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CJI scraps predecessor’s pet social justice bench a year after its creation

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NEW DELHI: Chief Justice T S Thakur has given a quiet burial to the social justice bench, which was set up by his predecessor Justice H L Dattu a little over a year ago, envisioning the Supreme Court to play a proactive role in expeditious resolution of social issues touching the lives of the voiceless.The special bench comprising Justices Madan B Lokur and Uday U Lalit sat every Friday at 2 pm and devoted two hours to pending PILs that raised a wide range of issues like human trafficking, tracing missing children, providing hygienic midday meals, welfare of construction workers, rehabilitation of acid attack victims and protecting women's dignity by reining in lumpen elements who circulated pornographic material online.

Recently, senior advocate Colin Gonsalves, who had been arguing for redressal of alleged human rights violations in Manipur through extra-judicial killings by armed forces, told a bench headed by Thakur about non-listing of cases. The CJI said, "That bench no longer exists." The CJI appears to have decided to disband the social justice bench without consulting Justices Lokur and Lalit. The notification setting up the bench had in December 2014 said, "In the SC, several cases relating to 'social justice' are pending for several years. The CJI is of the view that these cases be given a specialised approach for their early disposal so that the masses realise the fruits of the rights provided to them under the Constitution."

It had enumerated the issues pending before the SC for years, "To mention summarily, about the release of surplus food grains lying in stock for the use of people living in drought affected areas; to frame a fresh scheme for public distribution of food grains; to take steps to prevent untimely death of women and children for want of nutritious food; providing hygienic midday meal; to provide night shelter to destitute; to provide medical facilities to all citizens irrespective of their economic conditions; to provide hygienic drinking water; to provide safety and secured living conditions for women forced into prostitution."One of the achievements of the bench was to provide an institutionalised mechanism for rehabilitation of acid attack victims and forcing the Centre and states to put in place a strict regime for over the counter sale of the corrosive substance.

It also forced states to utilise the Rs 27,000 crore collected through 2% cess on cost of construction from builders for welfare measures for construction workers and their children's education. On its basis, the Centre has now framed a scheme for registration of all construction workers under the Employees Provident Fund Organisation. The government has decided to give a portable National Identification Number to each worker for receiving benefits irrespective of change of residence. Around Rs 20,000 crore is lying with states to be spent for the welfare of construction workers.

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