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TWO LABOURERS DIE CLEANING MANHOLE

The conservancy workers were working inside the drain without any safety gear; police lodge an FIR against the contractor for violating guidelines

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In most developed countries, manhole workers are provided with oxygen masks and bunny suits, but in India conservancy workers – go in almost naked – risking their life and limb.

On Thursday, two contract labourers died inside a manhole near Kalachowki while the third one is recuperating at KEM Hospital. The workers, who died due to suffocation and inhaling toxic gases, were carrying out 'manhole cleaning work' for a Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) contractor.

The deceased have been identified as Umakrishnan Kalia Perumal, 25, and Pandiyan Challa Perumal, 25. They were spotted by another labourer Anu Londe, 30 inside the manhole near Kalachowkie on G D Ambedkar Road.

According to other labourers, Londe entered the manhole to find Umakrishnan and Pandiyan after they did not come out for a long time. But he quickly jumped out of the drain as he felt nauseated due to toxic gases. Labourers said that Umakrishnan had entered the manhole first.

When he did not return for a long time, Pandiyan descended in search of him. Londe entered the drain, when the two of them did not come out for long. Police have registered an FIR against the contractor R P S Mehta Constorium and the supervisor for the negligence. Police have even arrested Ashok Wajaji Chaudhary alia Patel, 25, the supervisor, who was present at the site when the incident occurred.

Meanwhile, the BMC has issued a show cause notice to the contractor asking them to reply whether they have violated the terms and conditions of the tender which includes the safety of contract labourers. "They were cleaning and strengthening the British era drains as per the contractor's instruction. We will investigate if there was any negli-



Top: File photos of workers cleaning sewers without any safety gear, and (above) one of the two victims, who died after they entered a manhole near Kalachowki and inhaled toxic gases on Thursday

gence in giving the safety gears to the labourers. Strict action will be taken against the contractor," said P J Shah, deputy chief engineer (city) of BMC's storm water drain department.

He added that the police have filed an FIR and have recorded the statements of the contractor, supervisor, BMC engineers. "We will take suitable action against the contractor," Shah said.

"Contract labourers are always treated in an inhumane manner. No officer takes cognizance, whether proper safety gears are provided to them or not when

they enter manholes and drains," complained Uttam Gade, general secretary of Safai Kamgar Union. Gade, who has been associated with conservancy workers and contract labourers for the past 25 years lamented on the conditions under which labourers are forced to work.

"The High Court has given clear cut guidelines to the BMC, while giving such contracts, but the rules are hardly followed. Each time there is an accident or casualty, the guidelines are followed for few months," Gade said.

Elaborating further, Gade said

that as per the rule, labourers should be tied with belts at the waist and be given safety gears – oxygen mask, gumboots, apart from mechanised air blower, hand gloves, safety head lamp, gas mask among other things.

"They also need to be provided with breathing apparatus, wadder suit, diver suit and gas monitor to check the toxic level of gases. In addition, a mobile water tank for bathing and cleaning also needs to be provided as per the high court guidelines, but nothing is provided to the labourers," Gade claimed.

PICS: SUDHARAK OLWE