

Birsa Munda Marg

31 Oct

The Samajik Parivartan Yatra began its Bihar leg from Navada on 15 October. In a community area in Navada, near Hisua Mahadev Mod, a meeting of about 200 people, including 70 women, was held from 11 am to 1 pm. In the meeting we persuaded people to quit the demeaning practice of manual scavenging. They said they were looking for alternative work to do so. We garlanded a statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar and told the people about the all-India effort to eradicate manual scavenging.

Next was Navada's Barshili Ganj area where not many were present due to festivities. Manual scavenging has been eradicated here and people are now weaving bamboo baskets. After distributing pamphlets here, we headed off to Jamui. Next morning in Jamui our meeting was attended by 250 people, of whom only 5 are still engaged in the practice. They, too, resolved to leave the work as soon as they find an alternative. We then took out a 2 kms long march and carried a statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar with us. We raised slogans and garlanded another Dr Ambedkar statue, where the media enthusiastically covered the event.

Next stop was district Baka's Vijay Nagar area. A meeting of around 60 people was held. Then we went to Bhagalpur for the night. The morning after, on the 17th, in Bhagalpur's Navgachia area our meeting was attended by around 75 people. Ideas of alternative work, so that people could leave manual scavenging, were discussed. Amongst the suggestions was grinding and packaging Sattu for wholesalers - the sort of work where they can go past the untouchability discrimination. In neighbouring Katihar district's Kursela area, a hundred people attended the meeting. Three fourths of them were women. In the meeting that lasted two hours we persuaded them to leave the profession. We suggested they could get into the large corn and banana economies of the area, and also told them we were asking the government to provide 5 acres of land to each person for rehabilitation.

Next day in Purnea, the response was overwhelming. We were joined by 300 people, of whom 200 were women. The women said they had demanded their rights and tried agitating but had no support. Now, with the support of SKA, they plan to continue their struggle.

IN the state capital of Patna, the meeting was attended by national convenor Bezwada Wilson and a senior Bihar government official. The women and others attending were informed that the purpose of the Yatra was to make women from across India meet each other to share their experiences and strengthen the movement to eradicate manual scavenging in India. They were told that it was called "Samajik" Parivartan Yatra because it aimed at transforming society at large.

When one of the women, Sripatidevi, offered flowers before a portrait of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the hall reverberated with cries of "Jai Bhim!" and slogans such as "Ladenge, Jeetenge" ('we will fight, we will win'). The IAS officer smiled as the women shouted, "Rukhi-sookhi khayenge, maila nahi uthayenge" (we will eat half a roti but not lift night soil).

After Rajpal Valmiki informed the audience about the movement in West Bengal, Bezwada Wilson in his address motivated the women with his speech. He said, "Hum gande log nahin hain. Doosre log gande hain. Hum safai karte hain. Aur ab hamay samaj ki safai karni hain! (We're not dirty people. Others are dirty. We clean. And now we have to clean up this society.)"

In Chapra Saran district, we were joined by around 250 people of whom 27 had left the practice on SKA's urging. They shared their experience with others and urge them to leave the practice. We reached Siwan in the night, and next morning in Siwan's Raghunathpur area we had a meeting despite heavy rainfall. We first garlanded a statue of Babasaheb and then went to a school building, whose small room could not hold the 200 participants but they stood outside despite the rain. The meeting lasted 1.5 hours, slogans were raised and our demands before the government discussed.

Then we went to Gopalganj where our meeting had to be cancelled due to heavy rainfall. The Samajik Parivartan Yatra headed to Uttar Pradesh from here.



Community Meeting, Birsa Munda Marg



Rally in Bihar