Slow on sanitation

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Policymakers have failed to use technological advances made in treating faecal sludge

- The tragic death of six people who entered a septic tank in Tamil Nadu's Sriperumbudur town is a grim reminder that sanitation remains a low-priority area despite the high political profile of Swachh Bharat.
- Public understanding of the science of managing septic tanks continues to be poor, and the availability of cheap labour to clean these structures has slowed efforts to develop technologies that can safely remove and transport the waste.
- Sanitation thus remains a challenge in thousands of unsewered towns.
- What sets the incident apart from the several instances of people dying of asphyxiation in the tanks is that some of the victims were the owners of the property and not workers.
- More reports of deaths continue to come in.
- Every death of a manual worker represents a crime, since the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 makes the use of such labour to clean septic tanks an offence punishable with imprisonment of two years or with a fine of ₹2 lakh or both even in the first instance.
- If State governments are reluctant to prosecute offenders, they are also slow to adopt newer technologies such as Faecal Sludge Treatment Plants (FSTP), which can be combined with omniprocessors for safe treatment of waste.
- For the task of cleaning the tanks, indigenous innovation in robotics looks promising.
- A prototype is planned to be tested by the Indian Institute of Technology Madras and such devices can potentially transform sanitation in India and other developing countries.

- But the pace of adoption will depend on the priority that governments accord to the long-neglected problem.
- If governments remain apathetic, citizens would expect the courts to step in to uphold the law against manual scavenging and make individual departments accountable.
- The science on sanitation has advanced, and policy must urgently catch up.

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