



CHENNAI AT MIDNIGHT: THE SANITATION WORKERS UNYIELDING QUEST FOR DIGNITY IN THE FACE OF PRIVATISATION, LABOUR INJUSTICES, AND CONSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the midnight detention of Chennai's sanitation workers in August 2025 through the combined lenses of labour law, constitutional law, and humanitarian perspectives. It argues that the Greater Chennai Corporation's privatisation of waste management, while justified on grounds of efficiency and fiscal prudence, has deepened precarity for a predominantly Dalit, women-led workforce and exposed gaps in statutory and constitutional protections. By situating the events around the Ripon Building protest, the article analyses how existing labour frameworks, judicial interventions by the Madras High Court, and broader social justice commitments have responded to or failed this group of essential workers. It concludes that unless privatisation is conditioned on robust safeguards for wages, security of tenure, and dignity at work, Chennai risks becoming a cautionary tale for urban governance in India rather than a model of inclusive development.¹

Keywords: Chennai Sanitation Workers; Privatisation; Labour Law; Constitutional Law; Humanitarian Law.

INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of 14 August 2025, while most of Chennai slept, a convoy of police vehicles arrived outside the Ripon Building and detained nearly 800 sanitation workers who had been protesting there continuously for 13 days. The workers, many of them Dalit women employed

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¹ <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/madras-high-court/madras-high-court-sanitation-workers-protest-not-at-unauthorised-place-300761>

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-high-court-okays-privatisation-says-dont-cut-wages>

under the National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM), were demanding protection from the Greater Chennai Corporation's (GCC) decision to privatise solid waste management in Royapuram Zone 5 and Thiru-Vi-Ka Nagar Zone 6, the final two zones still managed directly by the Corporation. Acting on a directive of the Madras High Court, the police cleared the protest site on grounds of obstruction of public space, but the operation transformed what began as a labour dispute into a powerful symbol of the struggle for dignity, livelihood, and recognition in India's rapidly changing urban order.²

The conflict over Chennai's sanitation workers cannot be reduced to a single axis such as wages or employment status; rather, it sits at the intersection of labour law protections, constitutional guarantees of equality and life with dignity, and humanitarian obligations towards historically marginalised communities. The article traces the chronology and context of the protest, unpacks the legal and policy frameworks governing contract labour and privatisation, and examines judicial responses to both the workers' demands and the state's use of force and detention. It then moves beyond doctrinal analysis to engage with the caste and gender dimensions of sanitation work, arguing that any assessment of legality must be grounded in the lived realities of those who perform the city's most essential yet least valued labor.³

BACKGROUND: PRIVATIZATION AND THE SANITATION WORKFORCE

For over a decade, Chennai has steadily outsourced its waste management operations to private contractors, with 10 of the city's 15 zones already under private management by 2025. Companies such as Urbaser-Sumeet and Ramky Enviro Engineers Ltd have taken over large swathes of collection and transportation work, with the GCC justifying privatisation on grounds of manpower shortages, efficiency gains, and the need to modernise waste handling systems. The proposed transfer of Royapuram Zone 5 and Thiru-Vi-Ka Nagar Zone 6 to Chennai Enviro Solutions, a Ramky Group entity, would complete this process and leave no zone under direct municipal control.⁴

Workers employed under the NULM form the core of this conflict. They currently earn a monthly salary of around Rs 23,000, an amount achieved only after sustained protests and

² <https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-high-court-okays-privatisation-says-dont-cut-wages>

³ <https://liberation.org.in/detail/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-for-a-life-of-dignity>

⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/gcc-to-privatise-waste-management-in-two-more-zones/articleshow/111243450.cms>

negotiations over several years, but they face a projected reduction to between Rs 16,000 and Rs 19,578 if shifted to contracts under private management. While the new contractor has promised provident fund and Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) benefits, the workers argue that the combined impact of reduced wages, higher workloads, and diminished job security will push many families into acute financial distress, especially those already servicing high-interest loans. At a systemic level, the Corporation estimates that acceding to workers' salary demands across all 15 zones would cost approximately Rs 164 crore annually, revealing the fiscal pressures that often drive decisions about workforce restructuring in urban local bodies.⁵

LABOUR LAW DIMENSIONS

From a labour law standpoint, the Chennai dispute raises questions about the regulation of contract labour, the adequacy of statutory protections during transitions to private management, and the mechanisms available to workers to challenge adverse changes in service conditions. The city's sanitation workforce is divided between roughly 6,000 permanent employees and around 12,000 contract or NULM workers, creating a two-tier system where temporary workers perform similar tasks for lower security and fewer benefits. This structure is broadly regulated by the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970 and the Industrial Disputes Act 1947 (ID Act), which together address registration of contractors, licensing, and conditions for retrenchment or closure.⁶

The Supreme Court's decision in *Steel Authority of India Ltd v National Union of Waterfront Workers* clarified that contract workers could not claim automatic absorption into principal employers' rolls merely because contract labour was prohibited in an establishment, but it also underscored the need to prevent the use of contract labour as a tool for evading statutory obligations. In the Chennai context, workers' long-term engagement with the Corporation under NULM and their dependence on this employment for basic survival invite comparison with cases where courts have required regularisation or at least non-arbitrary treatment of long-serving temporary staff. Furthermore, where a government order has referred disputes regarding service conditions to an industrial tribunal, as reported in relation to the Chennai

