Govt.'s denial of manual scavenging deaths flayed

472 lost lives in 5 years, says activist

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Condemning the Centre for its "inhuman and cruel" statement that no deaths due to manual scavenging have been reported in the past five years, Safai Karamchari Andolan convener Bezwada Wilson said on Tuesday that at least 472 people died while cleaning human waste during the period. He demanded an apology and a statement from the Prime Minister addressing the issue.

Mr. Wilson was responding to Social Justice Minister Ramdas Athawale's written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday. Congress MPs Mallikarjun Kharge and L. Hanumanthaiah had asked for the number of people engaged in manual scavenging who had died in the five years. "No such deaths have been reported due to manual scavenging," the Minister said.

"The statement itself is a very inhuman statement. The practice is inhuman of course, but the statement is very inhuman and cruel. They know that people died, and they reported it in the last Parliament, and now in this Parliament, they are saying that nobody died," said Mr. Wilson.

The human rights activist accused the Centre of "manipulating the definition" of the word, noting that the question did not refer to those who clean dry latrines alone, but also included those who are forced to clean septic tanks and sewers without protective equipment. Employment of both is prohibited under the 2013 law against manual scavenging.

Responding to a similar question in the Lok Sabha last year, the government had acknowledged that deaths had been reported among those cleaning septic tanks and sewers.

Bezwada Wilson

'Misleading' remarks

"It is completely misleading the whole Parliament. They are not just talking of any numbers, they are talking of the life of the citizens. So you are unable to protect the life of the citizens," Mr. Wilson said. "They claimed in the last Parliament session, 340 deaths, but according to our records, it is 472 in last five years. In this year (2021), 26 people have died so far. And they have not even made one statement about it. This is a gross violation and the Prime Minister must answer for it," he added, demanding an immediate repeal and apology for the statement made in Parliament.

Mr. Wilson pointed out that if the problem was not acknowledged, it would not be dealt with. "How are you going to prevent the deaths? There is no action. Instead of preventive mechanisms to stop the deaths and the killings in the sewer lines and septic tanks, you are coming contra to that and stating nobody died. Which means you want to kill more and more people, you are welcoming that," he said.