

# Culmination of Samajik Parivartan

*Liberated SafaiKaramcharis from Twenty States Assemble in Delhi;  
Resolve to Eradicate Manual Scavenging*

## **New Delhi, 31 October 2010:**

Around 250 safaikaramcharis from 20 states assembled today in Delhi, after a month-long bus yatra in which they travelled through 172 districts, going to manual scavengers in each one and persuading them to quit the practice. The two-day event is being organised by the "Safai Karamchari Andolan", which has been working to eradicate manual scavenging.

At the entrance of the ViswaYuva Kendra in Chankyapuri, the buses arrived one by one – five of them, one each from Srinagar in Kashmir (Jai BheemMarg), Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu (PeriyarMarg), Dibrugarh in Assam (BirsamundaMarg), Khurda in Orissa (JhalkariBaiMarg) and Dehradun in Uttaranchal (SavitriBaiMarg). The SafaiKaramcharis were welcomed with garlands and dhol beats. They raised slogans against the outlawed but continuing practice of manual scavenging in India.

"Rookhisookhikhayenge, mailanahiuthayenge!" they said. ("We will eat half a roti but not lift the night soil.") Loud slogans were raised from liberated manual scavengers from Tamil Nadu, such as, "Malamnangala mama dike ningala." ('We are taking shit on our heads and others ringing bells in the temple'.)

The event began with a minute long silence in memory of SR Sankaran, Chairman of SKA, who passed away on 7 October. ShriSankaran was a retired as Secretary to the government of India and devoted his life thereafter to help get safaikaramcharis their right.

Liberated safaikaramcharis from various states shared their experiences of lifting night soil for years and then leaving the profession. The first to speak was Narayanamma from Karnataka, who was the first ever to quit the practice. She said that even if the choice was her life, she would not return to manual scavenging. One liberated safaikaramchari from Jalaun in Uttar Pradesh said that participating in the bus yatra to Delhi, meeting people like herself from all over India, made her feel part of a historic movement and that she now considers it her duty to eradicate manual scavenging from Bundelkhand.

The event was attended by, amongst others, Harsh Mander, member, National Advisory Council; CSDS fellow YogendraYadav; Paul Divakar of National Council for Dalit Human Rights; Prof VimalThorat of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. These and other special invitees presented all 250 safaikaramcharis with a shawl.

The gathering was addressed by sitting Member of Parliament from Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, ShriJesudasuSeelam. He said that while there were various government schemes to ameliorate the plight of manual scavengers and to rehabilitate them into other work, the challenge was to make these schemes reach everyone. He mentioned that the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council was taking up the issue with the Government of India. He promised to raise the issue in the Parliament. "It is shameful that even after 63 years people were lifting night soil. It is a blot on India."

Shri PS Krishnan, former secretary to the Government of India, said that while Dr Ambedkar's message was "Jharoochoro" (leave the broom) our slogan should now be "Jharoopheko" (throw away the broom). A liberated SK from Tamil Nadu said that the government should apologise to the Dalitsafaikaramchari communities for the

continuation of the practice despite outlawing it in 1993. Responding to her, Shri Krishnan said that it is not just the government but the whole nation which must apologise. He said that while a lot of money was earmarked by the government for their welfare, it was not reaching them.

Shri Yogendra Yadav, Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, said that this was a historic day. Responding to Shri PS Krishnan, he said that there will come a day when the nation will ask them for forgiveness. He said that leaving manual scavenging and demanding their rights, they were performing the urgent act of cleaning up the conscience of the nation.

In an emotionally charged speech, Bezwada Wilson, nation convenor of the Safai Karamchari Andolan, said that this was not an issue of only one community but of the entire nation. He said that the former manual scavengers had left from the backdoors of homes from across the country and come to the country's streets to break the silence, to demand their rights, freedom and dignity. He said that the pages of Dr Ambedkar's Constitution of India were still to be converted into reality.

He mentioned that the next 60 days, until the end of 2010, we have to make over 3 lakh manual scavengers in India leave the practice. He said this Yatra was coming to an end, it was part of the larger yatra of reformation of Indian society.

The month-long Samajik Parivartan Yatra will conclude tomorrow with a public meeting at the Constitution Club from 11 am to 2 pm. The demands of the Safai Karamchari Andolan for a special rehabilitation package from the government would be unveiled there.



The garlanded Yatris entering the meeting hall



Yatra Buses entering the premises



Fighting for my rights



Crowd attentively listening to the yatris