



Menace of Manual Scavenging

Why in News

Recently, the centre has claimed that no deaths due to manual scavenging have been reported in the past five years.

- However, according to the **National Convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan**, 472 manual scavenging deaths across the country were recorded between 2016 and 2020, and 26 so far in 2021.
 - Safai Karmachari Andolan is **a movement for elimination of manual scavenging.**
- **Article 21 of the Constitution** guarantees **'Right to Life' and that also with dignity.** This right is available to **both citizens and non-citizens.**

Key Points

- **Manual Scavenging:**
 - Manual scavenging is defined as "the removal of human excrement from public streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers".
- **Reasons for the Prevalence:**
 - **Indifferent Attitude:** A number of independent surveys have talked about the continued reluctance on the part of state governments to admit that the practice prevails under their watch.
 - **Issues due to Outsourcing:** Many times local bodies outsource sewer cleaning tasks to private contractors. However, many of them fly-by-night operators, do not maintain proper rolls of sanitation workers.
 - In case after case of workers being asphyxiated to death, these contractors have denied any association with the deceased.
 - **Social Issue:** The practice is **driven by caste, class and income divides.**
 - It is linked to India's caste system where so-called lower castes are expected to perform this job.
 - In **1993**, India **banned the employment of people as manual scavengers** (The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993), however, the stigma and discrimination associated with it still linger on.
 - This makes it difficult for liberated manual scavengers to secure alternative livelihoods.
- **Steps Taken:**
 - [The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation \(Amendment\) Bill, 2020:](#)
 - It proposes to completely mechanise sewer cleaning, introduce ways for 'on-site'

protection and provide compensation to manual scavengers in case of sewer deaths.

- It will be an amendment to **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.**
- It is **still awaiting cabinet approval.**
- **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:**
 - Superseding the 1993 Act, the 2013 Act goes beyond prohibitions on dry latrines, and outlaws all manual excrement cleaning of insanitary latrines, open drains, or pits.
- **Prevention of Atrocities Act:**
 - In 1989, the **Prevention of Atrocities Act** became an integrated guard for sanitation workers; more than **90% people employed as manual scavengers belonged to the Scheduled Caste.** This became an important landmark to free manual scavengers from designated traditional occupations.
- **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge:**
 - It was launched by the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on World Toilet Day (19th November)** in 2020.
 - The Government launched this “challenge” for **all states to make sewer-cleaning mechanised by April 2021** — if any human needs to enter a sewer line in case of unavoidable emergency, proper gear and oxygen tanks, etc., are to be provided.
- **‘Swachhta Abhiyan App’:**
 - It has been developed to **identify and geotag the data of insanitary latrines and manual scavengers** so that the insanitary latrines can be replaced with sanitary latrines and rehabilitate all the manual scavengers to provide dignity of life to them.
- **SC Judgement:** In 2014, a **Supreme Court** order made it **mandatory** for the government to **identify all those who died in sewage work** since 1993 and provide **Rs. 10 lakh each** as compensation to their families.

Way Forward

- **Proper Identification:** States need to accurately enumerate the workers engaged in cleaning toxic sludge.
- **Empowering Local Administration:** With **Swachh Bharat Mission** identified as a top priority area by the **15th Finance Commission** and funds available for smart cities and urban development providing for a strong case to address the problem of manual scavenging.
- **Social Sensitisation:** To address the social sanction behind manual scavenging, it is required first to acknowledge and then understand how and why manual scavenging continues to be embedded in the caste system.
- **Need For a Stringent Law:** If a law creates a statutory obligation to provide sanitation services on the part of state agencies, it will create a situation in which the rights of these workers will not hang in the air.

Source: TH