

'Sewer deaths rampant, states refuse to report'

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NEW DELHI: The government has stated that safety standards in the cleaning of sewer and septic tanks are alarmingly low across the country in the wake of 10 people falling prey to cleaning sewers in a month in the capital.

A review of the "Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013" (MS Act) has found that there is no information available about the cases lodged for engaging sanitation workers in "hazardous cleaning". Engaging sanitation workers without safety equipment is barred by the MS Act.

Without any official data from states, Union social justice ministry has said that 70 cases of deaths of persons in sewers and septic tanks have come to their notice from activists and press reports.

While the ministry took up these incidents with the states, there were no report from their side about action against those responsible except in one or two cases.

Importantly, six states have reported figures of "sewerage deaths" in the context of having paid the compensation to victim families which the SC had made mandatory through a judgement in 2014.

Tamil Nadu has reported 144 deaths, Punjab 18, Karnataka 57, UP 37 and Kerala 12. However, even these figures are not exhaustive and may be just the tip of the iceberg.

"There is no accountability for violations under the MS Act," the ministry told a review meeting on the implementation of the Act which was chaired by minister Thaawarchand Gehlot on Wednesday.

The non-observance of MS Act came to light in the wake of a string of deaths of sanitation workers in the capital this month.

The Centre feels that continued "hazardous cleaning" is linked to the fact that MS Act had failed as a deterrent for authorities that engage sanitation workers in the cleaning of sewers.

According to sources, the Centre is considering to amend the MS Act to tighten the provisions regarding the responsibility of "local bodies, contractors and private persons" for deaths in the cleaning of sewers. They may also be made liable to pay the compensation of Rs 10 lakh for every death.