

Impact of COVID-19 on Sanitary Workers in India

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Abstract: During COVID-19, the conditions of sanitary workers worsened day by day. They are going through callous conditions. According to the National Commission of Safai Karamcharis, 50 sanitation workers died cleaning sewers in the first six months of 2019, and many more cases remain unreported. However, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated the existing issues and created new problems as well. India generated around 33,000 tonnes of COVID-19 biomedical waste in the last seven months, with Maharashtra contributing the maximum (3,587 tonnes) to it, according to Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data. Over 5,500 tonnes of COVID-19 waste was generated across the country in October 2020, the maximum for a month so far. Because of the increase in biomedical waste, the lives of sanitary workers are under threat. It leads to increased infection of COVID-19 among the workers and even the death of a number of sanitary workers.

Keywords: Sanitary workers, COVID-19, Biomedical Wastes

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) proclaimed COVID-19 a pandemic and public health emergency. The coronavirus spreading across the world started in China and began affecting people on a greater scale. The WHO announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, affected 223 countries and reported a death toll of 14,15,49,845 confirmed cases and a death toll of 30,21,397 deaths in India (as of March 12). (April 29, 2021)^[1]. In India, the people most prone to COVID-19 are sanitary workers. The conditions of Sanitation workers are very pitiful. These sanitation workers are facing a number of health issues and are subject to various safety risks. They are financially not sound and also face psychological problems because of social discrimination. As per social norms, they are at the bottom strata of society. COVID-19 has increased their problems manifold. Because of unawareness about the proper disposal of COVID waste, PPE kits, and other biomedical waste, a number of sanitation workers test positive for COVID-19 and that may even lead to their death. India is on the rise of the COVID-19 waste but there are not enough treatment facilities or protection for sanitation workers.

2. Reasons

a) Increasing biomedical waste

India In total, we generated 33,000 tons of COVID-19 biomedical waste in the last 7 months. Around 4,530 tons of such waste was generated in December 2020, with Maharashtra contributing the maximum 629 tones, followed by Kerala (542 tones) and Gujarat (479 tones)^[2]. Biomedical waste is increasing day by day because of excessive use of gloves, masks, and personal protective equipment (PPE) and they are required to be discarded after a single.

b) Increasing Non-Biomedical wastes:

With the spread of COVID-19, not only biomedical wastes but also non-biomedical wastes like household wastes are increasing alarmingly which cause the health

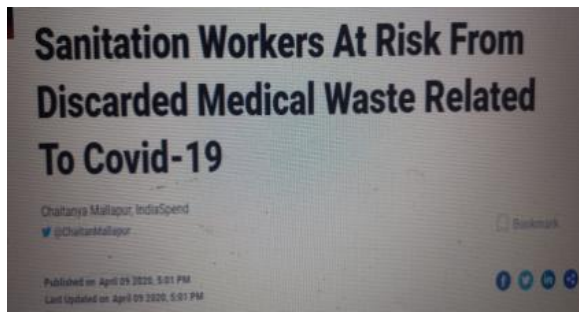
hazards to the sanitation workers. During lockdown, the collection of wastes from the houses is the sole responsibility of sanitation workers without caring about the, if there is COVID-19 patient or not. In such cases, these workers are more prone to the said disease.

- c) **Lack of Awareness:** Sanitary workers are not aware of the various guidelines issued by the government related to COVID-19 disease. In fact, no awareness program or campaign was arranged for the safe disposal of waste for sanitary workers.
- d) **No Segregations of Wastes:** Segregation of waste is essential for solid waste. But proper strategy to separate the solids is never maintained. Sanitary workers collect the waste from the houses, which they later segregate manually. Because of this, these people are more skeptical about this disease. In fact, there is no training to segregate COVID-19 waste.
- e) **Lack of Education:** Education is the primary need in society. Because of a lack of awareness, sanitary workers are not aware of the proper programs of facilities run by the government for them.
- f) **Poverty:** Sanitary workers are fighting for their daily bread. It is the requirements of their daily life that force them to clean the manhole.

3. Case Studies

- 1) A case was reported in media from Mumbai's Dharavi. A sanitation worker who was COVID-19 positive and because of small residential area, he could not maintain the physical and social distancing with his family and consequently his wife died because of this disease^[3].
- 2) Jagruti Devi and her husband who belong to a slum area from Rangpuri Pahadi, Delhi, both were engaged in collection and segregation of waste but because of COVID-19 spread which lead to lockdown their work suffered^[4]

4. Sanitation Workers in news



(i)



(ii)

Figure 1: (i), (ii) News related to the sanitation workers from the media*.

Source: Google

sanitation-workers-from-covid-biomedical-waste-19380.

- [4] Dilip Mandal, “Let’s talk about garbage in Covid battle and clap for India’s sanitation workers”, (1 May, 2020) <https://theprint.in/opinion/covid-battle-garbage-india-sanitation-workers/412107/>.

5. Recommendations

- Proper Compensation should be provided to the family members of deceased sanitary workers in all the states as done by Delhi Govt.
- Sanitation workers should be provided with protective equipment so that they would be minimal affected by waste.
- Pay of the sanitation workers must be adequate.
- To make people aware of the importance of segregating COVID-19 wastes, government and NGO’s should arrange for the campaign and programs like Nukkad Natak, media programs etc.
- COVID-19 waste disposal guidelines must be followed. If these guidelines are violated then strong actions may be taken [4].

References

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- [2] PTI,” India generated 33,000 tonnes of COVID-19 biomedical waste in last 7 months: CPCB” (10 Jan, 2021) <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/india-generated-33000-tonnes-of-COVID-19-biomedical-waste-in-last-7-months-cpcb/story/427521.html>.
- [3] Vijaya Pushkarna, “Delhi: 45 sanitation workers test positive for COVID, 15 succumb, but where are the yellow bins?” (9 July, 2020) <https://citizenmatters.in/delhi-threat-to-community-and->