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## Initiatives to Eliminate Manual Scavenging

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### Why in News

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Recently, the government has announced **two major initiatives** for **ending** the **hazardous** practice of **manual cleaning of septic tanks and sewer lines** and making the **mechanised cleaning** must.

The **Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment** will **amend the law** for making machine cleaning mandatory, whereas the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs** has launched the **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge**.

### Key Points

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- **Amending the Law:** Introduction of ‘**The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020**’ as a part of Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry’s **National Action Plan**.
  - The Plan aims to **modernise existing sewage system** and coverage of non-sewered areas; setting up of faecal sludge and septage management system for **mechanised cleaning of septic tanks**, transportation and treatment of faecal sludge; equipping the municipalities, and setting up of Sanitation Response Units with help lines.
  - The **Bill makes following important changes:**
    - **Mechanised Cleaning:** The Bill proposes to completely mechanise sewer cleaning and provide better protection at work and compensation in case of accidents.
    - **Penalty:** The Bill proposes to make the law banning manual scavenging more stringent by increasing the imprisonment term and the fine amount. Currently, engaging any person for hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks by any person or agency is punishable with **imprisonment of up to five years or a fine of up to Rs. 5 lakh or both.**
    - **Funds:** The funds will be provided **directly to the sanitation workers** and not to the municipalities or contractors **to purchase the machinery.**
- **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge:**
  - **Launch:** The challenge has been launched among **243 major cities** on the **World Toilet Day** (19<sup>th</sup> November).
  - **Aim:** To prevent hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and promote their mechanized cleaning.
 

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.
  - **Eligibility:** The state capitals, urban local bodies and smart cities will be eligible to participate.
  - **Prize:** Cities will be awarded in three sub-categories – with a population of more than 10 lakhs, 3-10 lakhs and upto 3 lakhs, with a total prize money of **Rs. 52 crores** to be given to winning cities across all categories.

## Manual Scavenging

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- **Definition:** Manual scavenging is defined as “the removal of human excrement from public streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers”.

- **Concerns:**
  - As per the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)**, a total of **631 people have died** in the country **while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in the last 10 years.**
    - **2019 saw the highest** number of manual scavenging deaths in the past five years. **110 workers** were killed while cleaning sewers and septic tanks.
    - This is a **61% increase** as compared to 2018, which saw 68 cases of such similar deaths.
  - Despite the **introduction of several mechanised systems** for sewage cleaning, **human intervention** in the process **still continues.**
  - As per data collected in **2018, 29,923** people are engaged in manual scavenging in **Uttar Pradesh**, making it the **highest in any State** in India.
- **Reasons for the Prevalence of Manual Scavenging:**
  - **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.
  - **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.
  - **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.
    - The law has ended manual scavenging as a form of employment, however, the **stigma and discrimination** associated with it still linger on.
      - The stigma and discrimination associated with manual scavenging **makes it difficult for liberated manual scavengers to secure alternative livelihoods.**

- **Related Initiatives:**

- The **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013** prohibits construction or maintenance of insanitary latrines, and employment of any person for manual scavenging or hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.

It also **provides measures for rehabilitation** of persons identified as manual scavengers by a Municipality.

- 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.
- In **1993**, the Government of India enacted the **Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act** which prohibited the employment of manual scavengers for manually cleaning dry latrines and also the construction of dry toilets (that do not operate with a flush).
- 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.
- **Article 21 of the Constitution** guarantees 'Right to Life' and that also with dignity.

## Way Forward

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- **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 **15<sup>th</sup> 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:IE**