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## **MPs contest figures on manual scavengers**

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NEW DELHI: Contesting government figures, several MPs on Monday stressed that the number of manual scavengers still left in the country was much higher than what was furnished by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment — 1.17 lakh.

At a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to the Ministry, they pointed out that this figure did not square with the much larger number of proposals received by the Ministry of Housing and Poverty Alleviation for conversion of dry latrines, according to sources on the panel. It was therefore imperative, the MPs said, that the Social Justice Ministry immediately conduct a survey to check the figures and vigorously work towards ending what the National Human Rights Commission recently termed “one of the worst violations of human rights.” Monday's meeting comes in the wake of the Centre appointing an expert committee — to be jointly overseen by the Ministries of Social Justice and Labour — to abolish manual scavenging.

The committee — which has a representative each from the Ministries of Social Justice, Urban Development and Railways, and one from the Planning Commission — has been asked to draft a new law and submit its report by September 30.

At the meeting, Social Justice Minister Mukul Wasnik said that while all States and Union Territories had confirmed the rehabilitation of all eligible and willing beneficiaries under the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), his Ministry would continue to work with the States to identify any persons who might still need to be rehabilitated.

Under the SRMS, term loans up to Rs.5 lakh and micro financing up to Rs.25,000 are given for rehabilitation in alternative occupations. Mr. Wasnik said information about each identified beneficiary had been placed on the websites of the apex corporations, the State governments, State channelling agencies and the districts concerned to make it open to public scrutiny. Simultaneously, action was being initiated to undertake a 100 per cent internal audit of the work done under the SRMS by the State governments, and at least 25 per cent external audit through the State Commissions for Safai Karamcharis/SCs and other independent bodies.

Though the government introduced as far back as in 1993 the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in 1993 — under which no person can be engaged in manual scavenging and construction of dry latrines is prohibited — the Centre missed three deadlines to abolish manual scavenging: December 2007, March 2009 and March 2010. The biggest defaulters are Meghalaya, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, U.P., Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and even Delhi.

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