein utre aur gas ki wajah se. Ya toh fir dhul mitti udne se long time TB jaise rog ho gaye.”* (According to my understanding, I do whatever I can to stay safe. Many of my fellow sanitation workers have tragically lost their lives while working. Some entered drains and gutters and succumbed to toxic gasses. Others developed long-term illnesses like tuberculosis due to exposure to dust and filth over time.) He prefers going to private hospitals when he gets unwell as in government hospitals often, they do not even conduct a checkup and just verbally ask and prescribe anything. At least in private they check properly and prescribe medicines accordingly. He generally covers an area of 1 kilometer and it is not fixed. Further, if he takes a leave then the amount gets deducted. There is a daily *hajri* system according to which the due amount is paid at the end of the month. Contractors take daily rounds to ensure that the workers are at the spot and doing their job. He gets half a day off in a week.

Women street sweepers in Surat, who work on the day shift for eight hours, from 7 AM to 11 AM and then from 2:30 PM to 6:30 PM shared that the job is physically demanding, requiring heavy lifting, which leaves some workers feeling exhausted. During their break between 11:00 am and 2:30 pm, they do not have a proper resting place. Although SMC provides a small room for rest, it is insufficient and lacks basic amenities like drinking water. Additionally, the workers are required to spread white powder on the road, which is a health risk, and not part of their job responsibilities but they are required to do it. They have not received a safety kit for the past two years. Injuries while working are common, but they only receive four leaves per month, and no leave is provided for menstruation. Workers do not receive health insurance or information about available health coverage from SMC. Contract sweeping workers were found to be working from 10 pm to 2 am in Surat. Apart from sweeping and brushing the streets, the workers are also required to clean the BRT bus stops once every week. They are often asked to perform additional tasks such as collecting wood scraps from the streets. They get one unpaid weekly off and wages for the day are deducted in case they take leave on other days. If they need extended leave then they are fired from work and find it difficult to get hired for 8-12 months. Workers indicated that they do this work at night for additional income, otherwise working as cleaners in private companies from 8 AM to 1 PM. As a result, they end up getting only 4-5 hours of sleep. Some of the women, who are homemakers, otherwise pick up this work at night in order to get additional income for their families. Workers shared that road accidents, especially at night, are also a common fear while working. Recently, a woman waste picker died in a road accident, yet her family received no compensation from the SMC or the contractor.

Workers involved in night sweeping and brushing in Surat shared that during monsoons, they deal with insects and flies while picking waste with their bare hands. The brushing work causes shoulder pain, and they only receive an orange vest as a uniform. They do not receive PPE or health insurance. The workers were of the opinion that the day sweepers, even the contractual ones, receive equipment like raincoats,

sweaters, gloves, and masks as the workers are at least visible during the day. Since night sweepers work only for four hours in the dark, the contractor sees no reason to provide them with similar equipment.

However, the condition is fairly different for permanent workers in both Ahmedabad and Surat. Brooms, brushes, gloves, and face masks are provided by the SMC and AMC. However, they might not be of the best quality. Workers shared that it is mandatory for the permanent safai karamcharis to wear the protective equipment while they work. One of the permanent AMC workers shared that while it is challenging to work during the monsoons, if they do not work then overall public health in the city will be impacted. *“Maalik ka karam hai hame koi dikkat nahi hoti hai. Hum apne khoon aur shareer ki chinta nahi karte. Hum avashyak seva mein hai toh praja ki seva ke liye kaam karte hein. Kabhi jukham ho sakta hai lekin dawa se theek ho jaata hai.”* (It is God’s will that we do not fall sick. We work without caring for our blood and body. We are in essential services, and for the benefit of the public. Sometimes we may get colds and coughs but it gets better with medicines). He added that they receive 1,000 rupees each month from the AMC for medical expenses. Another permanent worker added that the AMC provides them with all necessary equipment since they are permanent workers. While it is often challenging to wear them and work, especially when they sweat during high temperatures, some of them still prefer to wear them as ultimately their health is their own responsibility. On being asked about maternity leave for women workers, it was shared that women get maternity leave however the period is not fixed. One of the permanent workers in Surat shared that *Safai Karamcharis* were severely impacted during the heatwave, as there were some cases of heat strokes and workers falling unconscious while working. The only health facility they are provided with is free medicines from the SMC health center.

For waste collectors, the concept of “health and safety” takes on complex meanings given the lack of an employer. These women are self-employed and given the circumstances under which they labor, their health and safety often get deprioritized, often working 10-12 hours a day. Walking around the city scouting for waste is a tedious process, often coming with its own challenges especially during menstruation and pregnancy, when the women do not have the option of taking time off. The situation is also particularly challenging during extreme weather events such as heavy rains and heatwaves, which Ahmedabad and Surat have been witnessing with increasing intensity in recent times. All kinds of waste are encountered while sorting through dumpsters and dustbins. Some discards are useful for the workers, while some are just “dirty” materials but they have to sift through them regardless to figure out if they can be recovered and have any value. What they consider *bangar* i.e. which can be sold to scrap dealers, predominantly includes plastics, cardboard, and paper. Workers complained that often while sifting, they get pricked by glass or needles and they are used to this now. On being asked about using protective gear such as gloves and masks, the women shared that they cannot afford to slow down because of the quality of these PPEs, especially during summer months when wearing gloves can lead to excessive sweating and itching. Further, they have to incur the costs of procuring this protective gear on their own.

However, some of the women were more vocal about their health concerns. They shared that their health is severely compromised because of the nature of the work. Women cited regular body pain, fever, breathing issues, low blood pressure, stomach infections, and irregular menstrual cycle as common issues faced. A 30-year-old woman in Ahmedabad with two children shared that her blood pressure often falls low during which time she is unable to go for collection, and it costs her daily earnings. A 40-year-old woman in Ahmedabad who works as a cleaner at a private society and also collects and sells *bangar* shared that she lost her thumb when her hand came in between the doors of the vehicle that collects the *bangar*. Since her work is entirely private, she could not claim compensation from anyone and around 15,000 rupees went from her own pocket for treatment. Despite these challenges, speaking to the women indicated that they have developed a strong expertise in sorting the waste as per the various categories so as to sell them effectively. However, this skill, learnt on the job, is often ignored by society despite the essential contribution to public health and sanitation.

A 50-year-old worker in Surat shared that, although, every week a government ambulance called Dhanvantari Rath provides health check-ups in her neighborhood, after 25 years of walking to collect waste, she now needs knee surgery, which is too expensive for her. Recently she had to visit a private hospital and paid 3,000 rupees, nearly half of her monthly earnings. She has no health insurance and is unaware of any government health schemes. Safety is a constant concern at work; she often gets cuts from sharp objects like glass and blades while collecting waste. During the monsoon season, these risks increase due to poor hygiene, leading to frequent illnesses. Some of the women in Surat had received protective gear from Navsarjan Trust, however, they often find that such gloves and equipment slow them down, which they cannot afford to do. Especially now, when anyway their access to waste and earnings has reduced.

This “unwillingness” to wear gloves which they know will protect them from cuts and injuries needs to be looked at in the context of the precarity of their work and their need to get the most collection and segregation done in the least amount of time so as to at least have a livable income. Most of the workers were not aware of any specific healthcare scheme which was available to them as waste pickers. Most of the women shared that they only receive 4-5 hours of sleep every night, which also makes it challenging to perform laborious work during the day. Further, they have to work even during extreme weather events such as heat waves and heavy rainfall and are not used to maneuvering in these circumstances. They access public health services, which are often not sufficient, however, going to private hospitals is not an option.



Violation of workers' rights and freedom of association

The workforce engaged in sanitation work has been witnessing a decline in their organizing status. Discussion with workers and activists indicated that currently there are 25 unions of permanent SMC workers and 12 unions of permanent Valmiki AMC workers. The contractual workforce which is increasingly constituting a vast majority is not organized. Further, the self-employed waste pickers are also not organized in Ahmedabad and Surat, although some attempts have been made in the past. With increasing privatization of the work of waste collection, the vulnerabilities of the workforce are increasing making it challenging to organize.

