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Menace of Manual Scavenging

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This article is based on “**Machine hole**” which was published in The Indian Express on 21/11/2020. It talks about the issue of death due to Manual Scavenging and the way forward.

Recently, the government has proposed to bring amendments in the **Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013**. These amendments are being brought in the light of recently released data by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment which show that manual scavenging has led to 376 deaths over the past five years, including 110 in 2019 alone.

The proposed changes envisaged to make mechanised cleaning of sewers and septic tanks will be mandatory, the word “manhole” will be replaced with “machine-hole” in official usage, and a 24×7 national helpline will be set up to report violations.

However, correcting a problem that is closely intertwined with social hierarchies requires more than technological or legal solutions.

Manual Scavenging

- The term ‘**manual scavenging**’ refers to the practice of manually carrying human excreta.
- In the past, this referred to the practice of removing excreta from dry latrines.
- However, new modern sanitation technologies brought new forms of manual scavenging work, which include manual and unsafe cleaning of drains, sewer lines, septic tanks and latrine pits.

Legal Framework Against Manual Scavenging

- The Manual scavengers and their rehabilitation Act, 2013 prohibits manual scavenging.

- Further, the employment or engagement of people to manually clean drains, sewer tanks, septic tanks is an offence punishable by imprisonment and fine.
- Also, it asks state governments and municipal bodies to identify manual scavengers and rehabilitate them.
- Apart from it, a principle for compensation was also established by the Supreme Court for providing Rs 10 lakhs to every case of sewer death.

Reasons for the Prevalence of Manual Scavenging

- **Social Issue:** The practice of manual scavenging is linked to India's caste system where so-called lower castes were expected to perform this job.
 - Moreover, the law has ended, manual scavenging as a form of employment, the stigma and discrimination associated with it still linger on.
 - This makes it difficult for liberated manual scavengers to secure alternative livelihoods. Apart from this, people could once again return to manual scavenging in the absence of other opportunities to support their families.
- **Lack of Protective Gear:** Frequent deaths occur as manual scavengers don't even have adequate tools and protective gear to clean the manhole.
It often involves using the most basic of tools such as buckets, brooms and baskets.
- **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.
 - Unwilling to invest in technology and the rehabilitation of workers, municipalities live in denial instead of acting to end the practice.
 - Also, despite frequent news of death due to manual scavenging, there have been no reports from states of people being convicted for employing manual scavengers.
 - Further, there is no provision of hand holding people who are targeted for such rehabilitation.
- **Issue 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.

Way Forward

- **Proper Identification:** The Social Justice Ministry has decided to directly provide funds to workers to purchase cleaning machines, instead of giving money to contractors or municipalities. This is a step in the right direction.
For it to succeed, 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 provides for a strong case to address the problem of manual scavenging.
For this to happen, it is essential to empower local administration, so that money needed to shift to mechanised cleaning would not be a constraint.
- **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.
After this, there is a need to sensitise people about the gross violation of this human right.
- **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.

Conclusion

Manual scavengers are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in India.

It is due to this reason it is difficult to eliminate manual scavenging in a system that operates at the intersection of caste, economic inequality.

Drishti Mains Question

Manual Scavenging is a problem that is closely intertwined with social hierarchies and requires more than just technological or legal solutions. Discuss.



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<https://youtu.be/PUuwI1q-1Zg>

This editorial is based on "**Planning for a post-Covid world**" which was published in The Hindustan Times on November 23th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.
