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530 districts reported as free of manual scavenging: Centre

Social Justice Ministry says manual scavenging no longer practised in India; Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Bihar among States with all districts reporting free status

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The Union government says that India had seen no deaths due to manual scavenging in the last five years, adding that 330 had died while being engaged in cleaning sewers and septic tanks. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Jharkhand are among the States and Union Territories that have the highest number of districts yet to declare themselves as **manual scavenging free**, according to data submitted by the **Social Justice Ministry** in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

In response to multiple questions related to deaths caused by manual scavenging or hazardous cleaning of sewers, the Union government said that India had seen no deaths due to manual scavenging in the last five years, while adding that **330 people had died while being engaged in cleaning sewers and septic tanks.**

The Ministry said that a total of 530 districts across the country had so far reported themselves to be free of manual scavenging with the rest yet to do so. The Ministry added that the practice of manual scavenging is no longer continued in the country.

While 100% of districts in States like Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and a few others have declared themselves free of manual scavenging, in several States and Union Territories, only about 15% to 20% of the districts have reported so.

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For instance, in Manipur, just two of the 16 districts have reported as being manual-scavenging free. Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, just 30% of the districts have declared themselves free of the practice with a similar number in Telangana. In Odisha and West Bengal too, over 60% districts are yet to report their respective status.

However, Uttar Pradesh, which had the highest number of manual scavengers (32,473) in two surveys conducted till 2018, has nearly 90% districts reporting that they had been made free of manual scavenging.

Top Ministry officials said that each district is being asked to either declare itself as free of manual scavenging or point out locations of insanitary latrines and associated manual scavengers. “The district sanitation committees look at data of whether there are insanitary latrines and based on this extrapolate whether manual scavenging exists or not.”

Since the launch of the Swachata mobile app in 2016, more than 6,000 complaints have been examined by the Ministry for possible signs of ongoing manual scavenging. “But not one complaint was substantiated in all this time,” one senior official said.

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As government data show that deaths due to hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks continue, the Ministry has decided that their principal focus will be to address this problem - with officials saying the NAMASTE scheme had been launched for this purpose.

Another senior official said, “This is why now the focus is to ask municipalities, and civic bodies to ensure no hazardous cleaning takes place. And if it takes place, the responsibility should be placed on the employer.”

Replying to one of the questions on this matter in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday, the Ministry tabled data on action taken in cases of sewer deaths. This showed that out of 330 such deaths in the last five years, compensation had been paid out to families of 306, and FIRs had been registered in 249 cases either under the Prohibition of Manual Scavenging Act or under the SC/ST Act.

However, a Parliamentary Panel had noted earlier this year that the conviction rate in these cases were very poor, noting that just one conviction had been recorded in 616 FIRs registered against contractors for unsafe sewer cleaning.

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According to data released by the government in Parliament in 2021, over 90% of manual scavengers identified in the surveys till 2018, were from Scheduled Caste communities.

While the Ministry has denied that manual scavenging continues in India, they have maintained that the around 58,000 identified manual scavengers were being rehabilitated under government schemes for compensations, capital subsidies and other benefits.

Among the manual scavengers identified in these surveys, the maximum were in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Assam, Karnataka and Rajasthan.



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