Concerns with Contractual Work in India

What is the issue?

Sanitation workers in India represent a wider phenomenon of exploitative contractual work in the country.

What happened recently?

- Kishan Lal, 37, a sanitation worker in contract, died inside an underground drain in the nation’s capital.
- When he did not come out, the police and fire department were called but they could not find him.
- The National Disaster Response Force then found his body after an 8-hour search.
- Newspapers reported asphyxiation as the cause of death but notably he had no safety kit with him.

How has contract working evolved?

- The term 'contract worker' was earlier used only in the context of private sector employment as the government alone gave ‘permanent’ appointments.
- But economic reforms introduced under the 1991 liberalisation changed this condition.
- From the early 1990s, government jobs could also be given on contract.
- 'Contract worker' is now a term widely attributed to many, the scope of which has greatly expanded over recent decades.
- But depending on who the contractor is, there could be vast differences in the experience of work under a contract.

What is the caste-connect in sanitation?

- Among sanitation workers, thousands in each major city are serving on contract.
- Observations reveal a strong relation between caste and contract work in the sphere of sanitation as most of them belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category.
- Surveys indicate a small proportion of other castes in permanent sanitation staff.
- But it is reported that these non-SC permanent functionaries often get proxy

workers from SC backgrounds to do the actual work.

What leads to their exploitation?

- **Terms of contract** - In the case of sanitation, contract work means gross vulnerability and exploitation.
- The contracts are loosely-worded and the terms offer few safeguards for the workers.
- So a contractor feels free to enhance his own share of the contract with impunity, by taking away the worker's share.
- **Safety norms** - The government in the case of sanitation is often the municipality.
- It shows little sustained interest in imposing stringent norms for provision of equipment, including those for safety, necessary for sewer cleaning.
- Moreover, sanitation workers on contract work for small-time contractors who have absolutely no idea of the worker's role.
- So the contractor takes the liberty to exploit the worker, defying all barriers and checks for worker's safety.

- **Training** - Sanitation involves complex work, requiring both knowledge and training; but it is not recognised by the contractors.
- The bond that exists between caste and sanitation do not allow them to acknowledge the need for training.

What are the general concerns in contractual working?

- **Regulations** - There are shortfalls in government playing the supposed role of regulating the functioning of the contracts.
- It does not work out the details for different sectors and departments.
- Government has been following the general policy of privatisation as a matter of faith, in sanitation sector too.

- **Quality** - With lack of proper regulation, contractual working has made an impact on the quality of services.
- This is particularly worrying in areas directly related to welfare such as sanitation, health and education.
- Even in functions such as data gathering, which are crucial for economic planning and decisions, the contractual workforce has proved detrimental to quality.
- Little attempt has been made to study how contractual work has affected reliability in the postal services, railways and accounts.

Why does it remain substandard?

- The service conditions of contract workers are totally different from those serving as permanent staff, but they are expected to deliver higher quality.
- It has become evident that contractual work in professions such as teaching discourages motivation to improve one’s performance.
- It's because contractual functionaries see no definite prospect of a career or future in the same profession.
- Also, their wage is much too small to sustain the growth of substantial professional commitment.
- So they continue to perform below the standards and the quality remains poor.
- All these call for the government to make a fresh review of the working of the contractual system and bring in appropriate policy changes.

Source: The Hindu