The demand for removal of the contractual system is strong even from the permanent workers who regularly witness the plight of contractual workers. Workers indicated that in Ahmedabad only the permanent machine hole workers have a union. Permanent workers believe that contract workers are not able to organize because of their material realities, but they need to be aware of their exploitation and mobilize against it. A machine hole worker shared that *“kuch bhi takleef ho toh union waaley aakar khadey rehte hein aur humare haq ke liye ladte hein.”* (Whenever we face any challenge, the union stands alongside us and helps us fight for our rights). The fight to constitute the machine hole workers union, known as the manhole workers' union at the time, began in 1991 when getting into the drainage physically was rampant and normalized. The workers began questioning this practice, and conducted surveys to capture the reality of manual scavenging, leaders emerged and formed a *mandal* and carried out various *andolans*. They also got lab testing of samples from drainage to provide a scientific rationale pertaining to their demand of not entering the manholes. *Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal* played a key role in this process. Because of the efforts of the union, a case was registered in 1991 in the high court for a stay in the practice of manual scavenging, followed by another case in 2004, and finally in 2006 they received the order against manual scavenging because of the political power they had built. About the present scenario, one of the workers said, *“Hum hadtal karna nahi chahte kyunki ussey log hairan pareshan ho jayenge aur woh hum nahi chahte. Lekin jis tarah ze cheezein chal rahi hai aaney waaley samay mein gutter bhi band karne padenge. Jis din gutter band kar denge sarkaar gir jayegi.”* (We do not want to go on strike because it would trouble

and inconvenience people, which we do not wish to do. But with the way things are going, we may eventually have to stop working in the sewers. The day we close the sewers, the government will collapse).

The situation is similar in Surat. A woman safai karamchari in Surat who has been working since 2008, mentioned that during recess time she comes to the Union office in the SMC building. If she is late to work or if the residents see karamcharis sitting or taking breaks, the residents call the sanitary inspector/ sub-sanitary inspector to complain. In some instances, even their pictures and videos are sent on WhatsApp to the officials. She started the Rashtriya Safai Mazdoor Maha Sangh union in the SMC around five years back. Presently, the Union has approximately 300 members who are permanent safai karamcharis. She started the Union as she observed that women in this work were exploited in every possible way. She feels that the contractual safai karamcharis are compelled to do more work than the permanent workers and are paid very little for that work. She believes that the contractual system should be abolished.

Because of a lack of a collective and recognition of their work, the segregation of waste has also become an issue for waste collectors. AMC officials often come to the sorting site and trouble them, threatening them with eviction. Often, if an argument ensues, AMC officials confiscate the waste collected by the women, thus completely disregarding the labor and efforts that went into collecting the waste. The women have to go to AMC officials to get back the materials for which they end up paying up to 2,000 rupees. This purported fine is paid by the women by pooling together their money and ends up being a financial burden on them if it happens frequently. The women in Ahmedabad mentioned that various organizations have approached them about forming collectives, however, nothing has materialized yet. A lack of collective also hinders their access to schemes related to housing and pension, as often they have to undertake these processes alone which becomes challenging because of the bureaucratic requirements for documentation. However, some of the women shared that they are associated with NGOs such as SEWA and Navsarjan Trust and have received support from them during threat of eviction by the municipal corporation. The women expressed distrust towards having a contractor or middlemen between them and the scrap shops as that would mean parting with their earnings in the form of commissions to such intermediaries.

A woman working as a scrap dealer in Ahmedabad shared that the AMC officials often trouble her by shutting her shop and imposing a fine of 2,000 rupees if there is some garbage scattered around her shop. Sometimes police come to her shop to search for stolen things, accusing her of dealing with thieves. She also highlighted the issues with Material Recovery Facilities (MRF) wherein women are made to labor at these facilities for sorting of waste and have to compulsorily sell to the corporation. She stated that the rates are low as compared to selling in the open market where they have scope for negotiation with the dealers. She described how the bigger dealers dictate the rates by disseminating it across the chain. However, these rates are confirmed by the women from different dealers for verification. In general, there are two dealers/transporters between the scrap shop and the final user of the waste.

Some of the women have created informal structures to support each other, especially during displacement threats by AMC. One of the women who left this work after her cancer diagnosis two years back, eventually

took up a leadership role, while taking up another business of selling eggs. In the mornings, she stays at the sorting site to support the other women in case of any challenges and liaise with NGOs and AMC officials. The women mentioned that *dabaan waaley* i.e. AMC officials come to threaten them to vacate the sorting space, often resorting to throwing slippers at the workers, and using caste slurs. They have not registered cases under SC/ST Atrocities Act as they do not know the names of the officials and getting police support in such cases is difficult. SEWA employees also come at times to speak to AMC officials in such situations. The women are also planning to form a *Bachat Mandali* now for savings. The women were firm that their sorting space should be treated like a workplace, with provision of electricity, water, and toilets.

In 1997, Fr. Vincent of Navsarjan Trust started the work of building collectives of women in waste picking work in Surat. It started with one slum at Rasoolabad. The waste pickers faced tremendous problems. They were exploited by the private vendors to whom they sold the collected scrap. They were not paid the appropriate amounts for the scraps. The waste pickers also did not have any alternative place where they could sell the scrap. They all belonged to the Marathi Mahar (SC) community from the Khandesh region (Dhule, Nandurbar, etc.). The husbands of the women were alcoholics and were not involved in any work. Thus, the responsibility of the entire household fell on the women. The major challenge in forming the co-operative group of the waste picking women where they would sell the scrap was that most women had taken advance amounts from the private vendors and hence, were bound to sell the scrap to them only. Ten women who were debt-free were identified and the co-operative society of the waste picking women was established. They applied for a bigger place for the scrap store and also where the women could do the sorting work. SMC granted them a place around 1998-99.

The co-operative gradually grew and at its peak there were 125 women as its members. The co-operative accepted 17 types of scrap articles like glass, plastic, paper, etc. After 2005-06 when door-to-door waste collection was introduced by the SMC, the amount of scrap that was available to collect reduced drastically and it adversely impacted the earnings of the waste pickers. Previously, the women used to get the money daily after depositing the scrap to the vendor. After joining the co-operative, the women started getting their earnings on a monthly basis. Being a co-operative, the profits were distributed as dividends among its members. Another visible benefit observed was that the workers could save up money and construct pukka homes. The co-operative was instrumental in breaking the hegemony of the scrap dealer and *kabadiwalas* in the supply chain. Eventually, PF was also started by the co-operative for the members. But it was discontinued at the request of the members. A 50-year-old woman in Surat from the Mahar community shared that some of the women contribute 500 rupees every month to the Nari Bachat Mandal run by Navsarjan Trust. Previously, there was a PF system, but it was discontinued when they realized it was not beneficial for them. Now, they save their money in the Nari Bachat Gat. According to the Director of Navsarjan Trust, the only way to improve the condition of workers is through unionization, however, that is discouraged by the contractors, and the workers also fear losing their jobs. Without unions or collective bargaining, these workers continue to face poor conditions, including irregular wages and a lack of basic benefits.

Gendered dimensions

For women waste collectors, ‘safety’ takes on various dimensions, often dictated by their gender. Their work often forces them out of their *basti* at night as it is easier to collect waste during this time. Many of the respondents cited this as a concern as one can encounter all kinds of people and has often faced harassment. One of the women shared that they do not receive support from the men in their families even at night. “*Peene waley toh pee-pee kar so jaate hain, aur aurat ko kamaana padta hai. Toh kya karegi aurat. Jaana toh padega bacche ke liye*” (They drink and fall asleep while the women have to venture out to earn money. What can a woman do? She has to go to support the family and children). Some of the women shared that they go in groups rather than alone, indicating a strong kinship and support system. A woman who had been collecting waste for 15 years shared that she continued to go even when she was pregnant, until the day of her delivery. Even after delivery she would leave her newborn child with her mother and go for collection. Multiple women shared that they picked up waste picking work after marriage, as a compulsion, since their husbands were not working. Some of the women migrated to Ahmedabad because of marriage and took up this work as their husband’s family was also engaged in it. Thus, this was inherited by them either by birth or through marriage and is a hereditary occupation for most Nadia women who engage in this work. Women also shared that even within their maternal families, their education was not prioritized and the education of the male members was given preference with the limited resources. It was understood that the women would take up waste collection work.



