



Balalatha's



CSB IAS ACADEMY

The Road Map to Mussoorie...

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MANUAL SCAVENGING

SYLLABUS:

GS 2> Social Justice > Vulnerable & Backward sections

REFERENCE NEWS:

- In a comprehensive government study conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment under its NAMASTE programme, data gathered from over 3,000 urban local bodies across 29 states and union territories reveal that **91.9%** of the 38,000 workers profiled so far belong to **Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Class (OBC) communities**. These workers are predominantly engaged in the hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, highlighting ongoing socio-economic disparities.

The NAMASTE programme, launched in 2023-24, aims to mechanize all sewer work to prevent deaths from hazardous cleaning. This initiative replaces the earlier Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS).

The detailed demographic composition of the sanitation workforce is as follows:

- **Scheduled Caste (SC):** 68.9%
- **Other Backward Classes (OBC):** 14.7%
- **Scheduled Tribe (ST):** 8.3%
- **General Category:** 8%

MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA:

- According to the UN India, manual scavenging refers to “**the practice of manual cleaning, disposing, or handling of the human excreta, in any manner, from dry latrines and sewers.**”
- In 1993, India banned the employment of people as manual scavengers. In 2013, the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act** put an end to the practice in any form.
- However, the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)’s latest annual report (2019-20) noted that the practice is still continuing in both rural and urban areas.

- As per the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011 (SECC-2011) data of manual scavengers, there were **1.82 Lakh manual scavengers in the rural areas** of the country.
- However, 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.
- The government asserts that no new manual scavengers have been identified since 2018, following the redefinition in the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act.

WHY IT PERSISTS:

- **Caste and gender-based discriminations:**
 - Due to the prevalence of the caste system, such harmful tasks are mostly done by those belonging to the lower rung of the hierarchy particularly women. For instance, as per the recent study, around **92% of workers cleaning urban sewers, septic tanks are from SC, ST, OBC groups**
- **Poor policy implementation:**
 - Rehabilitation schemes such as one-time cash assistance, skill development training, and subsidies are provided to a smaller number of persons out of the identified manual scavengers.
 - For instance, as of 2019, the Self Employment Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (SRMS), had **covered a mere 6 percent of Safai Karamcharis.**
- **Weak institutions:**
 - In the recent annual report of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), the Chairperson admits that the organisation lacks the resources, and that the results over the years have not matched the expectation.
- **Lack of alternative opportunities:**
 - Lack of skill development coupled with poverty and social stigma against Safai Karamcharis have resulted in very few alternate employment opportunities for them. To make ends meet, these social groups continue to pursue manual scavenging.
- **Data deficiency:**
 - There is a huge issue with data related to various aspects of manual scavengers. Such discrepancies in data result in inefficient enforcement of legislations and schemes formulated for relief & rehabilitation of manual scavengers.
- **Institutionalization of the practice:**
 - Despite government outlawing the use of direct human labour in the cleaning of sewage, municipal corporations and government agencies have institutionalized the practice. For instance, SKA reports that in Railways there are 36,176 railway sewer cleaners.
- **COVID-induced vagaries:**
 - COVID-19 has pushed many into poverty and the vulnerable sections have turned to manual scavenging activities for livelihood.

- The social exclusion got even more enhanced due to the stigma that surrounded sanitation workers involved in COVID-19 relief works.
- **Engineering challenges:**
 - Mechanised scavenging remains limited largely to urban areas of the country. Also, most of the sewers and septic tanks have engineering defects which means that after a point, machines cannot clean it.

IMPACT OF MANUAL SCAVENGING:

- **Violation of human rights:**
 - **Right to live with human dignity** is one of the most important rights which is embodied under Article 21. However, the persistence of manual scavenging violates this right.
- **Undermines social contract:**
 - The practice of manual scavenging poses several questions over equal access to protection offered by the Indian Constitution and the Indian judiciary guaranteeing rights to all its citizens.
- **Threat to life:**
 - Manual scavengers are exposed to gases such as hydrogen disulfide, ammonia, and methane. Long exposure to these lead to death by asphyxia.
 - **Between 2019 and 2023**, there have been at least **377 reported deaths** across India resulting from hazardous cleaning activities, as stated in government data tabled in the Indian Parliament.
- **Poor health outcomes:**
 - Manual scavengers are exposed to diseases like cholera, hepatitis, tuberculosis and typhoid, and physical harm due to dilapidated work environment. This, coupled with poor nutrition perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty.
- **Perpetuation of social discrimination:**
 - Prevalence of manual scavenging perpetuates the discrimination and stigma against the people involved in them and restricts their scope to realize their true human potential.

