

2. No Meetings of SCs and STs Panel held for 3 Years

Prelims Syllabus: Constitutional Bodies, Regulatory Bodies

Mains Syllabus: GS-II Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these Vulnerable Sections.

Why in News?

- According to the information provided by the **Union Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry** to Parliament, the State-level committees had not met even once in three years – 2016, 2017 and 2018.

About the News:

- The State-level committees meant to monitor the implementation of the **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** of 25 States and Union Territories had not met even once in three years.
- The 1995 rules formed under the Act mandate the setting up of State and district-level vigilance and monitoring committees.
- The State-level committees, headed by the respective Chief Ministers, are supposed to meet twice a year, according to the rules.

What are the constitutional provisions against SC/ST Atrocities?

- **Article 17** of the constitution prohibits the practice of untouchability.
- **Article 46** promotes the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs, and other weaker sections of the society and protects them from social injustice and exploitation.
- **Article 338** – National Commission for Scheduled Castes
 - ✓ Investigate and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and other legal safeguards for the SCs and to evaluate their working.
 - ✓ Inquire into specific complaints with respect to the deprivation of rights and safeguards of the SCs.
- **338-A** – National Commission for Scheduled Tribes
 - ✓ Its functions are the same as that of NCSC, but with respect to ST instead of SC.

About the Act:

- Creation of new types of offences that are neither present in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) nor in the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955.
- It punishes crimes against people belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

- It vests special protections and rights with the victims.
- It creates Special Courts and special public prosecutor for speedier completion of cases.
- Commission of offences only by particular persons (by non-SCs on SCs and non-STs on STs).
- Punishment for public servant (non-SC/ST) in case of neglect of duties.
- Denial of anticipatory bail.
- Gives compensation, relief, and rehabilitation for victims of atrocities or their legal heirs.
- Mandatory and periodic monitoring system at District, State, and National level.
- Identification of atrocity prone zones.
- **Ministry of Social Justice** is the nodal ministry to enforce the provisions of the Act.

What are the states that did not met?

- The State-level committees in 25 States and Union Territories — Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Daman & Diu, Delhi and Lakshadweep — had not held any meetings in the three years.

Measures to be Taken:

- Minimising the duration of trials.
- SC/ST commission should start a national helpline number for any harassment on the basis of caste.
- Improving the training of police officers in dealing with POA cases so that they can solve the cases without any pressure or prejudice.
- Increasing awareness about several legal remedies and different rights available to the marginalized community.
- Use of audio-video recording to collect evidence.
- Better forensics.
- State Protection of a witness.
- The government should take proactive measures to improve the participation of people from SC/ST community in decision making and government functioning.

Way Forward:

- The most crucial thing for ending discrimination and improving fraternity is a consistent societal action to change the entrenched caste rigidity.
- SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA act) only serves as a tool in this endeavour rather than an end in itself.