Some women from the Valmiki community engaged as permanent workers with the AMC also shared that they took up the work only after migrating from their villages to Ahmedabad after marriage. One of the women got the job after her husband died. At their village, their families engaged in agriculture work which they also supported their families with before marriage. Another worker who took up waste picking work as a way to support her mother-in-law after marriage, who faced a paralysis, shared that if given the chance she would stick to the work of farming at her village which she did before migrating. *Chunney waaley ki koi izzat nahi hai, kewal mehnat hai. Hum mehnat karte hein, khota kaam nahi karte hein. Kisi ka ehshan nahi chahiye, bhaley gandgi bhi jhelna padey.* (There is no respect for those who clean, it is just hard work. We work hard, not dishonestly. We do not want anyone’s charity, even if it means enduring filth.)

However, despite these challenges, multiple women shared that being self-employed provides them flexibility which might not be possible in a job with fixed timings. Being their own employers provided them

with a sense of *azadi* or freedom to be able to arrange their day as per their domestic responsibilities. Some of them were earlier working in the construction sector, but being sole earning members of their household, as well as holding the burden for domestic work, made them take up the work of waste picking as it provided some semblance of flexibility in terms of planning their day. However, the concept of ‘rest’ and ‘leisure’ is not prevalent in the lives of waste pickers. Dividing their waking hours between collecting and segregating waste and domestic chores, the women are not left with any time for catering to their health and thinking about a future beyond this reality. Laboring through period pain and pregnancies was a common occurrence in their lives. While some of the women were keen on continuing with their self-employed status because of the flexibility it brings, others were keen on getting recognition as a government employee with the attached benefits, especially that pertaining to retirement. “*Aadat*” and “*majburi*” were oft repeated words specially when speaking about domestic burdens, and the hazardous nature of the work.

For permanent women *safari kamdars* often the areas of work are isolated and they are the sole cleaner in the area, which leads to a situation where they end up feeling unsafe. Sometimes they end up taking a relative along to accompany them in such areas, but there is no support from the corporation to ensure their safety as women workers. A woman who earlier served as a permanent worker shared that her salary was 350 rupees for close to 22 years, with no changes, after which she got permanent employment. Women from the Mahar community, working as night sweepers in Surat also highlighted safety concerns and harassment from drunkards while working at night. One of the women indicated that she traveled nearly 80 kilometers to reach the worksite at 10 pm, work till 2 am and then return. She continues with this despite the challenges because she hopes to secure a permanent position with the SMC.

It is to be noted that the current unions because of the gender concentration of mostly men has been alienating towards the women workers. According to one of the key leaders of the Rashtriya Safai Mazdoor Maha Sangh, one of the 25 unions of SMC safai kamdars, her major reason behind starting the Union was because the women safai karamcharis face mental, physical, and even sexual harassment at the hands of the SMC officials, sanitary inspectors, and even from the men from other Unions. They approach the women who are working as safai karamcharis on the pretext of offering them office work as attenders (attender is not an official post but is created by the SMC officials). This way the woman will not have to do the cleaning and brushing work. Then they demand sexual favors from the women. If the woman denies it or refuses to accept the offer of office work, she is targeted by the officials by allotting her areas that are far, made to do more work, and keep mentally harassing her.

The union leader claimed that this happens with almost all the women workers in the SMC. Inappropriate behavior and inappropriate physical touching of women is common and rampant. Women are so terrified that they are afraid to even file an official complaint against the harassment. She added that she does not invite the women in the union office of the SMC as the men are always on the lookout to exploit women. She also believes that since she is a woman, she was allotted the smallest office for the Union in the SMC premises. Remarks like “*Yeh mahila kya uniongiri karegi*” are common (How will this woman run a

union?). She also says that many Sanitary Inspectors/ Sub- Sanitary Inspectors are inebriated while on duty and nobody acts against them. In that state, they continue to exploit the women.

Living conditions in the city

It is particularly significant to discuss the housing condition of workers as that has a direct impact on their ability to perform the laborious work of cleaning. Most of the workers stayed in rental accommodations in slums or in squatter settlements. Apart from the general challenges of living in such conditions, other aspects which affect their health include the quality of water which they are able to access. Women from one of the bastis in Ahmedabad which predominantly houses waste pickers shared that the water they have been getting lately in the common tap is often dirty, especially in the mornings, which makes it not fit for consumption. Because this is a notified slum, they informed AMC officials who visited and repaired the pipelines, however, the condition did not improve. They finally get clean water by 8 AM, or they have to procure water from other sources by paying.



Often, the workers do not have an independent toilet at their home and have to queue up for using community toilets. One of the women mentioned that the gutter lines are always dirty which can lead to diseases and health challenges. One of the contract-based street sweepers in Ahmedabad, who is a migrant from Mandal shared that his housing condition is reflected in the amount he gets paid. Since he makes only 8,000 rupees through street sweeping work, he also tries to find other work so as to be able to pay a rent of 5,000 rupees and survive. His living situation is not adequate as often during rains the drainage next to his house overflows and creates challenges and health risks. A 50-year-old waste picker in Surat shared that she used to live in a rented house but bought her own home a few years ago. Unfortunately, the house is old and in poor condition, offering very little space. It remains a kaccha structure, making her living situation challenging.

Most of the permanent AMC workers were satisfied with their housing situation as they had received housing support from the government and most had houses in their names because of loans they were able to take from the Government as sanitation workers. The struggle was faced by contractual employees who receive no such support and mostly reside in cramped rented accommodations, with the meager earnings going into rents and other expenses for upkeep given the regular issues at these accommodations. However, some of the union members indicated that around 50% of the AMC permanent workers also have not received a home, especially those who became permanent after 2004, for which the union has been constantly putting up a demand under the *Ambedkar Awaas Yojana*.

Workers who were residing on a plot of railway land had their own set of challenges, especially the constant threat of eviction, which often disrupted their daily routine and work. The railway authorities and AMC officials view them as encroachers, because of which their *basti* is not recognized and regularly bulldozed, however, they build it back up as they have been residing in that area since the past 20 years, having migrated from Patan and Mehsana in Gujarat. Their *basti* has two more communities - tribal migrants and those belonging to Denotified Tribes. 50 people from the Valmiki community are residing in this *basti*, with 30 of them involved in private cleaning work at societies, four working as waste pickers, and three as street sweepers on contract. All their *jhuggis* are made of tarpaulin and bamboo, with no access to electricity, water supply, or toilets. To procure batteries, they end up spending 1,500 to 2,000 a month.

Socio-economic vulnerability and caste discrimination

Workers engaged in urban sanitation and waste management belong to historically oppressed communities. The caste discrimination and stigma, which comes inherent with the work, and the lack of mobility that contractualization pushes them into through precarious roles, reduces the chances to take up alternate employment opportunities. The work of sanitation and waste management in Ahmedabad and Surat has witnessed some transformations concerning the social profile of the workers who are undertaking this work now. In the previous study with tribal migrant workers engaged in door-to-door waste collection in Ahmedabad, Surat, and Gandhinagar, this transformation and its impacts were highlighted (Singh & Mane, 2023). Not just door-to-door waste collection, but any municipal work which is being tendered out to private entities is now seeking tribal migrants as well, as it is easier to hire them at the lowest wages without any social protection.

For Valmiki workers engaging in street sweeping and sanitation work, tracing back to when their ancestors picked up this work was difficult. Even in the villages, since they did not own much land, which predominantly belonged to Patels and Rabaris, cleaning work was performed on the fields and in houses, however, over there they were only provided with meals and no wages for their labor. They opined that in the cities at least they can earn money through their labor. Picking up other forms of work was challenging given the lack of opportunities for education and upskilling. The workers added that often they are invited to play the *dhhol* at weddings and *pujas* both at their villages and in Ahmedabad, which is also a traditional occupation for them. For instance, during *Navratri* they play drums all the nine nights and earn around 5,000-6,000 rupees.

