Edward Colston

Why in news?

As anti-racism protests spread across Europe, after the killing of black man George Floyd in the USA, the protestors attack their own local brand of racism.

What happened?

- In the English port city of Bristol, demonstrators pulled down a 125-year-old statue of 17th century slave trader Edward Colston.
- They dragged it through the city's streets into the harbour of river Avon.
- This incident has caused a stir in the city, with residents divided over his exact role in history.
- Some would like to remember him as a philanthropist who devoted his fortunes to the development and prosperity of Bristol.
- Others are wary of the exploitative nature of his work that brought in the same above fortunes.

What is the petition?

- A petition seeking a reassessment of Colston's contribution to the city of Bristol has been doing the rounds for the last three years.
- A petition asking for the removal of his statue from the city centre read that the people who benefited from the enslavement of individuals do not deserve the honour of a statue.

Who is Edward Colston?

- Colston was born in 1636 to a merchant family that had been living in Bristol since the 14th century.
- While he grew up in Bristol until the English Civil War of 1642-51, his family later moved to London, where Colston began his professional life.
- At the initial stage of his career, Colston was involved in the trading of cloth, oil, wine, fruits with Spain, Portugal, Italy and Africa.
- In 1680, he joined the Royal African Company (RAC), which had a monopoly in England on the trade of gold, silver, ivory, and slaves, along the west coast of Africa.

Why is Edward Colston seen as a racist?

- The RAC was established by King Charles II along with his brother James, the Duke of York.
- The ships of the Company enjoyed the protection of the Royal Navy, and the traders made good profits.
- Many of the enslaved Africans were branded with the initials 'DY', standing for Duke of York.
- They were shipped to Caribbean islands to work on the new sugar plantations, as well as further north to England's American colonies.
- Colston rose up to the company's board, taking on the position of Deputy Governor in 1689.
- During the period of his involvement with RAC till 1692, the company is believed to have transported about 84,000 slaves.

Why is Edward Colston seen as a philanthropist?

- Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow, and London were the key ports for British companies trafficking African slaves across the Atlantic.
- The merchants, shipbuilders, sailors involved in the trade were a major source of income and wealth for these cities.
- Colston was one such slave trade magnate.
- He funded many charitable projects in Bristol and London, including schools and almshouses for the poor of the city, thereby developing the reputation of a philanthropist.
- He briefly served as a Tory MP for Bristol before dying in Mortlake, Surrey, in 1721.
- In his day, he was revered by Bristol's corporation as the highest example of Christian liberality that this age has produced, both for extensiveness of his charities and the prudent regulation of them.
- His name is enshrined upon an independent school, a high rise building called Colston Tower, Colston Street, Colston Avenue, etc.

Who are the other figures targeted by anti-racism demonstrators?

- **Winston Churchill**: In central London, the statue of former British prime minister Winston Churchill was vandalised.
- The demonstrators reportedly wrote 'was a racist' on it.
- The wartime prime minister of the country was known for his 'indomitable spirit' among the British.
- But he has been accused by historians for his racist, imperial policies that led to the death of many in British India.
- **King Leopold**: In Belgium, demonstrators targeted the statues of the 19th century monarch King Leopold II.
- His administration of the Congo has been heavily criticised for the atrocities

and exploitation it led to.
- The institutionalised brutality unleashed by Leopold in Congo is believed to have led to the death of about 10 million people.
- An online petition asking for the removal of his statues garnered 60,000 signatures.

Source: The Indian Express

