



Menace of Manual Scavenging

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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