Some of the Valmiki workers, who are permanent workers with the AMC trace their roots back to Saurashtra, however, now they consider themselves local as they have a house here and migrated a generation back. In machine hole cleaning work, workers expressed that more than 90% of the labor is from the Valmiki community. Even at the supervisory level, around 70% is from the Valmiki community. Around 25% are now tribal migrants, and only the remaining 5% belong to the 'general category'. Workers shared that despite being permanent workers they still face discrimination because of their caste identity. Often the Patels and other 'upper castes' in the department sit on the chairs while specifically the Valmiki workers

are made to sit on the ground, during events. Some of the workers shared that the only reason they stop from displaying a complete casteist attitude is because those workers who are part of the union know that they can file cases of atrocities under the SC/ST Atrocity act against such individuals, to show their collective power.

Permanent workers who have been able to save money to purchase property in Ahmedabad, face constraints given their caste identity. “*Seedhe nahi puchte jaati. Puchte hein Patel ho, Brahman ho? Aur fir document dekh kar pakad lete hain*” (They do not ask our caste directly. They ask, 'Are you a Patel or a Brahmin?' And then, after checking the documents, they get to know). Even with regard to work they face a lot of challenges as given their caste, officials believe that they can do any unclean work, even if it involves picking up dead animals. There is often an extra burden on the Valmiki workers to perform all sorts of labor, right from sweeping the areas, to collecting the waste, putting it in lorries, and transporting it to the nearest dumpster.

One of the contract workers who migrated from Mandal, Gujarat, four years back shared that he migrated with the hope that he would find good work in a big city like Ahmedabad. However, he ended up picking the same “unclean” work which his mother also does in the village. People have shouted at him and used rude language if by chance, while sweeping, dust falls on their car because of the wind. “*Mere hisaab se galat hai ki itna hard kaam Valmiki samuday ko hi karna padhta hai.* (In my opinion, it is wrong that only the Valmiki community has to do such hard work). According to him, doing this work is not wrong, but the fact that they do not get the respect and compensation for the sort of work they do is what bothers him the most. “*Kaam karte hain tab paani peene mein bhi sangharsh karna padhta hai. Humein kayi log insaan manta hi nahi hein kyunki hum ye kaam karte hein. Kahin baithne nahi dete, koi cheez chuune nahi dete, gaali galoch karna, yeh sab humein bardasht karna padhta hai.*” (When we work, we even have to struggle to get water to drink. Many people do not consider us human because we do this work. We are not allowed to sit anywhere, not allowed to touch anything, and have to endure verbal abuse and insults) The main reason for this as per him is the lack of access to education for the Valmiki community. He is not able to ensure good quality education for his children because of his low income. He shared that often families have to discontinue the education of their children and get them into this work in order to sustain financially. He explained that he remembers his grandmother doing sanitation work in the village where she was hired by the Gram Panchayat, and her whole life went into it. His mother, who is more than 60 years old, has also been doing this work since she got married around 45 years ago. Even today she gets only 2,500 to 3,000 rupees per month. He reflected on how he has been facing so many concerns in the city, but the condition in the villages is even worse. The so-called “upper castes” do not even look at them as humans. His mother still cleans people’s toilets for 10-15 rupees. Seeing all this he came to the city, but he has encountered the same systems here. Caste discrimination and oppression exists in the city as well and the Valmiki community endures it. According to him, both organizing and getting educated are critical to get out of this oppression. However, they have completely decimated the public schooling system and private schooling is inaccessible to Valmiki children.

The workers also added that “upper caste” people have started entering the work. And they do not do any work. Their salary slip might say “labor” but they are not given any work. They just remain on the payroll and receive salaries. The consequence of this is twofold - non-Valmiki are hired who do not do the cleaning work, the burden of which falls on the Valmiki workers. The only worker from the Brahmin community that we encountered was at a toilet run by Toilet and Toilet Private Limited. However, it is pertinent to note that they were not performing the cleaning work directly. They sit at the collection counter, for 18 hours in the day, and hire cleaning staff informally to clean the toilets for 100 rupees, once or twice a day as required.

Tribal migrants have also been undertaking toilet cleaning work over the last 3-5 years. A 22-year-old Bhil Adivasi from Dahod indicated that he initially migrated with his parents for construction work but is now seeking work in door-to-door waste collection vehicles. In the interim, he drove mobile toilets for a monthly salary of 9,000 rupees. Just like in the case of door-to-door waste collection work, existing networks are playing a key role in this work reaching tribal migrant workers. The uncertainty surrounding construction work is a key reason for tribal migrants' transition to waste collection and toilet cleaning work in the city. However, the stigma they end up experiencing with this work is not something they anticipate before undertaking it. A worker who was engaged in cleaning mobile toilets for a few months shared that apart from driving the mobile toilet to a specific spot at seven in the morning, he also had to drive the vehicle 3-4 times a day to a sewage station to empty the tank. The abuse he faced during this process made him move back to construction work, despite its challenges. He shared that the supervisors who regularly visited to monitor the work were extremely abusive and rude towards him, especially when the worker refused to clean the toilet after each usage. He was also forced to clean if someone had defecated outside the toilet. This was not mentioned to him when he was hired. After a while, he could not endure it any longer and left the work.



Women from the Nadia community shared that they are often asked why they engage in this “*neeche wala kaam*” (lowly work). Some of the women shared that at least three generations of their family have engaged in this work. The work is perceived to be dirty by the society and they can sense that people like to keep their distance from them when they are out collecting waste. However, they added that generationally their community has been engaging in this work, because of which the current generation is also engaging in it.

According to an activist, where there are no Valmikis available for such work, Nadia community will be present. One of the women shared that the discrimination is now normalized as people refuse to even drink

water from their hands or sit near them. “*Neechi jaat ke hein isliye koyi baithta bhi nahi, bolta bhi nahi.*” (Since we are considered lower caste, people do not like to sit with us or talk to us). She added that the other community that engages in this work are *Valmiki*s who predominantly do street sweeping or cleaning work in private localities, however, they are able to recover waste at the source and then sell it at scrap shops. Some of the women also added that *Valmiki*s still have some political power to be able to secure government jobs. The same is not the case for the *Nadia* community, as they feel their community is invisible in the eyes of the State. “*Baaki kachra binney waley samaj ko sarkari naukri milti hai, humare Nadia samaaj ko nahi milti*” (Other communities engaged in waste handling work get government jobs but our *Nadia* community does not get that benefit). On being asked whether they would want their children to do the same work they shared that they would not wish this upon them as this work lacks any form of financial or social security. Hence, they have attempted to ensure that their children are going to schools, however it is fraught with challenges.

Waste pickers in Surat from the *Mahar* community have predominantly migrated from Dhule, Nandurbar, Jalgaon, Amalner, or Sindhakheda in Maharashtra a generation ago, increasing their vulnerabilities because of the triple burden of their gender, caste, and migration status. They migrated in search of employment because they faced a lack of job opportunities in their native places, and Surat city is relatively close to their districts. Their relatives got into this work after migrating, following others from their community who provided guidance. They often face mistreatment, especially when they go to collect waste in neighborhoods or apartments, residents abuse them and call them thieves. Security guards frequently deny them entry and use offensive language including caste slurs. One of the workers shared that her community is engaged in waste collection because ‘upper caste’ individuals do not want to do this work, leaving her community with few opportunities in other sectors. She feels that this line of work negatively impacts their dignity and self-worth. She hopes that the next generation will receive an education and pursue better job opportunities, rather than continuing in waste collection. Her dream is for her children to have a brighter future and to break free from the challenges she has faced. Workers from the *Mahar* community were also found to be engaged in night sweeping and brushing - contractual jobs which are even more precarious than day sweeping work. They were indicated to have migrated 2-3 generations back to Surat.

