US Resumes Federal Executions

Why in news?

The Supreme Court of the United States cleared the way for the resumption of federal executions.

What happened later?

- After the Supreme Court (SC) ruling, Daniel Lewis Lee became the first federal inmate to be executed in the US in 17 years.
- Lee was put to death by lethal injection at a prison in Indiana.
- This SC verdict reignited public debate about death penalty in the US.

What are federal executions?

- In the US, the criminals can be tried either at a national level in federal courts, or at a regional level in state courts.
- As many as 22 US states including New York, Hawaii have abolished the death penalty at a regional level.
- But, it can still be awarded at a federal level in all the 50 US states.
- However, it is rarely used.
- At present, there are 62 inmates on federal death row.

What is the history?

- In 1972, the SC struck down capital punishment at both the state and federal level.
- However, it was reinstated by Congress over a decade later, in 1988.
- With the passing of the Federal Death Penalty Act of 1994, the list of crimes that could lead to federal execution grew substantially.
- In 2006, the SC ruled that death row inmates could challenge the use of lethal injection as a method of execution.
- In 2014, then-US President ordered an investigation into capital punishment procedures and the use of the lethal injection.
- In 2019, the US Attorney General William Barr ordered the government to abandon the use of the three-drug lethal injection.
- He wanted to replace it with a single-drug injection.

How are the executions carried out?

- In 2019, Trump administration announced its plans to employ a single-drug lethal injection, using a sedative called **Pentobarbital**.
- It is known to gradually slow brain activity and the nervous system.
- Several inmates challenged the constitutionality of using Pentobarbital.
- They claimed that its use violates their rights under the eighth amendment of the US constitution.
- [Eighth amendment protects citizens from cruel and unusual punishment.]
- Another issue is that Pentobarbital is not readily available in all states.
- There have been instances in the past where the drug has caused pain to the inmates.
- Many states have also faced criticism for using other drugs that have been known to have severe effects.

What are the arguments against death penalty?

- Many argued that the death penalty violates an individual's civil liberties and fundamental rights as citizen of a democracy.
- The American Civil Liberties Union believes the death penalty violates the constitutional ban against cruel and unusual punishment.
- Several lawyers and activists have also raised the issue of race.
- Data shows that the American justice system is unfairly skewed against people of colour (POC).

What are the arguments supporting death penalty?

- Some have argued that severe punishments will help reduce crimes.
- Attorney General Barr had argued that federal executions must be carried out as the government owes it to crime victims and their families.

Which countries still have death penalty?

- As of 2020, at least 53 countries around the world impose death penalty as punishment.
- Several methods including hanging, shooting, electrocution and beheading are used across the globe.
- In 2019, the most number of executions took place in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt, in that order.
- According to a study conducted by Delhi's National Law University, 755 people have been hanged to death in India since Independence.

Source: The Indian Express



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