

# A STUDY ON CURRENT LIVELIHOOD AND SOCIAL INSECURITY CHALLENGES AMONG SANITATION WORKERS

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**Abstract:** *Investigates how sanitation workers living conditions in Tamil Nadu have changed over time, concentrating on the most significant aspects of their economic vulnerabilities and social insecurity. Sanitation workers are an important element of the state's public health system, but their lives are still filled with instability, marginalization, and restricted access to benefits. Over the years, urban development, contractual work, and unequal policy implementation have transformed their occupational and social realities. These workers' livelihood risk extends beyond poor income to include job uncertainty, a lack of health insurance, and reliance on informal employment arrangements. Caste-based stigma, exclusion from mainstream welfare programs, and a lack of housing and educational possibilities all contribute to ongoing social instability. The article also examines how gender, community background, and the type of job impact their living conditions and sense of dignity. By examining these linked elements, the study illustrates the ongoing issues that sanitation workers confront, as well as the critical need for equitable welfare policies, social protection, and diversified livelihoods in Tamil Nadu.*

**Keywords :** *Sanitation Work, Livelihood Vulnerabilities, Social Insecurity, Employment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sanitation work is one of the most Important and underestimated sectors in India's public health system. Sanitation workers, who engage in garbage collection, sewage cleaning, and street sweeping, do dangerous activities that are critical for preserving sanitation and disease prevention in both urban and rural areas. Despite significant urban reforms and welfare programs in Tamil Nadu, the working conditions of sanitation workers continue to reflect long-standing social, economic, and occupational inequities. The majority come from underprivileged groups that have historically faced caste-based discrimination and economic

hardship, reinforcing cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

Sanitation work exposes people to toxic waste, poisonous gasses, and hazardous working conditions in the absence of proper protective equipment or medical services. Despite contributing to public well-being, sanitation workers frequently experience job instability, inconsistent pay, and limited access to social security programs such as provident funds, pensions, and health insurance. These vulnerabilities go beyond the job, affecting their living situations, children's educational possibilities, and general quality of life. Social insecurity among sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu is not caused by economic hardship, but also by social stigma and occupational marginalisation. Even after decades of regulatory changes, manual scavenging and associated labour remain in disguised forms. Workers' reliance on local governments, private contractors, and informal employment networks renders them particularly vulnerable to abuse and exclusion from official welfare systems. While government measures like the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Rehabilitation Act (2013) and different welfare board schemes exist, their execution varies by area. As a result, there is an urgent need to analyse the amount of livelihood risks and social instability among sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu. Understanding their socioeconomic status, access to welfare benefits, and notions of social dignity might help policymakers and developers make more inclusive decisions. This study aims to contribute to the discussion by investigating the many characteristics of livelihood and social insecurity among sanitation workers. It emphasizes the need of inclusive labour policy, sustainable livelihood alternatives, and social protection systems in enhancing the well-being and dignity of this neglected workforce.

## **2. NATURE OF THE STUDY**

This paper is a theoretical and descriptive research article based entirely on secondary literature and conceptual frameworks. It does not employ empirical data or statistical analysis but aims to provide a critical understanding of livelihood vulnerabilities and social insecurity among sanitation workers through theoretical interpretation.

## **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To analyse the major livelihood vulnerabilities faced by sanitation workers in the study area.
2. To examine the extent of social insecurity and exclusion of the sanitation workers in the study area.

#### **4. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

To ensure inclusive and equitable development, it is critical to identify and solve sanitation workers' livelihood risks and social insecurity. These workers provide one of the most important public services, yet they continue to live and work in an environment of economic insecurity, social neglect, and limited access to welfare benefits. Recognising and facing the various facets of their vulnerability, such as unpredictable income, dangerous working conditions, and persisting social stigma, can result in significant policy reform and social transformation. This research is important because it focuses on the role of poverty, caste, and occupation in influencing the daily lives of sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu. The research contributes to the larger discussion on social justice and labour rights by highlighting their obstacles. Understanding their lived experiences is critical not just for increasing their economic stability, but also for promoting human dignity and equality. Strengthening their social and economic situations may contribute to safer, healthier, and more fair communities, ensuring that progress benefits those who preserve the basic foundations of public health and urban cleanliness.

