

A paper law

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In July last year, four workers died after inhaling poisonous gases while cleaning a water harvesting tank in Ghitorni in south-west Delhi. A month later, the toxic gases claimed another three workers who were cleaning a sewer in Lajpat Nagar in south Delhi. These deaths led the Delhi Jal Board to institute preventive measures. “No manual entry into sewerage systems will be permitted. No human contact will be allowed without prescribed protective gear,” a circular issued by the board on August 14, last year, laid down. But two more deaths in the city’s septic pits in the last week of April point to the fact that unsafe conditions continue to stalk sanitation workers. The problem is not limited to Delhi. According to a reply by the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to the Lok Sabha in December last year, more than 300 people were asphyxiated while working in septic tanks in 2017 alone.

Manual scavenging, with its definition limited to cleaning of dry latrines, was outlawed in the country in 1993. But it was only in 2013 that the amended Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act recognised the more hazardous forms of the practice, including the work of sewer and septic tank cleaners. The Act makes it incumbent on municipalities to provide gas masks, safety harness belts and helmets to workers when they enter these cesspools of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, ammonia, methane and hydrogen sulphide. The Act also lays down a prison term and strict fines for those who violate its provisions. But nearly five years after it came into force, bookings under it have been very rare, even though an average of 150 people lose their lives every year while cleaning sewers all over the country.

The sewage workers who lost their lives in Delhi in the last week of April were employees of a contractor to whom the municipality had outsourced its work — so were the workers who lost their lives last year. In fact, most people who clean septic tanks are casual workers. The 2013 Act applies to them as well. But as an analysis by this paper shows, it’s easy for the municipal authorities or contractors to disclaim any association with the deceased. And after every such incident, the authorities concerned — the Delhi Jal Board in case of last week’s incident — issue statements replete with homilies about safe conditions for sewage workers. Putting them into practice seems another matter altogether.

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