The Warasdar System

The *Warasdar* system is a system wherein the next of kin of municipal sanitation workers are assured a job after the death or injury leading to incapacitation of the workers. This system continues owing to a multitude of factors. Foremost is the fact that it provides an assured government job to a section of workers who are often denied other avenues of employment. The perpetuation of the caste system in urban municipal jobs has led to a situation wherein the collective imagination of the *Valmiki* community has been attacked, and they are made to believe that this is the only job that they and their children are destined to perform.

In 2006, the machine hole worker union was able to institute a *Warasdar* system for the workers, wherein if the workers became unfit for work, their family members would get the job in their place. Earlier, this was not followed, even if the workers died. After 2006, workers were added through the *Warasdar* system and around 900 such workers received permanent jobs as next of kin. If this system did not exist then even the remaining workers would have been non-permanent or contract hires as no new hiring is happening for permanent workers in this work now. The only permanent workers are next of kin of the earlier generation of permanent workers. Most of the permanent workers we spoke to in Ahmedabad got the job because of the *Warasdar* system.

“Pehle se karte aa rahey hein hum hi log ye kaam, parampara hai, aur toh kaun karega, hum hi kar sakte hein. Agar kahin aur koi achi naukri mili, toh kar lenge” (laughs). (“We have been doing this work for generations; it is our tradition. Who else will do it? Only we can do it. If we get a good job somewhere else, we will do it.”), said a machine-hole worker who holds a permanent position with the municipal corporation. This feeling was echoed by a worker from the Valmiki community who works as a sanitation worker with AMC - *“Jo kaam koi nahi kar sakta woh Valmiki samaj karta hai”* (The job no one can do, the Valmiki community can do). However, he added that he had to pick up this work because of a lack of education. Their father, who had a permanent sanitation job at the AMC, tried to ensure that all the children were educated but it was not possible at the time. The worker got his father’s job under the *Warasdar* system, and opined that the government support for their community is good as the opportunity to get this job is available to them. He added that if his children, who are receiving education in private schools, are able to study well and get other jobs through their capability, he would be happy. But the *Warasdar* system is favorable for the community and should remain. He explained that the union - *Naukar Mandal* fought hard to get contractual jobs converted to permanent jobs and get the *Warasdar* jobs.

Another permanent worker with the AMC expressed that *“Yehi chalta raha hai humare dada pardada ke samay se. Toh yeh chalta hi rahega. Mainey aisa na hi suna hai aur na hi dekha hai ki kisi aur jaati ke log ye kaam kar rahe hein.”* (This has been going on since the time of our ancestors. This will continue, I have neither heard nor seen people from any other caste doing this work). According to him the *Warasdar* system should remain as it provides security to people of his community. But he added that he will leave decisions about the future on to his children. Since he only has two children, unlike his parents who had five, he has the means to educate both of them so that they have the option for an alternate life. He could not get proper education so he had no other option but to pick up this job. Workers highlighted instances where shops opened by Valmikis were boycotted, and their children not receiving admission in schools after seeing caste certificates. *Chuuu chuut abhi bhi chaalo hai humare samaaj mein. Mein mehnat kar raha hun ki apne bachche ko padhaun, lekin admission nahi de rahe toh ab kya karun.* (Caste discrimination still exists in our society. I am working hard to educate my children, but when they are not being given admission, what can I do?)

The system runs so deep in ensuring that Valmiki continue with this work that this job security gets taken away if a worker takes a promotion to a supervisory position. “*Agar mainey pehla ya dusra promotion le liya toh mere bache ko naukri nahi milegi.*” (If I take one or two promotions then my child will not get the job in my place under the *warasdar* system). This is the reason why many from the community refuse the promotions and stick to lower-grade labor roles. “*Is samuday mein maansikta aisi baith gayi hai, jiski wajah se woh jaagruk hote nahi hein, aur aagey badhne ki raah nahi milti.*” (There is a psychology within the community now because of which they cannot become aware of their exploitation and do not find ways to progress). The workers are required to give an exam for promotion, which most of the experienced permanent workers also end up skipping. Promotion hinged on two factors, education of the workers and their will to move up the ladder and forego the opportunity for their next of kin to get their job. Thus, the *Warasdar* system has led to further deepening of the caste-based nature of this occupation, in the absence of any other social and economic safeguards or reparations.

However, some of the workers shared that often this denial of supervisory positions is from the municipal corporation, especially when it comes to Valmiki workers. Thus, they end up laboring in lower positions. For instance, one of the *safai karamcharis* in Surat who got his mother’s job under the *Warasdar* system shared that despite holding a degree in Bachelor of Commerce (B. Com), getting a job has been challenging because of which he took up his mother’s job. Moreover, his degree was ignored and he was offered the job of a cleaner. He added that most of the Sanitary Inspectors and Sub-sanitary Inspectors he has come across were from the general category and have displayed insensitivity and casteist behavior. He opined that these positions should be held by *Safai Karmacharis* themselves who could be promoted after gaining experience in the work. He was in support of the *Warasdar* system as it offered job security to the community. 60% of the *safai kamdar* of AMC must be Valmiki and 40% other communities, such as Patel, Rabaaris, Thakore, and Brahmins, on paper, as per the workers. They do not join the union and they are given office work, rather than the work that Valmiki sanitation workers do. “*Waisey toh Amit Shah ne bhi jhaadu uthaya hua hai, Modiji ne bhi uthaya hua hai. Ab aur kya bolun*” (Amit Shah has also picked up a broom, and so has Modiji. Now, what else can I say?) quipped a worker, about “upper castes” entering this work, implying that it is merely pretense.

According to a permanent *safai karmchari* in Surat belonging to the Valmiki community, when even basic equipment was not available, her family carried the night soil on their heads and did this work without any pay for generations. Now, when the work has become secure and pays well for permanent positions, other communities have become interested in this work. She claims that not many people from the Valmiki community are employed in the permanent positions. Patels and Marwaris have also entered this work and are beginning to take over the permanent roles. The last recruitment for the permanent positions happened in 2017. During the recruitment process, the non-Valmiki bribe the people from the SMC who are in-charge of the recruitment process to secure these jobs. As a result, people from the Valmiki community are forced to work under private contractors to do the cleaning work in residential complexes, apartments, companies, etc. Sometimes, the *safai karmacharis* from the other communities are allotted office work like peons and

attenders and they do not do the cleaning work. She feels that the permanent safai karamchhari positions should be completely reserved for the communities like Valmiki who have been doing this work for generations.

A critical reason for this situation is the lack of education among the Valmiki community, systematically ensured by the current education system. “*Shiksha ka abhav sabse bada karan hai. Na woh padhte hain aur warasdar ki naukri mil hi jaati hai.*” (Lack of education is the biggest reason. They do not get to study and they anyway end up getting sanitation jobs under the Warasdar system). One of the workers at a Valmiki basti in Ahmedabad shared that there are no schools near to their bastis and sending their children far away is expensive and they also do not have time to pick up and drop them to the schools. Currently, very few children in their *basti* attend school regularly. Women street sweepers in Surat also shared that their children might continue in this line of work because this work is permanent, but they also wish for their children to have better opportunities and stable, dignified jobs. They want a better future for their children and hope they can pursue careers that offer greater respect and security.

However, workers shared that in many cases, despite getting educated there is no guarantee that their children would be accepted in other jobs because of the stigma attached with their caste occupation. The government needs to show commitment to the community that they will have equal opportunities to compete for other jobs. At present, children from their community do not even get admission to schools easily, especially private schools where education quality is better. Workers shared that only the Valmiki community does not need to do this work, others can also do it, but right now this mentality has taken a grip on the community and they are not able to come out of it because of a lack of access to education. Multiple workers expressed that they wanted their community to move on from this work and do not want their children to do it either, however, lack of avenues becomes a hindrance. For this reason, despite wanting to leave this work, the majority of the workers expressed their support for the *Warasdar* system as it assures them of some job opportunities amid the rampant caste discrimination and denial of opportunities faced in other sectors. Thus, the demand for maintaining the system seems to be made under structural constraints.