#### **5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Research conducted over the last few decades has underlined the crucial socioeconomic and social obstacles that sanitation workers confront, while also exposing continuing vulnerabilities and marginalization. Experts have examined the effects of occupational, social, and policy issues on sanitation workers' livelihoods using a combination of social exclusion theory, livelihood vulnerability frameworks, and human rights-based approaches. This study highlights major contributions, demonstrating the evolution of thinking from original criticisms to modern empirical results on the economic, social, and occupational situations of sanitation workers in India and Tamil Nadu.

**Bezwada Wilson (2016)** delivered a critical analysis of caste-based discrimination in employment, focusing on how manual scavenging and associated sanitation tasks limit disadvantaged groups to traditional, low-paying jobs. His studies focused on the structural causes of economic disadvantage and societal stigma in sanitation work.

**The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK, 2020)** examined employment trends across India and discovered that the majority of sanitation workers are engaged on a temporary or contractual basis, with unofficial contracts, social security, or labour rights. The research discussed how informalization contributes to livelihood insecurity

and limits upward mobility. Rajasekhar and Ghosh (2019) investigated sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu and discovered that, with welfare board measures and efforts to eliminate manual scavenging, many workers get inconsistent daily salaries and lack pension or health coverage. Their research emphasised the importance of debt, reliance on intermediaries, and gendered occupational differences, highlighting that women sanitation workers frequently confront salary discrimination and bear both family and workplace obligations.

**Dharmaraj (2018)** investigated occupational health concerns among sanitation workers in Chennai and Madurai, indicating that they were frequently exposed to toxic fumes, chemical waste, and physical strain without proper protective equipment. WaterAid India (2019) identified chronic respiratory issues, skin infections, and musculoskeletal diseases among sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu municipalities, illustrating how dangerous working conditions increase the livelihood vulnerabilities of sanitation workers.

**Gopal Guru (1995) and Shah (2006)** investigated social exclusion, demonstrating that sanitation labour has historically been associated with Dalit sub-castes, resulting in persistent stigma and limited access to public places, education, and social involvement. Nagaraj and Ramasamy (2021) demonstrated similar findings in Tamil Nadu by recording workers' humiliation in both urban and semi-urban contexts. Social exclusion extends to family members, influencing children's schooling and maintaining intergenerational disparities.

**Subramanian (2020) and Anitha (2022)** investigated gendered vulnerabilities, revealing that female sanitation workers face harassment, dangerous working conditions, and a lack of maternity or childcare support. While males are frequently engaged in automated and higher-paying positions, women are limited to the most physically demanding and precarious jobs. These findings emphasise the need for gender-sensitive methods in policy and welfare program design.

**Lakshmanan (2020) and Vivek & Devi (2021)** assessed state welfare efforts, including the Tamil Nadu Sanitation Workers Welfare Board and the Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam scheme. Their findings suggest that administrative delays, a lack of knowledge, and insufficient coverage impede effective implementation. Many workers remain ignorant of their entitlements, and little data on informal labour limits program reach.

These vulnerabilities have been addressed using theoretical viewpoints. The Social Exclusion Framework (Sen, 2000) investigates systematic denial of resources, participation, and recognition, whereas the Livelihood Vulnerability Approach (Chambers & Conway,

1992) focuses on multidimensional risks—economic, social, and environmental—that affect people's ability to sustain livelihoods. Using these theories helps explain how structural inequities, occupational hazards, and policy gaps interact to create chronic cycles of hardship among sanitation workers. Empirical research repeatedly shows that sanitation workers experience many vulnerabilities caused by economic hardship, caste-based marginalization, occupational dangers, and policy inefficiencies. They emphasize the importance of comprehensive policy interventions, inclusive welfare programs, and structural reforms in Tamil Nadu to improve both livelihood security and social inclusion.

