

LETHAL FILTH

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The [death of five young men who were employed to clean a septic tank](#) in an upmarket residential community in New Delhi is a shocking reminder that India's high-profile sanitation campaign has done little to alter some basic ground realities. Around the same time as the Delhi incident, five workers died in a septic tank in Odisha. The law is not being enforced, and there is no fear of penalties. The workers in Delhi were apparently asked to perform the task in violation of Section 7 of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013; a violation can be punished with two years of imprisonment or fine or both. Under the provision, no person, local authority or agency should engage or employ people for hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. Mechanised cleaning of septic tanks is the prescribed norm. But in spite of a well-funded programme such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in operation, little attention is devoted to this aspect of sanitation. The requirements of worker safety and provision of safety gear for rare instances when human intervention is unavoidable are often ignored. Mere assertions by the Centre that it is pressing State governments to prosecute violators, therefore, ring hollow. More and more incidents are being reported of workers dying in septic tanks. In the absence of political will and social pressure, more lives could be lost because more tanks are being built in rural and urban areas as part of the drive to construct toilets.

Get real on Swachh: on manual scavenging

If the law on manual scavenging is to be effective, the penalties must be uniformly and visibly enforced. It is equally important for State governments to address the lack of adequate machinery to clean septic tanks. The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation in its manual of 2016 on toilet design acknowledges that in rural areas, mechanical pumps to clear septic tanks are not available. In the southern States, sanitation has expanded along with urbanisation, but it has brought with it a higher number of deaths as workers clean septic tanks manually. For instance, Tamil Nadu recorded 144 fatalities of workers engaged for septic tank cleaning in the past three years, according to official data. On the other hand, toilet designs proposed by the government include those in which fully composted waste must be removed from pits every two years. The Centre must ensure that this does not become a fresh avenue to oppress members of some communities who are expected to perform such work, reflecting social inequalities. India's sanitation problem is complex, and the absence of adequate toilets is only one lacuna. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan should make expansion of the sewer network a top priority and come up with a scheme for scientific maintenance that will end manual cleaning of septic tanks. The law should be enforced vigorously to eliminate manual scavenging in its entirety.

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