

NAC [National Advisory Council] forces govt to act on manual scavenging

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As a consequence of a stinging reminder from the National Advisory Council [NAC] headed by Congress president Sonia Gandhi on still prevalent manual scavenging, an interministerial group headed by Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Mukul Wasnik on Friday decided to set a fresh self-imposed deadline to end the shameful practice identified with only specific communities in society.

The meeting also decided to set a timetable to end the system of constructing dry latrines in the states besides setting up an official level committee to look into modalities on conducting a fresh survey to identify the exact number of manual scavengers in the country.

The meeting was attended by representatives of the Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation Ministry, Urban Development Ministry and the Railway Ministry.

Three months ago, the NAC passed a resolution observing that the inhuman practice of “manual scavenging still persists in India despite being outlawed” and underlined that “governments have been weak” in implementing the Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 besides pointing out that no one had been punished under the law in the last 17 years.

According to officials, a status report sought by Wasnik in the meeting acknowledged that barring one, not a single case had been registered in any of the 20 odd states as well as UTs [Union Territories] which had themselves adopted the central law through resolutions in the state assemblies. Uttar Pradesh was the only state to have registered 20,000 cases so far under the Act, yet there was not a single case of prosecution, the status report said.

Those found guilty of constructing a dry latrine or employing another person to carry human waste are to be punished with imprisonment for up to a year along with a fine up to Rs 2000.

What has posed more problems for the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry is that it has been spending hundreds of crores on a rehabilitation programme to end manual scavenging, without success. The ministry claims numbers have come down though complete eradication is yet to take place. From 7.70 lakh manual scavengers reported by the states in 1992, the figure came down to less than half when 4.2 lakh beneficiaries were rehabilitated in 2005, officials contend. The figure further dropped to 1.18 lakh in 18 states out of which 78,941 beneficiaries were rehabilitated by March 31, last year.