MEASURES AGAINST MANUAL SCAVENGING:

I. LEGISLATIVE:

- **The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993:**
 - It criminalized the employment of manual scavengers to clean dry latrines.
- **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:**
 - It was also passed with the objective to end manual scavenging. The 2013 Act also focused on the **rehabilitation of manual scavengers** and the introduction of **mechanization to prevent manual scavenging**.

- Under this Act, any person who engages an individual for manual scavenging is punishable with **imprisonment** up to two years and/or a **penalty of Rs. 1 lakh**.

II. INSTITUTIONAL:

- **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK):**
 - The commission was set up in 1993 under the NCSK Act 1993 for a period of three years. Since the Act ceased to have effect from 2004, the tenure of the NCSK has been extended as a **non-statutory body** from time to time through resolutions.
 - Its objectives are to **investigate the conditions of Safai Karamcharis, investigate grievances with respect to the implementation of schemes and make recommendations** to the Central Government.
 - The Commission comprises one Chairman and four members, including a lady member and the Secretary along with other supporting staff.
- **National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC):**
 - NSKFDC is in operation since 1997, as an Apex Corporation for the all-round socio-economic upliftment of the Safai Karamcharis and their dependents throughout India, through various loan and non-loan based schemes.

III. POLICY:

- **NAMASTE Programme:**
 - The NAMASTE programme, initiated in 2023-24, aims to replace the older Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS). It focuses on mechanizing all sewer and septic tank cleaning to mitigate the risks involved and effectively end the practice of manual scavenging under its previous definitions.
 - **Goals and Actions** Key components of the initiative include:
 - **Profiling Workers:** A nationwide effort to create a central database of sanitation workers.
 - **Safety Training and Equipment:** Providing essential training and equipment to enhance worker safety.
 - **Capital Subsidies:** Offering financial support to encourage workers to transition into 'sanipreneurs'—sanitation entrepreneurs. To date, capital subsidies amounting to ₹2.26 crore have benefited 191 workers, and another ₹10.6 crore has supported 413 sanitation workers or their dependants in starting sanitation-related projects.
- **Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge:**
 - On the occasion of World Toilet Day November 19, 2020 **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)** launched the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge-2021.
 - It is aimed at preventing hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and to promote mechanised cleaning.
 - It also intends to thrust upon providing proper protective gears and equipment and identification of informal workers and thereby integrating them into formal mechanism.

