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Yatra for a new life of dignity

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A journey across the country against manual scavenging

Yatra is spearheaded by those who have voluntarily given up the practice

The call to manual scavengers is to break free, without waiting for job or rehabilitation

NEW DELHI: Towards the fag end of September, five buses, each carrying a group of highly motivated, mostly women protesters, headed out from different parts of the country — Srinagar, Dehra Dun, Dibrugarh, Khurda and Kanyakumari.

Since then, the buses have been winding slowly through 160 districts across 20 States. On October 30, they will converge here. Along the way, many more will have joined the stream, lending the journey an air of joyous reunion — between the already liberated and those being urged to throw off the yoke and start a new life of dignity.

Mercifully for the National Capital, the Samajik Parivartan Yatra (national rally for social transformation) will reach the city well after the end of the showpiece Commonwealth Games.

For what could be more shameful than the country having to admit to the reality of manual scavenging — unarguably the worst human rights violation in the world — at a time when it was seen to be spending thousands of crores of rupees on a sporting extravaganza?

Spearheaded by the Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and consisting of men and women who have voluntarily given up manual scavenging, the yatra was an idea born out of frustration.

Sixty-three years after Independence, a section of the country's citizens continue suffering the indignity of having to manually lift and carry human faeces, euphemistically referred to as “night soil,” to hide the benumbing ugliness of the act.

A decade ago, an estimated 13 lakh people, 85 per cent of them girls and women, were engaged in manual scavenging, a good number on government rolls. With some official effort made at converting dry latrines into pour-flush toilets and the enactment in 1993 of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, today the numbers have declined.

But the scourge is far from eradicated. Recently, the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment put the number of manual scavengers at just over one lakh — a statistic hotly contested by members of its own Parliamentary Consultative Committee.

The SKA, which has surveyed manual scavenging in 18 States and has an entire library devoted to the documentation of the practice, estimates the current numbers at more than three lakhs. Its national

convener, Bezwada Wilson, attributes the decadal decline as much to governmental intervention as to the Andolan's success in persuading manual scavengers to free themselves from the demeaning, dehumanising job.

“Self- liberation”

Indeed, on the yatra, “self- liberation” has been the rousing call, prioritised over the demand for a rehabilitation package.

As Mr. Wilson explains: “Our message to manual scavengers is to break free, without waiting for a job, without waiting for rehabilitation. That will happen and we will fight for it.” The rationale for “self-liberation” is two- fold. Manual scavenging is horrifically degrading. It is a perpetuation of the Varna system and a form of apartheid. Besides, the wages are so low — a maximum of Rs. 250 a month, according to the SKA — that not earning the amount will make no effective difference.

In 2003, the SKA, a handful of individual safai karamcharis and 18 other social action groups filed a public interest litigation petition in the Supreme Court against the continuing practice of manual scavenging in many States; there were instances of government departments themselves violating the 1993 Act.

The State governments denied the charge and filed affidavits claiming their States to be “free from manual scavenging.”

Ministry's “helplessness”

The Railway Ministry, considered the worst offender, pleaded helplessness, citing the vastness of the railway network and the absence of alternative facilities to clean the tracks. In a later update, the Ministry said it had begun to install the required facilities.

The SKA's sample survey, complete with photographs and personal details, conclusively established the falsity of the State government affidavits. The SKA's demands include strict implementation of the 1993 Act, severe punishment to those violating the Act and a rehabilitation package consisting, among other things, of cash compensation, land, housing, free education and jobs.

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