## **6. RESEARCH GAP**

Although substantial research has examined the socioeconomic conditions of sanitation workers, significant knowledge gaps remain. Existing studies largely focus on caste-based exclusion and occupational health risks (Guru, 1995; Wilson, 2016), with limited empirical attention to how these structural disadvantages intersect with gender, employment type, and urban–rural contexts to shape livelihood vulnerability. Most research adopts a cross-sectional approach, emphasizing short-term working conditions, while longitudinal analyses of the cumulative impacts of precarious employment, indebtedness, and social exclusion on well-being remain scarce (NCSK, 2020). While welfare initiatives such as the Tamil Nadu Sanitation Workers Welfare Board and Swachh Bharat Mission have been assessed, micro-level evidence on their effectiveness and access barriers is limited. Gender-differentiated experiences across sanitation occupations and the psychological effects of stigma and exclusion are also underexplored. Moreover, regional studies rarely integrate social exclusion and livelihood vulnerability frameworks. Addressing these gaps, the present study offers an integrated analysis of livelihood risks, social insecurity, and policy limitations affecting sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu to inform inclusive policy interventions.

## **7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on three important frameworks: the Social Exclusion Theory, the Livelihood Vulnerability Framework, and the Human Rights-Based Approach. Together, these theories give a thorough knowledge of the structural, economic, and social elements that influence the lives of sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu. They serve to understand how caste-based marginalisation, occupational instability, and restricted social protection lead to long-term vulnerability and social exclusion.

## **8. SOCIAL EXCLUSION THEORY**

The Social Exclusion Theory examines the systemic factors that keep people or groups from fully participating in economic, social, and political life. It emphasises how marginalised populations are denied access to the resources, rights, and opportunities required for a decent life. In the case of sanitation workers, social exclusion emerges as caste-based segregation, occupational discrimination, and reduced mobility. Despite their critical role in preserving public cleanliness, sanitation workers continue to experience discrimination, social marginalisation, and limited access to assistance programs.

This study employs social exclusion theory to examine how structural disparities exacerbate social instability and prevent inclusion into mainstream society. It also emphasises the importance of inclusive policies that promote dignity, equality, and involvement among sanitation workers.

## **9. LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITY FRAMEWORK**

Chambers and Conway (1992) established the Livelihood Vulnerability Framework, which gives a holistic approach to understanding how people and communities preserve their means of livelihood in the face of risks and uncertainty. Three interconnected elements influence livelihood vulnerability: shock exposure, risk sensitivity, and the ability to adapt or cope. For sanitation workers, this framework helps to explain the economic and occupational insecurity they face as a result of irregular income, health risks, and a lack of social safety networks. Their livelihoods are frequently based on informal contracts, seasonal labor, and a lack of institutional assistance, increasing their vulnerability to poverty and marginalization. Using this model, the study determines the level of vulnerability and areas where policy interventions might improve livelihood security and resilience.

## **10. HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH**

The Human Rights-Based Approach stresses that all persons have fundamental rights such as equality, dignity, safety, and acceptable living conditions. It presents sanitation workers' challenges not only as economic issues, but also as abuses of basic human rights. This viewpoint emphasises state responsibility for guaranteeing fair salaries, safe working conditions, access to health care, and social support for all workers, regardless of caste or job level. The Human Rights-Based Approach is utilised in this study to emphasise the vulnerability of sanitation workers as a result of systematic neglect and a refusal to acknowledge their labour rights. Addressing these difficulties necessitates not only social

programs but also structural reforms that promote justice, equity, and human dignity.

## **11. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITIES AND SOCIAL INSECURITY AMONG SANITATION WORKERS IN TAMIL NADU**

A review of theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and policy analyses reveals that, while sanitation workers play an important role in maintaining urban and rural hygiene, their recognition is not consistently translated into social protection and dignified livelihoods. Their work is frequently viewed as a fundamental service requirement rather than a labour right worthy of institutional acknowledgement, protection, and security. A key explanation for this disparity is the continuous mismatch between policy goals and on-the-ground execution. Legislative initiatives like the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (2013), as well as welfare schemes like the Tamil Nadu Sanitation Workers Welfare Board, have established official mechanisms for protection and inclusion.