IV. OTHERS:

- **Bezwada Wilson and Safai Karamchari Andolan:**
 - Bezwada Wilson, born in Karnataka to a community traditionally involved in manual scavenging, is a key figure in India's movement against this practice. As the National Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) since 1986, he has spearheaded efforts to abolish manual scavenging. He initiated a significant legal challenge in 1993, filing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that targeted violators of the 1993 Prohibition Act. Under his leadership, SKA has worked relentlessly as a watchdog, advocating for the demolition of dry latrines and aiding scavengers in finding alternative livelihoods.
- **Technological solution: Bandicoot robot**
 - The Bandicoot is a spider-shaped robotic machine that is engineered for cleaning any type of sewer manholes.
 - Developed by Genrobotics, the technology is currently used in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Assam, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Enhanced Data Collection and Monitoring:** Establish a robust, transparent system for monitoring and reporting, utilizing modern technology and periodic audits. The Swachh Survekshan survey should be expanded to specifically identify and record instances of manual scavenging, ensuring accurate, real-time data that drives policy and rehabilitation efforts.
- **Adoption of Successful Models:** Promote and replicate successful sanitation models from across India and globally. Initiatives like Tamil Nadu's Namma Toilets and eco-friendly sanitation solutions from countries like South Africa should be adapted and implemented widely, enhancing public infrastructure and reducing reliance on manual scavenging.
- **Refocusing the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM):** Redirect the focus of SBM towards creating sustainable employment opportunities for former manual scavengers. This involves expanding initiatives in solid waste management, promoting mass awareness through media campaigns, and supporting skill development and entrepreneurship in sanitation-related activities.
- **Legislative and Policy Strengthening:** Strengthen existing laws and policies with stricter enforcement and heavier penalties for violations. Ensure that local governments and private entities comply with the legal requirements to mechanize sanitation work, backed by judicial oversight and community monitoring.
- **Support and Rehabilitation Programs:** Enhance support for manual scavengers transitioning out of the practice through comprehensive rehabilitation programs that offer educational, financial, and psychological support. Establish dedicated centers for skill training and legal aid to empower and uplift affected individuals and their families.
- **Community Engagement and Education:** Foster a national dialogue on the stigma associated with sanitation work, emphasizing the dignity of all labor. Educational

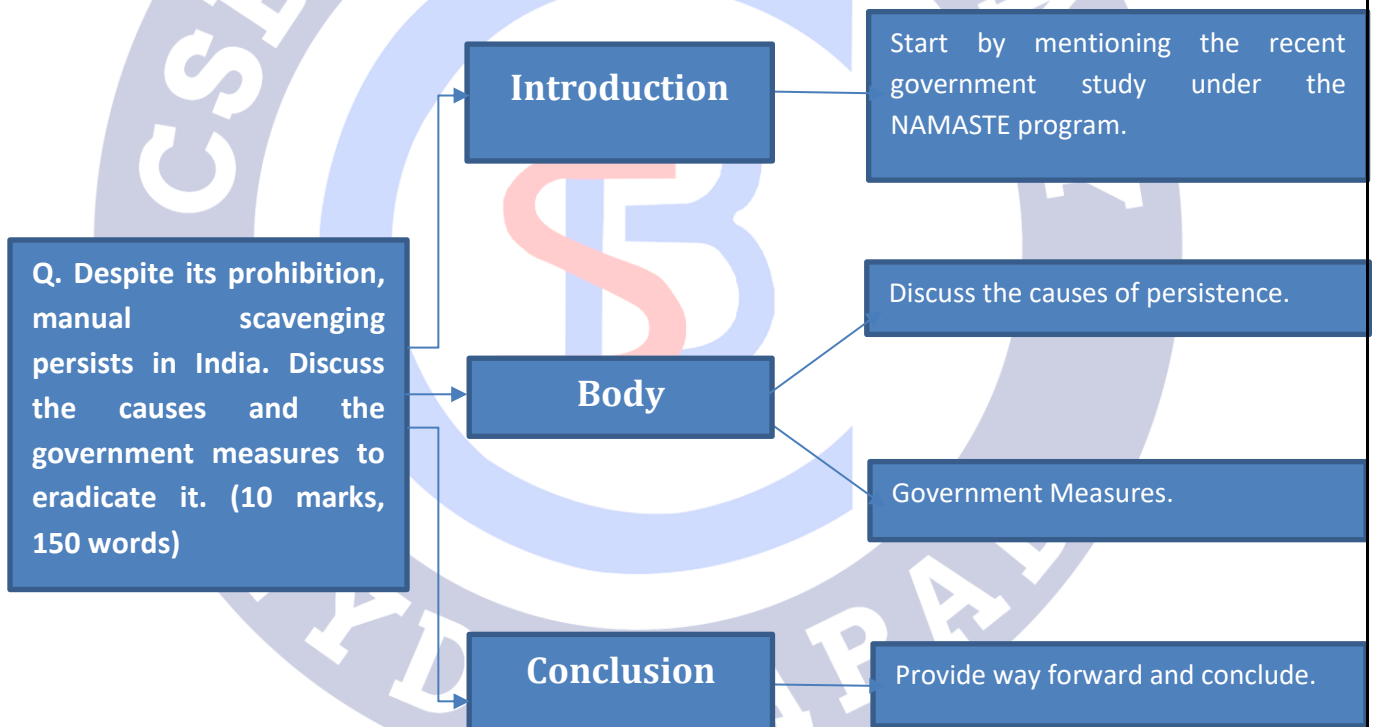
campaigns should target both rural and urban populations to change perceptions and encourage respectful and equitable treatment of sanitation workers.

