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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. Manual scavenging remains an embodiment of injustice and failure of India to follow Gandhian ideas. Discuss. (250 Words)

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Approach

- In introduction, write about the problem of manual scavenging still prevalent in the society and discuss the effects of manual scavenging.
- Discuss some of the steps taken by the government.
- Conclude with what more can be done to eliminate manual scavenging.

Introduction

According to the 2011 census, there were about 26 lakh dry latrines in India where human excreta is removed physically by a person.

Even after the passage of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, there are still around 15 lakh manual scavengers in India, of whom over 70% are women, according to 2019 data from the Rehabilitation Research Initiative.

Moreover, 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.

Body

Effects of Manual Scavenging:

- **Health-related Problems:** The scavengers are exposed to gases such as hydrogen disulfide, carbon monoxide, ammonia, and methane. Long exposure to hydrogen disulfide can lead to death by asphyxia.
- **Structural Violence Against Manual Scavengers:** Manual scavengers are exposed to two types of violence that are **social violence and physical violence** (associated with caste discrimination).
- **Caste And Gender Discrimination:** Most of the manual scavengers are women and members of the marginal class. The caste is regarded as a lower class and is excluded from moving to a better occupation. As a result, the scavenging work is seen as part of their natural occupation.

Reasons for the Prevalence:

- **Indifferent Attitude:** 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.

- **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.

Steps already taken by the government

- **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.
- **'Swachhta Abhiyan App':** It has been developed to identify and geotag the data of insanitary latrines and manual scavengers.
- **SC Judgement (2014):** It is 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.
- Earliest passage of 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.

Conclusion

The manual scavenging is against the human right to live with dignity. The government and civil society must together work to eliminate this social menace.