Uncounted Deaths of Sanitation Workers in India

What is the issue?

In 2021, the government has no accurate record of the number of sanitation workers (including manual scavengers), nor their approximate death count.

What do recent estimates show?

- In the last 50 years over 1 million uncounted deaths of sanitation workers estimated in India.
- Deaths in the last 5 years and their causes
- 10,000 people - Multiple chronic conditions emanating from manual scavenging and cleaning insanitary latrines.
- Over 600 people - Hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks, with around 18-20% unreported cases in both these categories.
- Many deaths occurred during the peak of the pandemic's second wave, as sanitation workers handled dead bodies in semi-urban and rural areas and on the banks of the Ganga.

What are the realities and concerns?

- The sub-castes of the Dalit community are largely engaged in all these unidentified categories of sanitation work, including manual scavenging.
- So far, in its identification-related surveys, the government has merely reached –
    i. 5% of the total population of manual scavengers
    ii. 20% of the total area of India

- **Causes of Failure**
    i. Inadequacy of identification of manual scavengers by urban and rural local bodies
    ii. Failure to comply with Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act by District magistrates
    iii. Failure in exhibiting appropriate lists of examination of sanitation infrastructures by Appointed Inspectors
- Safety gears and devices promised to scavengers under the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge do not reach them.
- When workers identify themselves as manual scavengers, they are often harassed with death threats by local authorities.
- Non-compliance with the Act is hardly ever penalised.
- Compensation and promises of one-time case assistance are only provided in around 40% of "all recorded cases".

What should be done?

- Estimating the actual number of deaths of sanitation workers (manual scavengers or other categories).
- Highlighting the lapses in the implementation of the PEMSR Act and government interventions, and rectifying them.

Source: The Indian Express