⁵ <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/india/chennai-sanitation-workers-detain-protest-privatisation-work-waste-management-service-ahpcrrem>

⁶ <https://www.groundxero.in/2025/11/22/sanitation-workers-protest-in-chennai/>

workers, the ID Act limits unilateral changes to those conditions during the pendency of proceedings, potentially constraining the timing and manner of privatization.⁷

Privatisation also interacts with health and safety norms under statutes such as the Factories Act 1948 and allied regulations concerning hazardous work. The reduction in workforce size within each division, alongside increased geographical coverage per worker, raises concerns about compliance with legal standards on reasonable hours, rest, and protection from occupational hazards. When workers describe sweeping up to 12 streets a day and being left exhausted by the physical demands of intensified labour, these accounts point to possible breaches not only of statutory minimum protections but also of the broader labour law principle that employment conditions must not degrade human dignity.⁸

Table 1: Workforce Tiers Comparison

Aspect	Permanent (6,000)	NULM/Contract (12,000)
Monthly Pay	Rs 23,000+ benefits	Rs 23,000 (pre-cut risk)
Security	Tenure, pension	None, privatisation peril
Workload	Balanced	Intensified (12 streets)
Hazards	Mitigated	Exposed, gear-deficient

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW AND THE RIGHT TO DIGNITY

The constitutional implications of the Chennai sanitation workers' struggle are profound. Article 21 of the Constitution, as interpreted in cases such as *Olga Tellis v Bombay Municipal*

⁷ *Steel Authority of India Ltd v National Union Waterfront Workers* AIR 2001 SC 3527.

⁸ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-gccs-waste-privatisation-fear-pay-cuts-and-job-loss>

Corporation,⁹ protects the right to livelihood as an integral component of the right to life, especially for individuals whose survival depends directly on informal or precarious work. Substantial pay cuts and the threat of eventual displacement under private contractors may not constitute a formal termination, but they can amount to a de facto undermining of livelihood security, particularly for households already living on the edge. These developments also intersect with Article 14's guarantee of equality before the law and equal protection of laws, given the existence of a dual workforce where permanent workers receive pension, health insurance, and job security, while NULM workers doing similar tasks remain in a state of uncertainty.¹⁰

The caste dimensions of sanitation work bring Article 17's prohibition of untouchability and related disabilities into focus. With more than 95 per cent of sanitation workers in Chennai reportedly belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Most Backwards Classes, the concentration of hazardous and stigmatised work in these communities raises concerns of systemic discrimination and exclusion. The Supreme Court's judgment in *Safai Karamchari Andolan v. Union of India*¹¹ recognised manual scavenging and related sanitation labour as violations of fundamental rights and mandated state action for their eradication and the rehabilitation of affected workers. While the Chennai workers may not all be engaged in manual scavenging as defined in that judgment, their conditions, marked by physical risk, social stigma, and economic vulnerability, suggest that the constitutional promise of dignity remains only partially fulfilled.

The events of 14 August 2025 also intersect with Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b), which protect freedom of speech and expression and the right to assemble peacefully without arms. The Madras High Court, while directing that the protest outside the Ripon Building be cleared, emphasised that demonstrations could continue at designated locations subject to permissions, thus applying the principle that rights under Article 19 may be reasonably restricted in the interest of public order and convenience. Earlier Supreme Court jurisprudence, such as *Himmat Lal K Shah v Commissioner of Police*,¹² supports regulatory frameworks for assemblies while cautioning against blanket or arbitrary bans. In Chennai, the key question is whether the midnight operation, the manner of detentions, and the reported treatment of workers and

⁹ *Olga Tellis v Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985) 3 SCC 545.

¹⁰ <https://liberation.org.in/detail/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-for-a-life-of-dignity>

¹¹ *Safai Karamchari Andolan v Union of India* (2014) 5 SCC 422.

¹² *Himmat Lal K Shah v Commissioner of Police* (1973) 1 SCC 227.

supporting students remained within the bounds of “reasonable restrictions” or veered into disproportionate interference with fundamental rights.¹³

HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVES

Beyond formal legal rules, the Chennai sanitation workers’ protest invites analysis from a humanitarian and social justice standpoint. International labour standards, including those articulated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), call for safe and healthy working conditions, non-discrimination, and special attention to vulnerable groups, principles echoed in India’s Directive Principles of State Policy and in Article 51(c)’s commitment to respect international law norms. The fact that the backbone of Chennai’s sanitation system is a workforce of Dalit women working in hazardous environments, often without adequate protective equipment or health coverage, indicates a systemic failure to meet these standards.¹⁴