CONCLUSION: The persistence of manual scavenging in India starkly violates human rights. Despite laws and mechanization efforts laying groundwork for eradication, real change requires effective policy execution, community involvement, and strong support systems. Concentrated efforts on these fronts can not only end this inhumane practice but also secure a dignified future for the marginalized. With dedicated societal commitment, eradicating manual scavenging is achievable, supporting broader goals of equity and social justice.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. Despite its prohibition, manual scavenging persists in India. Discuss the causes and the government measures to eradicate it. (10 marks, 150 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

A recent government study under the NAMASTE programme reveals that 91.9% of the 38,000 sanitation workers surveyed across 29 states and union territories belong to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), or Other Backward Classes (OBC), underscoring significant socio-economic disparities. Despite legislative measures, manual scavenging persists, driven by deep-seated social and systemic challenges.

Causes of Persistence:

1. **Caste-Based Discrimination:** Predominantly, manual scavenging is carried out by individuals from SC, ST, and OBC communities, showcasing entrenched caste-based discrimination.
2. **Ineffective Policy Implementation:** Government programs like the earlier Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers have historically reached only a fraction of the affected population, with as low as 6% coverage among Safai Karamcharis.
3. **Economic Dependencies:** Many involved in manual scavenging lack alternative employment opportunities due to limited education and skills, compounded by the stigma associated with their caste and occupation.
4. **Resource Constraints in Oversight Bodies:** Institutions like the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis are often under-resourced, limiting their ability to effectively address grievances and enforce policies.
5. **Technological and Infrastructure Limitations:** Mechanical cleaning is still not feasible in all settings due to engineering challenges in sewer and septic tank designs, which often require human intervention.

Government Measures:

1. **Legal Frameworks:** The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, aims to eliminate manual scavenging with strict penalties for violations. However, enforcement remains uneven.
2. **Technological Adoption:** The introduction of technologies like the Bandicoot robot under the NAMASTE programme aims to mechanize the cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, reducing the need for human involvement.
3. **Capacity Building:** Initiatives like the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge aim to equip workers with safety gear and proper training, targeting a reduction in fatalities from hazardous cleaning, which have totaled 377 deaths between 2019 and 2023.
4. **Financial and Rehabilitation Support:** Through capital subsidies and training, affected workers are encouraged to become 'sanipreneurs,' with significant funding supporting the start of sanitation-related businesses.
5. **Data and Monitoring Enhancement:** Efforts are being made to create comprehensive databases of sanitation workers to better tailor policies and interventions, ensuring no affected individual is overlooked.

Way Forward:

- **Enhance Data Accuracy and Accessibility:** Implement more rigorous data collection and monitoring systems to ensure all manual scavengers are identified and can access government support programs.
- **Expand Educational and Vocational Training:** Offer broader educational programs and vocational training to provide alternative livelihoods for those involved in manual scavenging.

- **Increase Public Awareness and Social Integration:** Conduct national awareness campaigns to destigmatize and integrate workers from marginalized communities, highlighting the dignity of all forms of labor.
- **Strengthen Policy Implementation and Accountability:** Establish clearer accountability mechanisms within governmental and institutional frameworks to ensure that policies and protections for manual scavengers are properly implemented.
- **Promote Public-Private Partnerships:** Encourage collaborations between the government, NGOs, and private sectors to innovate and implement scalable technological solutions that can replace manual scavenging

Manual scavenging in India persists due to entrenched social and systemic challenges. To eradicate this practice, it is essential to enforce existing laws rigorously, increase public awareness, and provide viable economic alternatives for affected communities. Focused efforts in these areas are crucial for upholding human dignity and achieving social equity.