Technological shifts

Discussion with the machine hole workers indicated that earlier machine hole workers were known as manhole workers, given the manual nature of the work. However, despite the transition, machines are only sent in when the blockage is too heavy, i.e., 100-150 feet deep and clearing it manually is not possible. *Kaam toh abhi bhi manually hota hai, naam bas machine hole workers hai.* (The work is still done manually; the only thing is that they are called machine hole workers.) The work is mostly done manually using rods. Moreover, using machines is only feasible on main roads, as they are too big for smaller lanes and *chawlis* (slums). Often manholes are old, which makes the process time consuming and challenging. These machines, Super Sucker Machine and Sewer Jetting Machine, are owned by private companies and the corporation acquires them through a tendering system;

and they are later deployed for the worker to use. Since the machines are rotated amongst wards, often some workers do not have access to it. There is an entrepreneurial scheme of next of kin of workers that they can purchase the machines at reduced interest rates. However, there is no surety that tender would be given to them, thus increasing the possibility of putting them in debt. They have also transitioned to hydraulic bucket rickshaws which the workers can use for cleaning the machine holes.

The technological shifts have remained largely unsuccessful in introducing any transformational shifts in the practice of manual labor in this realm, given the lack of implementation and monitoring by the state and the infrastructural challenges. Workers shared that for cleaning and housekeeping work across the world now there is machinery which ensures that workers' health is maintained. However, the AMC needs to ensure that the machinery is procured and be willing to spend money on that, while at the same time paying the workers fairly. For instance, there has been a long-standing demand for gas monitors so that the workers are aware of the toxic fumes as soon as the gutter is opened, especially the ones that have been shut for many years. Other demands were specialized masks which would protect them from toxic fumes, hand Safety Gloves which are especially anti-cut, first aid box, and air compressor. These should be compulsory, and have been mandated based on the experiences in manual scavenging. There are around 44 such equipment out of which 18 are compulsorily to be provided, but they are not in practice. On being asked whether mechanization of the work would lead to redundancy of human labor, a worker stated that *“machine ka kaam machine karti hai aur insaan ka kaam insaan. Machine chalane ke liye bhi insaan ki hi zarurat hai. Jahan machinery laana zaruri hai, yahan hona chahiye.”* (The machine does the work of the machine, and the human does the work of the human. Even to operate the machine, a human is required. Where machinery is necessary, it should be present).

Most of the women waste pickers believed that given the current waste disposal in the city, a lot of work has to be done manually, hence they do not foresee any technology that can replace this effort. As per them, the work of collection and segregation is most effective when performed by hand since everything is mixed together and they know which material can be recovered and sold. This 'skill' is often not recognized by the State and the society in general. Workers were of the opinion that if the State decides to stop this work, then they should be provided with an alternate government employment so as to not hamper their livelihood, otherwise this manual work should continue and they should get the recognition for their contribution.

DISCUSSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

This qualitative study presents direct narratives of workers regarding caste and labor realities they encounter and how it gets exacerbated within the current regime of privatization and contractualization of this essential but hazardous and stigmatized work. The study exposes the inadequacies of the current regime. It is crucial to look beyond merely the economic aspects and bring the socio-political aspects of this work into the conversation. Insights from workers indicated the prevalence of job insecurity because of the increasing reliance on contractual workers, in machine holes and street sweeping work. They often lack fixed contracts, leading to uncertainty in their positions. There has been a decline in permanent hiring over the years, with most workers now solely being hired on contracts. Under the contract system workers have been facing lower wages and decline in social security and labor rights. There are notable wage disparities between permanent and contract workers, with the latter often earning significantly less and lacking job security, with the constant threat of being fired, which negatively impacts their economic stability. Worker union support was also cited to be crucial which is only available for permanent workforce. Further, informal labor systems create accountability issues by shifting the onus for worker rights on to contractors, who cannot be held accountable for any violations. Many workers are apprehensive about their contractual status, which limits their willingness to share concerns or seek help, thus, feeling alienated from the municipal corporation and the existing union of permanent workers. They do not have formal contracts, making it difficult to prove employment or seek recourse for grievances. Workers also expressed a strong desire for permanent jobs to gain access to government benefits such as healthcare, pension, and job security for their families.



Cleaners in private societies, and informal waste pickers highlighted the lack of recognition for their essential work, indicating a broader issue of undervaluation of labor in this sector. The current actions by the AMC and SMC, given the invisibility of waste pickers in the government system of conservancy and waste management, is posing severe threats to waste pickers, along with the depleting access to waste because of the system of privatization. Given this, the state needs to conduct a comprehensive survey of waste pickers and provide them with identification, all of which is covered under the SWM Rules, 2016. Further, ensuring waste pickers have adequate access to spaces for sorting is also a key demand and something that municipal corporations need to pay attention towards.

Permanent workers reported feeling a sense of security and increased pay compared to their previous daily wage roles, highlighting the importance of job stability. They also appreciated the support of the unions, which provides them with a sense of community and solidarity, specially to navigate challenging circumstances and put forward their demands for changes. However, workers are struggling to secure permanent jobs. For example, Valmiki workers are negotiating with AMC but remain pessimistic about their chances of obtaining permanent roles. Overall, the responses indicate a systemic issue with the contractualization of labor, leading to job insecurity, lack of benefits, and insufficient recognition of essential workers in the sanitation sector. The shift towards a contractual labor system in municipal services undermines the quality of work life for sanitation workers and affects the overall efficiency and effectiveness of municipal services.

‘Just housing’ for workers, education for their children, strict action against caste discrimination, reinstatement of the old pension scheme and its applicability for even contract workers, minimum wages, health benefits even at private hospitals, filling the gap in workforce through permanent hiring, provision of ID cards for all categories of workers to recognize their status as workers, and efforts towards abolishment of the contract system through regularization of workers, were some of the key demands highlighted by the sanitation workers who participated in the research. Implementing stronger regulations for contractors is also necessary in the interim, to ensure accountability and job security. Another aspect is strengthening of union representation for contract workers as currently they do not form a part of the unionized workforce, leading to a lack of forum to advocate for their rights. Training programs to support workers to transition from contractual to permanent roles, and within permanent roles from labor to supervisory positions should also be an area of focus for the municipal corporations. There is a need to utilize progressive judgements such as the Bombay High Court’s judgment in March 2024 which upheld the Industrial Tribunal’s order directing the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai to regularize the employment of 580 sanitation workers. The court gave a strong statement that “in a welfare state, cleanliness for one class of citizens cannot be achieved by engaging in ‘slavery’ of others.” Importantly, the court also explicitly stated the caste-based ties of the work and that they cannot be compared to any other contract labor disputes (Verdictum, 2024). Such actions are only possible through undertaking a comprehensive enumeration and survey of workers, as lack of data breeds invisibility which leads to challenges in linking workers to entitlements, and ensuring access to alternative livelihoods. ULBs need to invest in ensuring eradication of manual handling of waste, without affecting the earnings of workers.

The ILO’s decent work agenda which includes dignified and safe working conditions, no discrimination in terms of wages and income, effective representation and recognition as workers, voice in redressing their problems and collective bargaining, and claim on state resources need to be centered as well. Given that transportation costs are a heavy burden for the workers because of the constant mobility required for their work, the ULBs need to provide transportation subsidies to the workers. Moreover, stronger efforts need to be put into including the general public into the conversation and increasing their accountability for proper segregation of waste at source, littering on roads, and checking improper disposal into drains to avoid clogging. Waste pickers we spoke to during the survey requested that the government should have stronger measures to ensure segregation at source such that the job becomes slightly easier for workers as currently they have to sift through mixed waste which is challenging. Given the hazardous nature of the work and the overrepresentation of SC and ST communities in this work, death and injuries because of state negligence should be treated as atrocities.

