

## Get real on Swachh: on manual scavenging

Despite the most stringent penal provisions in the law against manual scavenging, it continues in parts of India. The [recent order of the Madras High Court](#) asking the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government to ensure the strict enforcement of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, in the wake of the death of 30 people engaged in the activity in the State in recent years, points to the malaise. Evidently, the vigorous national campaign for the rehabilitation of those engaged to manually clean insanitary latrines, and urban structures into which human excreta flows without sewerage, has been unable to break governmental indifference and social prejudice. Manual scavenging persists mainly because of the continued presence of insanitary latrines, of which there are about 2.6 million that require cleaning by hand, according to the activist organisation, Safai Karmachari Andolan. In spite of a legal obligation to do so, State governments are not keen to demolish and rebuild old facilities lacking sanitation, or conduct a full census of both the latrines and the people engaged in clearing such waste. The Central government, which directly runs the self-employment scheme for the rehabilitation of these workers, has reduced funds from 448 crore in the 2014-15 budget to 5 crore this year. High allocation in the past has not meant substantial or effective utilisation. This is incongruous, as sanitation is high on the agenda of the NDA government, and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's favourite programmes, to which the public was contributing a cess.

### The ugly truths of manual scavenging

A determined approach to end the scourge requires a campaign against social prejudice that impedes solutions in two ways. Many communities still regard the inclusion of a sanitary toilet as ritual and physical pollution of the house, and even the less conservative are ready to accept only large, expensive and unscientific structures much bigger than those recommended by the WHO. More pernicious is the entrenched belief in the caste system, that assumes Dalits will readily perform the stigmatised task of emptying latrines. Clearly, the law on punishment exists only on paper. Change now depends on the willingness of the courts to fix responsibility on State governments, and order an accurate survey of the practice especially in those States that claim to have no insanitary latrines or manual scavenging. Raising the confidence level among those engaged in manual cleaning is vital; even official data show their reluctance to take up self-employment. Empowerment holds the key to change, but that would depend on breaking caste barriers through education and economic uplift. Compensation sanctioned for the families of those who died in the course of the humiliating and hazardous work should be paid immediately; only a fraction of those with verified claims have received it.

An earlier version of this editorial had stated that a cess is being levied for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The cess is not being levied anymore. The error is regretted.

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