

Epidemic Disease Act, 1897

Why in news?

Recently, the Centre amended the Epidemic Disease Act, 1897.

What has changed?

- Through an ordinance, the Cabinet amended the 1897 Act.
- The amendment made commission or abetment of acts of violence against healthcare workers a cognisable, non-bailable offence.
- The offenders will be imprisoned for a term of three months to five years, and with fine of Rs 50,000 to Rs 2 lakh.
- In case of causing grievous hurt, imprisonment shall be for a term of six months to seven years and with fine of Rs1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh.

Why did the Centre invoke the 1897 Act now?

- In March 2020, this Act was invoked to fight the Covid-19 outbreak.
- The Act empowers the state governments to take special measures and prescribe regulations in an epidemic.
- It defines penalties for disobedience of these regulations, and provides for immunity for actions taken under the Act.

Why the Act was enacted?

- In January 1897, Council member J Woodburn tabled the Epidemic Diseases Bill during bubonic plague outbreak in Bombay.
- The Bill was tabled as a measure to contain the plague before it attains large proportions elsewhere in the country.
- It noted that the powers of the municipal bodies and other local governments were inadequate to deal with such situations.
- It called for special powers for governments of Indian provinces and local bodies, including to check passengers of trains and sea routes.
- It said existing laws were insufficient to enable municipal officers to deal with matters related to overcrowded houses, sanitation, etc.

How was it passed?

- The Bill was referred to a Select Committee, which submitted its report on

4th February 1897.

- The Bill was passed the same day, after a brief discussion.
- It was passed amid concerns of the disease spreading, with crowds from Bombay having reached places all over India.
- The government was particularly worried about Calcutta, then the Indian capital.
- Among the members, Rahimtula Muhammad Sayani and Maharaja of Darbhanga said that the Bill was passed hurriedly.

What were the challenges discussed?

- Babu Joy Gobind Law suggested that steps be taken with regard to **Muslims'** pilgrimage to Mecca.
- But Alexander Mackenzie, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, clarified that his government was unwilling to interfere with religious practices.
- Sayani said that the persons desirous of performing the pilgrimage could be persuaded to put off their intention until the danger has passed.
- It was discussed that isolating **women** was particularly difficult.
- Woodburn told that the whole town could not run the risk of plague infection merely because its source is a woman.

Source: The Indian Express

