

Centre set to expand mechanised sanitation scheme to rural India

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Even as the government plans to expand its scheme to mechanise sanitation work, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) has been lagging the continued rejection of applications under the self-employment and capital subsidy components of the project.



The Social Justice Ministry has already moved a proposal to expand the scope of the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme from towns and cities to rural parts of the country as well, officials said. As per this proposal, the scheme, started in 2023-24 with the aim of eradicating sewer and septic tank deaths, will now be expanded to include drain cleaners, and workers in sewage treatment plants (STPs), and faecal sludge treatment plants. The Ministry has proposed an outlay of around ₹498.73 crore for the expanded scheme, to be spent from this fiscal year to 2030-31.

The Social Justice Ministry told Parliament this August that 498 people had died across the country while engaged in the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, from 2019 to June 2026.

The NAMASTE scheme had initially covered sewer and septic tank workers (SSWs) and was first expanded to include waste pickers. So far, 90,915 SSWs have been proled across the country, along with 1.3 lakh waste pickers, according to the Ministry's annual report for 2025-26. The main components of the scheme help manual scavengers and SSWs to set up their own sanitation-related projects by providing capital subsidies of up to 50% of the total project cost, and aid in setting up emergency response sanitation units in urban local bodies. Other components include training workshops and the provision of personal protective equipment for the proled workers.

Only 810 SSWs have been approved for capital subsidies under the scheme, of which 147 have actually received their funds, as of March 31 this year, according to Ministry data. Similarly, only 2,652 projects have been approved for the 58,000 manual scavengers identified under the scheme. This includes projects proposed by Private Sanitation Service Organisations (PSSOs) and by individuals.

In repeated letters to the Social Justice Ministry since last year, the NCSC has highlighted that one reason for the low number of approved projects is the high rate of rejections. It has noted that there have been rejections under each part of the capital subsidy component, which need to be examined. In an August 2025 letter, the NCSC lagged rejections in the self-employment components of the scheme, both in the Safai Udyami Yojana, under which SSWs receive capital subsidies and in the component for PSSOs.