Caste based discrimination and labor rights need to be spoken of simultaneously when it comes to sanitation workers and waste pickers. Unions need to accept that there is a lot of work to be done to address the social and cultural differences between the workers engaged in conservancy work. Often while advocating for labor rights such as minimum wages, social security, and weekly offs for all workers, regardless of the caste-based nature of the work, the intent might be to ensure equal treatment and dignity

of labor and might help communities to improve their socio-economic condition, however, there can also be a risk of perpetuating caste-based occupations. Thus, the approach needs to be two-pronged wherein while improving the current situation for workers, especially in “unclean” work it is also important to focus on generating alternate livelihood opportunities for upward mobility and for breaking the cycle of caste.

The study highlights that the demand for *Warasdar* jobs is because of intense vulnerabilities and discrimination. When vulnerabilities will reduce through the enforcement of strict labor laws across all categories of workers, including contract and informal workers, these demands will automatically reduce. Despite their support for the *Warasdar* system or the acceptance of their community performing this work for generations, the unanimous desire expressed by the workers was for their children to have a different future which did not entail doing this work. Caste identity clearly poses a strong hindrance towards access to education, highlighting the need for special programs for children. Apart from skill-based training for the current workforce, it is also important to ensure quality education for their children, so that more avenues open up for them in the future. Linking them to schooling under the current system is critical but it does not end there. The State should also endeavor to improve government school standards and initiate conversations towards the Common School System.

In a workshop held in Ahmedabad on 07 December 2024 to disseminate the findings of the study, various activists, organizations, and workers participated. While formalization of work is the only way forward to achieve dignity, the current system is moving in the opposite direction. The participants deliberated how this can be resisted by addressing the barriers to organizing and the actions which can help in transcending the barriers. Based on the deliberations during the event, the following actionable steps were suggested:

- It is critical to work on identification of workers and linking them to basic entitlements and documents. This can be done by creating a basic profile of workers based on occupation classification and use that data to advocate with the ULBs.
- Create a platform of contract workers holding regular ward-wise meetings and trainings to facilitate a move towards organizing contractual and casual workers across work categories.
- Ward-level groups can be created for holding such meetings and training on rights and entitlements, by first piloting in a few wards. These groups can advocate to the ward-committees.
- Conducting medical checkup of workers under the Dhanwantri scheme and track the data regarding health of the workers, which can be used for advocacy regarding the health of the workers.
- Regular advocacy with the government by filing applications to create evidence of demands raised with the state.
- Creating a key demands charter or *maang patra* for combined advocacy pertaining to urban sanitation workers

BR Ambedkar is known to have held meetings with workers from Mumbai and Delhi, leading to the creation of a sanitation workers union in Delhi in 1944. Ambedkar's efforts revolved around urging sanitation workers to abandon what was imposed as their “traditional occupation of manual cleaning.” At the same time, he was persistent in highlighting the importance of organizing sanitation workers to wage a collective fight for better working conditions and treatment in society through establishing legal framework to establish their rights, which would forge the path for their progress towards occupation mobility and educational opportunities (Shyamlal, 2018, p. 79, 81, as cited in Alves, 2022). Once basic rights of workers are protected and their immediate needs met, it opens up possibilities for the communities engaged in this work to imagine different and just futures.



ANNEXURES

Annexure A: Interview Guide

A. Questions common to all workers

Personal Information

1. Name
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Religion and caste
5. Education qualification
6. Where are you from?
7. If migrant- When and why did you come to this city and how long have you been here for? Do you live here alone or with your family?
8. Are you married? How many people are there in your family? How many of them are your dependents?
9. How many children do you have and of what age? Do they go to school?
10. Which area in Ahmedabad do you live in?

Questions Related to Employment and Economic Conditions

1. Can you please tell me about your work? What work are you engaged in? How and when did you begin engaging in this work?
2. What does a work day in your life look like?
3. How much are you able to earn in a month? Is this a fixed amount or does it fluctuate?
4. Have your earnings changed over the last few years? Why?
5. Is this your only source of employment or do you have some other work? If yes, what is it and how do you manage the time?

6. Are you able to save? What do you generally save for?
7. Are you the sole earning member of the family? If not, is there anyone else who is in the similar line of work?

Questions Related to Health and Housing

1. Where do you live and what is the housing condition like? Do you have access to basic infrastructure such as water, toilets, and sanitation? Can you describe these facilities?
2. How much have you paid for these basic services in the last month?
3. Do you pay rent? If yes, how much?
4. Are you satisfied with your living situation? Does it affect your health and your ability to work? Have your living conditions changed over the years?
5. What is your daily diet like? How many hours of sleep do you get?
6. Do you have access to safety equipment or PPE?
7. Have you recently felt unwell? What are the main health problems you face? Why do you think that was and what steps did you take after that?
8. Do you think your work affects your general health and well-being?
9. Have you faced any health problems due to adverse weather conditions (heatwaves/monsoons / cold)? Has it affected or altered your working hours and your working capacity? How do you cope with it?
10. Are you able to access the public healthcare services in the city? If not, what are the reasons?

11. Do you think the situation is different for your gender when it comes to this work?
12. Have you ever carried on with the work while being pregnant?
13. Do you still have to go to work when you are feeling unwell or do you generally take leave?

Questions related to social conditions

1. Do you belong to a caste or tribal group which has historically done this work? If yes, why do you think that is so?
2. If not, why did you enter this work?
3. What do you think is the perception of this work among people? Does that affect their attitude towards you?
4. How are you treated by authorities - including the police, government officials, supervisors, contractors, private companies, NGOs, and unions?
5. Are you a part of any union or any other collective such as SHG or cooperatives? If yes, does that help you? Why or why not?
6. What do you think are the value or benefits of your work - personal and societal benefits?
7. Are you aware of any government benefits or schemes? Are you availing of any of them?

Questions related to future aspirations

1. Would you want your children to continue engaging in this work?
2. What are your aspirations for the future - for yourself, your family, and your community?
3. Have you noticed any changes in how this work is managed over the years? What do you think is the reason for these changes?
4. Do you think there should be a reservation for your caste category for this work?

5. What technological changes have you seen in your work over the years?
6. Do you think technological changes can happen in the work you do? How do you think it would affect your work prospects?

B1. Questions for Informal waste pickers

1. Roughly, can you tell us how many hours you engage in waste picking in a day?
2. What are the areas that you cover and how far are these areas from your place of residence/stay?
3. Do you have any sort of identity card?
4. Do you work alone or in groups?
5. What kinds of equipment and tools do you carry while doing the work / collecting waste? Have you experienced difficulties due to lack of adequate tools?
6. What are the kinds of waste that you collect? Do you collect waste that is potentially hazardous? If yes, how do you deal with them? Do you think it affects your health?
7. Do you collect waste from private societies and offices as well?
8. How do you travel around to collect waste? How much of your time is spent traveling?
9. Do you carry the waste to the sorting site by hand or through transportation? If using transportation, what are your monthly expenses on that?
10. Are you involved in the process of sorting and are you given a designated place for sorting? If not, how do you manage?
11. Who do you sell the waste to? The recyclers or some middlemen? Does being self-employed affect your negotiating power? Who decides the rates?

12. What are your estimated earnings from waste picking? Is it subjected to fluctuation and how? What is the mode of transaction?
13. Do you have a bank account?
14. Do you have any other source of employment? If yes, what, and how do you manage the hours?
15. Have you faced any harassment of any kind? It may be from the AMC, the police, or the people in general. What kind of other problems do you face in this line of work?
16. Have you gained any benefits from people for whom you work?
17. How do you feel about privatization and contractualization? Has your access to waste and its value chain been affected by the privatization of waste work?
18. What sort of interventions do you want to see in this line of work?

B2. Questions for workers involved in street sweeping / cleaning of roads, sewerage, and toilets

1. Are you a permanent worker with AMC or a temporary / contract worker?
2. If temporary, what are the terms of employment? Who is the contractor and how did you get the job?
3. Does being under contractual agreement affect your working condition and negotiating power?
4. Do you feel job security? Have you received any ID card or a written contract?
5. What are your working hours? Do you get breaks in between and a weekly off?
6. Which areas/ places of residence are you responsible for cleaning? How far is it from

your place of residence? How do you travel and how much do you spend on travel?

