Borewell Deaths - Tamil Nadu Incident

Why in news?

The intensive operation in Tamil Nadu to rescue two-year-old Sujith Wilson who slipped into an abandoned borewell in Manapparai, Tiruchi ended in failure.

What happened?

- The two-year-old Sujith Wilson fell into an abandoned borewell at Nadukattupatti near Manapparai, Tiruchi district, Tamil Nadu.
- Hopes were brightest in the initial phase of the rescue operation.
- But, varied efforts to lift the child through the borewell kept failing.
- Hopes faded as the victim sank further into the borehole, partly buried under earth.
- The attempt to drill a hole nearby using rig and rescuing the child also failed due to the challenging geological structure.
- The body was reportedly 'highly decomposed and dismembered' when it was finally retrieved from the borewell after more than 80 hours.
- Members of the NDRF, SDRF, and state fire service as well as personnel of the state administration and government were involved.

What are the concerns raised?

- Unfortunately, no breakthrough method to rescue children falling into deep holes has emerged.
- This is the case both in terms of technology and protocols.
- Worryingly, more such disasters are bound to occur, since there are many unused and uncovered well holes scattered in farms in several States.
- Notably, the NDRF deployed its teams no less than 37 times until 2018, mostly in Maharashtra, but also in Rajasthan, TN, Gujarat and Karnataka.
- Deep borewell accidents have also occurred in cities that rely heavily on groundwater.

What are the regulations in place?

- Tamil Nadu issued, under its Panchayats Act, the Regulation of Sinking of Wells and Safety Measures Rules 2015.
- The Rules incorporated the measures ordered by the Supreme Court in 2010 in this regard.

- There is a provision [requiring the holder/owner of a permit or well] to fill up an abandoned hole up to the ground level using clay, sand or boulders.

What should be done?

- For meaningful implementation of the provisions in place, the onus should rest with the local body.
- It should not lie with the owner of the borewell who is often a farmer of poor means.
- Under this, closing an abandoned well would no longer be seen as a wasteful expenditure by farmers as they would not be charged for it.
- The panchayat personnel would execute the closure rather than merely certify that action has been taken.
- As the Supreme Court pointed out, it should be the task of the municipal and public health authorities to eliminate this recurring incidents.
- In the court's view, the District Collector bears responsibility for enforcement.
- It is high time that the State governments take safety seriously, and come up with a census of well structures in need of attention.
- Besides avoiding the human toll, time-bound capping of open wells will eliminate the intensive, high-cost rescues that the NDRF has to attempt.

Source: The Hindu

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