The humanitarian dimension also encompasses the treatment of protesters during and after the midnight detentions. Civil society reports and media accounts suggest that some workers and supporting lawyers or students alleged rough handling and unlawful detention, prompting judicial scrutiny and orders for release. Even if the initial decision to clear the protest site is accepted as a lawful enforcement of a court order, the manner in which it was executed remains central to assessing whether the state met its obligations to act with restraint, proportionality, and respect for human dignity.¹⁵

THE ROLE OF THE MADRAS HIGH COURT

The Madras High Court has played a pivotal and complex role in the trajectory of this dispute. On one hand, it directed the removal of protesters from the Ripon Building area, thereby enabling the midnight operation that ended the visible occupation. On the other hand, in later proceedings, the court reportedly declined to quash the privatisation initiative itself but directed that workers’ wages should not be reduced as a result of the transition, indicating an attempt to balance administrative discretion with protection of basic economic security. The court also criticised aspects of the police response, including the detention of lawyers and law students

¹³ <https://www.indiatoday.in/cities/chennai/story/tn-chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-ends-after-high-court-order-midnight-police-detentions-draw-vijay-eps-criticism-of-dmk-2771126-2025-08-14>
<https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/madras-high-court/madras-high-court-lawyer-law-students-detained-sanitation-workers-protest-300961>

¹⁴ <https://liberation.org.in/detail/chennai-sanitation-workers-protest-for-a-life-of-dignity>

¹⁵ <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/madras-high-court/madras-high-court-lawyer-law-students-detained-sanitation-workers-protest-300961>

who were present in solidarity, and ordered their release, signalling a concern for due process and individual liberties.¹⁶

These interventions highlight the judiciary's dual function as both guardian of fundamental rights and arbiter of administrative and policy disputes. The Chennai case underscores the difficulty of this role in contexts where courts are asked to both uphold urban governance objectives—such as keeping public spaces accessible and enabling municipal reforms—and protect vulnerable groups from the harms that such reforms may entail. The High Court's stance that protests must move to designated venues reflects a broader trend in Indian jurisprudence towards spatial regulation of dissent, a trend that has been both defended as necessary for order and criticised as diluting the visibility and impact of collective action.¹⁷

URBAN GOVERNANCE AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

The sanitation workers' struggle in Chennai must also be situated within wider patterns of urban governance and the changing nature of work in Indian cities. Since the implementation of NULM in 2014–15, municipal bodies have increasingly shifted from permanent employment models to various forms of contractual and scheme-based engagement, often citing budget constraints and administrative flexibility as justification. While such arrangements may appear attractive from a fiscal standpoint, they have created a large class of workers who occupy a precarious middle ground—better paid than many informal workers, but still exposed to abrupt changes in employment conditions and lacking the security of permanent status.¹⁸

Privatisation amplifies these dynamics by introducing profit-oriented contractors who may prioritise cost-cutting and efficiency metrics over long-term investment in worker welfare and community relationships. Experiences from other Indian cities, including controversies about waste management contracts and their environmental and social impacts, suggest that outsourcing public services can sometimes undermine accountability and transparency, especially when oversight mechanisms are weak. In Chennai, past criticism of contractors for poor performance, alleged manipulation of waste tonnage data, and inadequate service in some

¹⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/madras-high-court-directs-removal-of-protesting-sanitary-workers-from-the-pavements-of-ripon-building/articleshow/123276424.cms>

¹⁷ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2025/Aug/13/madras-hc-orders-tn-government-to-take-appropriate-action-against-gcc-conservancy-workers-on-protest>

¹⁸ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/privatisation-is-forcing-sanitisation-workers-to-keep-chennai-clean-with-lesser-pay>

zones has fuelled scepticism among workers and residents alike about whether privatisation will deliver the promised improvements.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A FAIRER MODEL OF URBAN SERVICES

The events outside the Ripon Building in August 2025, and the ongoing negotiations and protests that have followed, present Chennai—and urban India more broadly—with a critical choice. One path leads towards a model of urban governance where essential services are treated primarily as cost centres to be optimised through privatisation and flexible labour, with limited consideration for the lived realities of the people who perform them. The other path seeks to integrate efficiency with equity by ensuring that any restructuring of service delivery is accompanied by strong legal and institutional safeguards for workers' rights, meaningful participation in decision-making, and sustained efforts to dismantle entrenched caste and gender inequalities.

From a labour law perspective, this would mean robust enforcement of protections against arbitrary changes in service conditions, greater transparency in contractor selection and monitoring, and pathways for long-serving temporary workers to secure more stable status. From a constitutional standpoint, it would require taking the commitments to dignity, equality, and livelihood embedded in Articles 14, 17, 19, and 21, and in the jurisprudence that has evolved around them. From a humanitarian and social justice angle, it would demand policies that recognise sanitation workers not as invisible service providers, but as rights-bearing citizens whose welfare is integral to the health of the city itself.

Whether Chennai emerges as a model of inclusive urban development or a warning about the dangers of unchecked privatisation will depend on how these issues are resolved in the months and years to come. For the sanitation workers who were taken away in police vans under the cover of darkness, and for the thousands who continue to watch from the sidelines, the struggle is not merely about garbage on the streets—it is about justice, recognition, and the possibility of a future where their labour is valued as indispensable to the life of the city.