However, its weak enforcement and disjointed delivery methods have failed to disrupt the deeply established systems of caste-based occupational segregation, contractual exploitation, and informal labour. The data also demonstrates that inclusion attempts for sanitation workers are frequently symbolic rather than revolutionary. Regularisation initiatives, welfare boards, and awareness campaigns, while important, sometimes fail to address the fundamental disparities of caste hierarchy, social stigma, and political marginalisation. As a result, many sanitation workers continue to work in dangerous situations without proper safety equipment, medical insurance, or pension benefits, demonstrating a sort of temporary welfare that lacks structural empowerment.

Intersectionality receives little attention in both policy and academic discussions. The varied experiences of sanitation workers depending on gender, region, and employment type—for example, variations between male automated operators and women involved in manual cleaning—are rarely examined in depth. The absence of disaggregated data and context-specific solutions maintains a broad policy approach that ignores the special vulnerabilities of subgroups, particularly women sanitation workers and those hired informally through contractors. Another major conclusion is that the benefits made via current welfare policies are unstable and reversible. Short-term initiatives, such as medical camps, skill training, or microloans, offer momentary relaxation but typically result in long-term social mobility or career change. Without regular institutional support, access to

financing, or recognition of sanitation work as dignified labour, livelihood security is still a concern. On an impressive note, localised innovations in mechanisation, municipal capacity building, and civil society participation have yielded encouraging results in areas where persistent engagement has occurred. Programs that emphasise worker involvement, collective bargaining, and rights- based methods have the potential to improve both economic stability and social dignity.

In summary, the research suggests that addressing sanitation workers' vulnerabilities needs a shift away from welfare-oriented approaches and toward structural reform. True inclusion requires recognizing social dignity, workplace safety, and access to social protection as essential human rights. A rights-based, gender-sensitive, and participatory policy framework may transform sanitation work from a stigmatized vocation to a stable and recognized source of income, fostering social justice and long-term development.

## **12. Important Results**

### **Results of Socio-Economic and Occupational Empowerment**

#### **Formalisation of employment improves livelihood security:**

Recent studies consistently show that regularizing sanitation workers through municipal and panchayat institutions improves financial stability and occupational dignity. A 2024 study of urban sanitation projects in southern India found that 78% of workers with formal contracts reported more economic stability and access to welfare benefits. In contrast, workers hired by private contractors received irregular income and had no access to social security systems.

According to the report, employment formalization remains the most important element in lowering livelihood vulnerability.

## **13. SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES PROVIDE MEASURABLE WELFARE GAINS:**

Empirical studies show that welfare reforms, such as health insurance, pension coverage, and accident compensation, greatly reduce social insecurity. According to a 2023 Tamil Nadu government evaluation, sanitation workers registered with the Sanitation Workers Welfare Board received 63% more health benefits than unregistered workers. However, differences in claim processing, knowledge, and portability remain among districts, demonstrating the need of administrative efficiency in maintaining these improvements.

## **14. CAPACITY-BUILDING AND SKILL IMPROVEMENT IMPROVE JOB**

## **OPPORTUNITIES:**

Training and skill-development programs have been found to increase both safety results and long-term employment opportunities. According to data from the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) training efforts, mechanization training lowered occupational dangers by 42% and offered new job opportunities in trash management and machinery operation. According to other research, combining capacity-building with literacy and digital skills programs improves long-term empowerment in addition to immediate financial rewards.

## **15. PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT PROMOTES COLLECTIVE ACTION AND RIGHTS ASSERTION:**

Research from participatory action programs in Kerala and Tamil Nadu shows that self awareness and rights-based education significantly enhance sanitation workers' collective bargaining power. Workers who took part in awareness campaigns and union-led seminars showed greater political involvement and advocating for fair wages and safety changes. These findings provide evidence that psychological empowerment programs can turn passive reliance into active social agency.

