Carrying the Dead

What is the issue?

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There is a need for a “National Hearse Policy” with a minimum corpus for transportation and cremation of dead bodies.

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What has brought this up?

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- Although the Gorakhpur tragedy was greatly painful in itself, details emerge that the dead bodies of most of the children were manually carried back home without any government assistance.
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- Ever since a man carried the body of his wife on his shoulders from the hospital in Kalahandi district of Odisha, there has been a surge of similar reporting from across the country.
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- In 2017 alone, more than a dozen such incidents have been reported so far which besides being visually repugnant, also carries a risk of transmission of diseases and physical damage to the body.
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- It isn’t surprising that people who were forced to take this walk of shame were predominantly from the most backward regions of the country and marginalised sections of society - both in terms of economic status and social strata.
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- This pathetic condition of the downtrodden puts the onus on the state for ensuring the transportation & burial/cremation of the dead from government and private hospitals with dignity.
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What kind of a policy is needed?

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- In the West, transporting the dead from hospitals follows laid down “Standard Operational Protocols” - (SOPs) which are missing the Indian context.
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- It can be easily seen that illiteracy, poor health administration and social norms are barriers.
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- But this shouldn’t deter the government from at least developing and promoting SOPs for those who die within the confines of a government set up.
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- Most importantly, such SOPs when designed should not become a mere legal protocol that is devoid of the necessary sense of compassion and care for the situation of the downtrodden.
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- It needs to be constituted with a ‘Fund Corpus’ to facilitate free of cost services for those who can’t afford to comply.
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What are the challenges?

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- **Vehicle Shortage -** Besides the absence of SOPs for the transportation of the dead, there appears to be an acute shortage of hearse vehicles in India.
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- It is common knowledge that most dead bodies in India are transported using private vehicles like vans and ambulances.
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- We are probably the only nation in the world which transports our dead in ambulances for ambulances are not meant for the dead but for the dying.
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- There is no national data available on the demand and number of hearse vehicles in the country even when schemes like the MP Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) allow the purchase of such vehicles for district hospitals.
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- **Long Distance Transport -** Another aspect of transportation of dead bodies is the practice of long distance transport which needs the body to be embalmed (preserved) for the journey.
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- Such transportation is essential in a big country like ours where higher

referral medical centres are few and scattered.
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- This also highlights the urgent need to formulate guidelines for transportation of embalmed bodies by air, rail and road which is lacking.
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Source: Indian Express

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