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News: ‘India still not free of manual scavenging’

- The Union Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry has said that only 508 districts of the 766 districts in the country have been declared free of manual scavenging.

Manual Scavenging

- Manual scavenging is defined as “the removal of human excrement from public streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers”.
- India banned the practice under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR).

Steps taken to tackle Manual Scavenging

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020

- The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020 proposes to completely mechanise sewer cleaning, introduce ways for ‘on-site’ protection and provide compensation to manual scavengers in case of sewer deaths.

- It will be an amendment to The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.
- It is still awaiting cabinet approval.

The Building and Maintenance of Insanitary Latrines Act of 2013

- It outlaws' construction or maintenance of unsanitary toilets, and the hiring of anybody for their manual scavenging, as well as of hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks.
- It also provides a constitutional responsibility to provide alternative jobs and other assistance to manual scavenging communities, as reparation for historical injustice and indignity.

Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes (Prevention Of Atrocities) Act, 1989

- In 1989, the Prevention of Atrocities Act became an integrated guard for sanitation workers, more than 90% people employed as manual scavengers belonged to the Scheduled Caste.
- This became an important landmark to free manual scavengers from designated traditional occupations.

Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge

- It was launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on World Toilet Day (19th November) in 2020.
- The Government launched this “challenge” for all states to make sewer-cleaning mechanised by April 2021 — if any human needs to enter a sewer line in case of unavoidable emergency, proper gear and oxygen tanks, etc., are to be provided.

Swachhta Abhiyan App

- It has been developed to identify and geotag the data of insanitary latrines and manual scavengers so that the insanitary latrines can be replaced with sanitary latrines and rehabilitate all the manual scavengers to provide dignity of life to them.

National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE)

- The NAMASTE scheme is being undertaken jointly by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and aims to eradicate unsafe sewer and septic tank cleaning practices.

Supreme Court Judgment

- In 2014, a Supreme Court order made it mandatory for the government to identify all those who died in sewage work since 1993 and provide Rs. 10 lakh each as compensation to their families.