Modernise Sanitation

Faster adoption of technology is needed to end the horror of manual scavenging

The central government has told Parliament that 613 cases of death of sanitation workers involved in cleaning of sewers and septic tanks have been identified as eligible for Rs 10 lakh compensation. On a parallel track, the Delhi government has announced several measures to help rehabilitate manual scavengers, including skill development training of up to two years with a stipend of Rs 3,000 per month. This government will provide the financial assistance to 45 manual scavengers who were identified earlier. But the real question is, why manual scavenging, which is illegal, still continues in several parts of the country, causing deaths with depressing regularity.

Given the plethora of mechanical options available and affordable in the 21st century India, it is absolutely inexcusable that human beings are still being made to clean sewer lines and septic tanks, usually without basic safety gear, which is often like sending them into a death trap. Between 2016 and 2018 the Safai Karamchari Andolan puts the casualty figure at 429 deaths in Delhi alone. This despite the fact that the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, bans anyone from employing people to manually clean sewers.

Both caste attitudes and lack of technology diffusion are at the heart of the problem. That most manual scavengers are Dalits isn’t just a coincidence. Archaic attitudes towards hygiene and pollution reinforce the prejudice that those who clean sewers and dry pits are themselves unclean. The only way to change this is through faster diffusion of technology. In a modern country machines do the cleaning and those who operate them are known as sanitation engineers. India needs this model to purge the stigma associated with sanitation work and eradicate manual scavenging in 2019.