7. What kind of waste do you usually deal with? Do you also segregate the waste? Are you given the training on how to deal with potentially hazardous waste?
8. Are you provided with all the safety equipment and tools while doing the work? Brooms, shovels, containers, Tricycles etc.? If yes, do you think they are adequate?
9. How much are you able to earn in a month? Is this a fixed amount or does it fluctuate?
10. How do you receive the payment? Bank account, cash, cheque? Do you have access to your bank account - passbook / ATM?
11. Do you receive any other benefits such as social security - Provident Fund, insurance, healthcare, bonuses etc.? How are the benefits different for permanent and temporary workers?
12. Do you face work related health issues? Have you made out of pocket expenses for treatments?
13. Do you have provisions for occasional leave from work and on what grounds?
14. What do you think about the contract system and privatization?
15. Do you think this work should remain the responsibility of the municipal corporation and that you should be hired directly?

Interview guide for organizations/activists

1. Can you please share what you know about the caste composition of groups involved in sanitation and waste management work in the city?
2. Why do you think such a division of labor exists?

3. Do you work with a particular caste, occupation, religious group, or specific geographic area?
4. What do you think are their particular challenges? How many workers do you think there are in Ahmedabad / Surat who are engaged in this category of work?
5. Do you think there should be a reservation for this caste category for this work?
6. What do you think should be different for these workers? If you could demand changes, what would they be?
7. What do you think about the prevalent laws and regulatory system for sanitation and waste workers? Do you think it favors the workers?
8. What do you think about the contract system and privatization? Do you think this work should remain the responsibility of the municipal corporation and that workers should be hired directly?
9. What do you think is the perception of this work among people? Does that affect their attitude towards the workers?
10. How are the workers treated by authorities - including the police, government officials, supervisors, contractors, private companies, NGOs, and unions?
11. Are they permanent, contract workers, or self-employed? How do you think that affects their working conditions and negotiating power?
12. Do you think technological changes can happen in this work? How would it impact the workers?
13. How do you think workers can be organized? What are some of the challenges you have faced in that process?

14. What according to you is the best form of organization for sanitation and waste management workers? Unions, SHGs, or cooperatives? Why?
15. Have you noticed any changes in how this work is managed over the years? What do you think is the reason for these changes?
16. Anything else you would like to add?

Interview guide for municipal corporation officials

1. What are your views on the current sanitation and waste management system in the city?
2. Can you comment on the technologies that are deployed for sanitation and waste management work? Have there been changes towards more sustainable and green technologies over the years?
3. What monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure that the system is functioning smoothly and that regulations and laws are being enforced?
4. Has the state taken any measures to check littering, open defecation, illegal dumping, and non-segregation of waste?
5. What measures have been taken to ensure sanitation and waste management facilities are present in informal settlements in the city?
6. What municipal work has been outsourced to private companies? What are the benefits of that?
7. What as per you is the condition of workers engaged in sanitation and waste management work? What are some critical issues being faced in that area?

8. How does the government ensure that workers receive fair wages and safe working conditions?
9. What measures have been taken to ensure the safety and well-being of sanitation and waste management workers, especially those engaged in hazardous and high-risk work?
10. What do you think would be the impact on workers if more green technologies are brought into sanitation and waste management work?
11. What is the process for reporting labor rights violations for workers - especially those permanently employed by the government, or on direct government contracts?
12. In case work has been contracted out or outsourced to private companies, is there any mechanism in place for such workers to report exploitation, labor rights violations, or unfair labor practices?
13. What measures have been taken to integrate informal workers into the system?
14. Please share about the training and capacity-building programs being run by the government for sanitation and waste management workers. Do they participate in such sessions?
15. What strategies are being deliberated to improve the working conditions and labor rights of workers in this sector?

Annexure B: FGD Checklist

Section 1: Nature and history of employment

- A. What work are you engaged in? Since when have you been engaged in this work? What work were you doing before that?
- B. What is the nature of work contract you are engaged in - permanent worker / contractual labor / or daily

wage earner? What are the specific challenges you face because of that? What do you think about the contract system and privatization?

- C. Has the nature of your employment changed over time? Why did you shift to this work?

Section 2: Conditions of Work

Mode of recruitment

- A. Have you migrated? How do people migrate from the village? Through contractor, through the network of fellow village men or relatives, or the employer contacted directly?
- B. What sort of relationship do you share with the contractor? Do you have any interaction with the ultimate employer?
- C. Have you ever worked with a different contractor than you are currently working with?
- D. Is there an existing relationship you have with the contractor, before entering the work?
- E. Do you belong to a caste or tribal group which has historically done this work? If yes, why do you think that is so? If not, why did your community enter this work?
- F. Do you think there should be a reservation for your caste category for this work?

Payment for work

- A. How much are you able to earn in a month? Is this a fixed amount or does it fluctuate?
- B. Are wages paid regularly? Have you ever faced non-payment or do you generally receive wages on time?
- C. Are these wages sufficient? How much do you think it should be?
- D. Does money get deducted if you take a leave?
- E. How do you receive the payment? Bank account, cash, cheque? Do you have access to your bank account - passbook / ATM?

F. Do you have any savings?

Conditions of work

A. Can you describe a typical day of work? How many hours do you work for in a day? Do you get to take breaks?

B. What are the challenges that you face during your workday?

C. Do you receive any protective gear such as gloves, masks, boots?

D. Do you receive any social protection such as health insurance, pension, provident fund?

E. Have you faced any harassment in relation to your work? If, yes could you describe it? What do you think is the perception of this work among people? Does that affect their attitude towards you?

F. How are you treated by authorities - including the police, government officials, supervisors, contractors, private companies, NGOs, and unions?

G. Do you feel you have job security?

H. Have you noticed any changes in how this work is managed over the years? What do you think is the reason for these changes?

I. What technological changes have you seen in your work over the years? Do you think technological changes can happen in the work you do? How do you think it would affect your work prospects?

Occupational hazards

A. Do you get any injuries/cuts/bruises because of your work? If yes, how regularly? Do you receive any assistance from the contractor/employer?

B. Are you able to access the public healthcare services in the city? If not, what are the reasons? If you access private healthcare, how much money goes on average?

C. Are there any instances of long-term skin infections or respiratory diseases? How many such cases are there in a month?

D. Do you have access to safety equipment or PPE?

Gender-based

A. When do you generally get up and when do you sleep? How many hours do you spend for domestic work?

B. Who generally looks after the household chores? If it is the women, do you receive any support from the family members?

C. Does it get tiring for you to manage both home related tasks and work outside the house?

D. Do you think the situation is different for your gender when it comes to this work?

Health and maternity related aspects

A. Do you receive any healthcare benefits from the contractor or employer? If not, where do you generally go for any health checkups or consultation and treatment? Do you go for checkups regularly?

B. Do you get any maternity benefits such as antenatal care and maternity leave?

C. Are you and your family able to have a nutritious diet?

D. Are there any lactating mothers? Do they have Mamta Card?

Conditions of living

A. Where do you live and what is the housing condition like? Do you have access to basic infrastructure such as water, toilets, and sanitation?

B. Are you satisfied with your living situation? Does it affect your health and your ability to work?

C. What is your daily diet like? How many hours of sleep do you get?

Demands and work continuity

A. What do you think should be different? If you could demand changes, what would they be?

B. Do you think this work should remain the responsibility of the municipal corporation and that you should be hired directly?

C. Would you want your children to continue engaging in this work? What are your aspirations for the future - for yourself, your family, and your community?

Others

A. Are you part of any SHG or Cooperative? If yes, how has that helped you in improving your work conditions?

B. Are there any local civil society organizations or religious organizations that you work with?

C. Have you ever received any opportunity for upskilling or any other health and safety related trainings?

D. What do you think are the value or benefits of your work - personal and societal benefits?

E. Have you faced any other issues that you want to talk about?

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