Prevalence of Manual Scavenging in India

Why in news?

Three labourers in Mumbai, allegedly hired for manual scavenging, died on after inhaling toxic fumes in a septic tank.

What is manual scavenging?

- Manual scavenging is the practice of removing human excreta by hand from sewers or septic tanks.
- India banned the practice under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR).
- The Act bans the use of any individual for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta till its disposal.
- In 2013, the definition of manual scavengers was also broadened to include people employed to clean septic tanks, ditches, or railway tracks.
- The Act recognizes manual scavenging as a “dehumanizing practice,” and cites a need to correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by the manual scavengers.

What does the statistic say?

- According to a parliament response from December 2021, a total of 58,098 manual scavengers have been identified as per the criteria laid down in the 2013 act.
- More than 97% of those engaged in manual scavenging are from the SC community.
- The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)’s annual report (2019-20) noted that the practice which became prominent due to urbanization and industrialization is still continuing in both rural and urban areas.
- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 2021, held that the claims made by many States that they have zero manual scavengers and zero insanitary latrines are far from the truth.

What reasons were cited for its prevalence?

- Prevalence of caste-based discrimination and social inequality
- Lack of enforcement of the Act
- Exploitation of unskilled labourers who are cheaper to hire and illegally employed by contractors
- Poor rehabilitation schemes such as one-time cash assistance, skill development training, and subsidies
- Lack of data - NCRB stopped showing the number of cases registered under the Act in its report

What efforts were taken to eradicate manual scavenging?

- **Legislations-** In 1955, *the Protection of Civil Rights Act* called for the abolition of scavenging or sweeping on grounds of untouchability which was revised in 1977 for a stricter implementation.
- In 1989, *the Prevention of Atrocities Act* became an important landmark to free manual scavengers from designated traditional occupations.
- *The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993* was enacted to take a stricter stance against employing manual scavengers.
- In 2013, the Parliament passed the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers Act, 2013,* with a greater emphasis on mechanisation of sewer cleaning and rehabilitation.
- **Financial aid**- National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC) was established to become an integrated platform to provide financial aid to manual scavengers.
- **Commission-** In 1994, the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), a statutory body made by the same Act of Parliament, 1993, was established.
- **Committees**- Several committees such as Kaka Kalelkar Commission, Barve Commision, Pandya Committee (1968), etc. sought recommendations to regulate the service conditions of the manual scavengers.
- **Schemes**- The centrally sponsored scheme of low cost sanitation for *Liberation of Scavengers (ILCS)* began from 1980-81 for the conversion of dry toilets into pit toilets through integrated low-cost sanitation scheme.
- Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's declaration of a city / settlement being open defecation-free and building of the toilets helps in complete integration of the sanitation system which includes the structural maintenance of these toilets.
- **NGOs**- Various organisations such as the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) have been working to eradicate manual scavenging.

References

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