

1. Manual Scavenging in India

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?

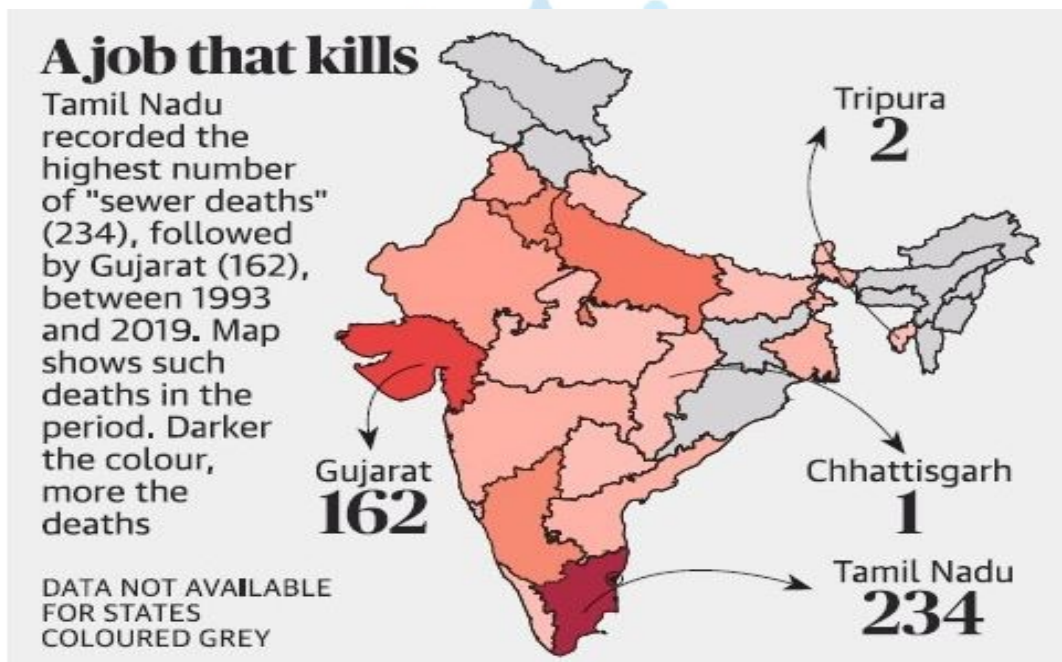
- The Supreme Court has directed the government to place on record within six weeks the steps taken by it to implement its nearly 10-year-old judgment to end manual scavenging and prevent future generations from the “inhuman practice” while making entry into sewers without safety gear a crime even in emergency situations.

What does the act says?

- The act prohibits the employment of manual scavengers, manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks without protective equipment, and the construction of insanitary latrines.
- It seeks to rehabilitate manual scavengers and provide for their alternative employment.
- Each local authority, cantonment board and railway authority is responsible for surveying insanitary latrines within its jurisdiction. They shall also construct a number of sanitary community latrines.
- The District Magistrate and the local authority shall be the implementing authorities. Offences under the Act shall be cognizable and non-bailable and may be tried summarily.

What does the previous report says?

- According to the National Commission of Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), a total of 53,598 people, of which 29,923 were in Uttar Pradesh alone had been identified as engaged in manual scavenging after surveys in 2013 and 2018.
- Though most of the sewer death compensation had been paid but states like Gujarat, Maharashtra is yet to pay compensation.
- Since 1993, a total of 926 deaths related to the manual scavenging is reported in the country, out of which 172 families are yet to receive compensation.
- Tamil Nadu reported the highest number of deaths but has paid compensation in all but seven of the 234 cases.
- Gujarat has the highest number of cases where the compensation amount was not paid followed by Maharashtra.
- Currently, one-time cash assistance, capital subsidy and skill development training are provided to the identified manual scavengers.



National Commission of Safai Karamcharis

- The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) was constituted on 12th August 1994 as a statutory body by an Act of Parliament viz. 'National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993'.
- The act "The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993" lapsed in February 2004.

- The Commission is acting as a non-statutory body of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment whose tenure is extended from time to time through Government Resolutions.

Why Manual Scavenging is still prevailing?

- Despite the most stringent penal provisions in the law against manual scavenging, it continues in parts of India largely due to governmental indifference and social prejudice.
- The continued presence of insanitary latrines, of which there are about 2.6 million that require cleaning by hand, according to Safai Karamchari Andolan.
- Many communities still regard the presence of a sanitary toilet inside the house as physical pollution.
- The entrenched belief in the **caste system** that assumes people belonging to a particular caste group will readily perform the stigmatized task of emptying latrines.
- The state governments are not keen to demolish and rebuild old facilities lacking sanitation, or conduct a full census of both the latrines and the people engaged in clearing such waste.

Way Forward:

- With Swachh Bharat Mission identified as a top priority area by the 15th Finance Commission and funds available for smart cities and urban development providing for a strong case to address the problem of manual scavenging.
- To address the social sanction behind manual scavenging, it is required first to acknowledge and then understand how and why manual scavenging continues to be embedded in the caste system.
- The state and society need to take active interest in the issue and look into all possible options to accurately assess and subsequently eradicate this practice.