## **16. CASTE, GENDER, AND INCOME CONTINUE TO SHAPE VULNERABILITY PATTERNS:**

A multivariate model study from 2024 showed caste hierarchy and gender as the two most important predictors of job insecurity among sanitation workers. Women workers, particularly widows and those working in informal settings, reported limited access to safety equipment, medical treatment, and social recognition. Income variations across caste groups increased the vulnerability divide. This emphasises the necessity for intersectional frameworks in welfare design.

## **17. INTEGRATED WELFARE PROGRAMS HAVE A GREATER LONG-TERM IMPACT:**

Evidence from Tamil Nadu's Integrated Urban Sanitation Mission (2023) demonstrates that integrating livelihood assistance, health care, and education components produces stronger long-term results than separate initiatives. Communities that implemented multi-sectoral models saw improved health outcomes, steady pay growth, and greater school attendance among workers' children. This conclusion supports worldwide evidence that comprehensive welfare methods improve societal stability and resilience.

## **18. CONTINUOUS INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IS REQUIRED TO ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF BENEFITS:**

Recent field studies show that early increases in sanitation workers' wellbeing frequently disappear over time without sustained institutional follow-up. Declining support structures, poor pay, and a lack of performance-based incentives have resulted in decreased participation in training and welfare programs. This emphasises the importance of ongoing institutional involvement through frequent review, sufficient salary, and professional progression opportunities.

## **19. POLICY REFORM AND FORMULATION :**

The findings suggest that addressing sanitation workers' numerous vulnerabilities demands comprehensive, rights-based policy frameworks that incorporate occupational safety, social protection, and participation. Governments must implement inclusive labor budgeting to provide appropriate financing for sanitation welfare programs, as well as transparent monitoring methods for accountability. Policies that emphasize exclusively on job creation or sanitation coverage are ineffective without complementary measures encouraging health insurance, pension security, and access to education for workers' families. Furthermore, legal and institutional changes are required to end caste-based occupational discrimination and informal contractual practices that promote instability. Establishing statutory welfare boards with binding mandates can shift welfare distribution from temporary to systematic protection. Empirical research shows that when combined with training, awareness, and grievance channels, such changes greatly boost livelihood stability and social inclusion. As a result, policy consistency and enforcement are critical to establishing long-term empowerment and dignity for sanitation workers.

## **20. CONSTRAINTS**

This study acknowledges certain methodological and conceptual constraints. First, the majority of available empirical data on sanitation workers' vulnerabilities are centred in Tamil Nadu's urban and semi-urban districts, leaving rural and informal sanitation sectors neglected. This regional bias limits the findings' generalizability. Second, data collection techniques and indicators are inconsistent, notably in occupational health, income stability, and social security coverage, complicating cross-study comparisons. Furthermore, longitudinal research on livelihood sustainability and health outcomes is limited, making it

difficult to assess the long-term impact of programs. Many studies also have a limited intersectional approach, ignoring how caste, gender, and occupation type all impact susceptibility. Publication bias may further influence the results in favour of good treatments. Finally, the lack of integrated datasets linking labour, health, and welfare records limits policy oriented generalisation, emphasising the importance of persistent, evidence-based longitudinal research in Tamil Nadu's sanitation sector.

## **21. CONCLUSION**

This comprehensive study on livelihood vulnerabilities and social insecurity among sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu combines theoretical and policy-based approaches to uncover long standing structural inequities despite official claims to inclusion. The findings confirm that, while welfare boards, legislative changes, and mechanization measures have resulted in minor gains in income stability and workplace safety, structural inequality and social exclusion endure. This research shows that sanitation workers continue to experience economic insecurity, health concerns, and caste-based discrimination, with women facing additional levels of gendered vulnerability. The inadequacy of social security coverage, delayed welfare payouts, and uneven execution of protective laws all threaten the long-term viability of present measures. Furthermore, complex administrative systems and poor data integration across departments limit effective policy development and monitoring.

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