

MoHUA's New Model Contracting Framework to Safeguard Sanitation Workers & Improve Sanitation Services

Professional and accountable sanitation services

Encouraging local entrepreneurs and community-based sanitation workers

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In a significant step toward ensuring the safety, dignity, and well-being of sanitation workers across the country, Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban (SBM-U), under the aegis of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), has issued Model Empanelment and Contract documents to guide Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in engaging Private Sanitation Service Operators (PSSOs).

Out of an estimated 42 crore urban population in India, about 50% (4.5 crore households) use septic tanks. This indicates a critical need for regular desludging services to safely remove and dispose of faecal sludge at designated treatment locations. Around 35% of the population is connected to sewer networks that require regular maintenance for efficient wastewater flow to treatment plants. Both sewer systems and septic tanks need regular cleaning - sewer manholes must be cleared of blockages, and septic tanks must be desludged every three years to remove built-up faecal waste.

The maintenance of sewer networks and desludging of septic tanks is essential for cities to ensure safe collection, disposal and treatment of used water. Cities and PSSOs play a vital role in undertaking the maintenance activities and servicing citizen requests to ensure safe and effective functioning of the urban sanitation infrastructure. However, these maintenance activities often involve cleaning of sewers and septic tanks through the manholes with adequate safety and protection measures to be followed by the sanitation workers. In absence of strict oversight and adherence to the safety protocols, sanitation workers often undertake hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks manually. This has led to numerous accidents and tragic fatalities across the country.

To professionalize the mechanized sewer and septic tank services provided by sanitation workers, MoHUA has developed a model contracting framework for the empanelment and outsourcing of mechanized cleaning of sewers and septic tanks to private operators (PSSOs). This framework aims to establish clear legal and operational guidelines for delivering safe, mechanized services in compliance with the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act, 2013. These model documents ensure citizens receive professional sewer and septic tank cleaning services while holding PSSOs accountable for mechanization and safety regulations.

These model documents are central to the SafaiMitra Suraksha initiative, ensuring safe, dignified, and mechanized sewer and septic tank cleaning by sanitation workers. The empanelment document lays down the procedure to encourage private entities involved in sewer and septic tank

cleaning services to register with cities. These private entities could include companies, cooperative societies, self-help groups (SHGs), Sani-entrepreneurs, or Micro-entrepreneurs. The cities are encouraged to promote and register SHGs, Sani-entrepreneurs and Micro-entrepreneurs that are beneficiaries of welfare schemes by the National Safai Karamcharis Development Corporation (NSKFDC).

In addition to the empanelment, the model contract document establishes the terms of services for sewer and septic tank cleaning services. The contract document outlines the key elements related to the jurisdiction of service provision for an empaneled private entity, routing citizen requests through '14420' or any other helpline institutionalized by the city, and disposal of used water at designated treatment locations. The contract also defines the roles and responsibilities of city and private operator, service level benchmarks, and cost of services to citizens. It further sets the terms for penalties, termination and blacklisting of private operators that violate the safety protocols causing risks to the health and safety of sanitation workers and failing to perform mechanized cleaning services under this contract.

By introducing this contracting framework, the citizens will benefit by having access to formal and professionalized services from cities and PSSOs as well as ensure that informal practices and hazardous cleaning are not undertaken by sanitation workers. This contracting framework would also benefit the SHGs, Sani-entrepreneurs, and Micro-entrepreneurs to enter into the formal contracting framework with cities and provide services as private business enterprises. Moreover, the formalized structure of sewer and septic tank cleaning services would also assign responsibilities to cities and private operators on protecting the health and safety of sanitation workers as required under the PEMSAR Act, 2013.

To support the transition from manholes to machine-holes across all cities and towns, MoHUA has launched key initiatives and issued guidelines to States and UTs. The cities are financially supported to procure equipment and safety gear devices to ensure mechanized cleaning services. Through the NSKFDC, financial assistance packages have been promoted for SHGs and Sani-entrepreneurs to procure mechanical equipment and setup businesses as mechanical cleaning service providers. The model contract documents issued by MoHUA are envisaged to nudge cities and PSSOs to adopt mechanized cleaning of sewer and septic tanks and further strengthen the National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE).

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