

Stiff penalties for manual scavenging

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New Delhi: Municipal corporation or state officials could face two years in jail or Rs 2 lakh fine for the familiar sight of bare torsos plumbing the depths of sewer tanks to clean the muck with their hands.

The Centre proposes to ban 'hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks' with stiff penal provisions. It plans to make it mandatory for employers to provide cleaning devices and protective gear to the staff tasked with cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.

While there is a law to ban manual scavenging, it has failed to stop the authorities from continuing with hazardous manual cleaning of septic tanks. The initiative is likely to be part of the proposed 'prohibition of employment as manual scavengers and their rehabilitation bill' which seeks to strengthen the 1993 law which has failed because of poor implementation.



SHAMEFUL SIGHT

The law could force municipal bodies to upgrade safety kits for workers engaged in professions which have revolted observers for years but without any corrective action from the governments. An official said violation of a law that is watched closely by civil rights groups would raise the fear of legal action and curb the continued indifference among authorities.

Besides the justice to municipal workers, the proposed bill seeks to make stringent provisions for the continued ill of manual scavenging, a banned practice that continues unabated despite the 'employment of manual scaven-

Times View

The fact that manual scavenging exists even 65 years after India attained independence is a matter of grave national shame. Repeated promises by governments have failed to eliminate the menace. In June last year, for instance, the Prime Minister had called upon states to take note of a home ministry advisory that suggested they invoke provisions of the SC/ST Atrocities Act against anyone employing a dalit or tribal for manual scavenging. He had urged them to end the practice within six months. In the President's address to the joint sitting of Parliament last month, the government had spoken of a new law to deal with the problem. All of this is fine, but isn't it time they walked the talk? Just passing another law will not suffice.

gers and construction of dry latrines act, 1993'.

The government may hike punishment for manual scavenging from one year/Rs 2,000 fine in the present law to jail of one year/Rs 50,000 fine 'for first offence'.

Offences under the law may be "cognizable and non-bailable", a substantial hardening of penalty for contraventions. Union social justice minister Mukul Wasnik said, "We intend to table it in the monsoon session of Parliament."

To start with, the bill seeks to remove ambiguity from what constitutes manual scavenging. While the present law defines a manual scavenger as "manually carrying human excreta", the proposed one would expand it to include any person employed for "manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which human excreta from insanitary latrines is disposed of..."