

A revolutionary journey, a revolutionary mission

(The Hindu, Nov 2, 2010)

NEW DELHI: “Baba Ambedkar was the first one to coin the slogan “*jhadoo chhorro*” (leave the broom); it should now be called “*jhaadoo fenko*” (throw away the broom!),” said former Union Welfare Ministry Secretary P. S. Krishnan here.

He was addressing a function organised by the Safai Karamchari Andolan to mark the culmination of *Samajik Parivartan Yatra* (National Rally for Social Transformation) that saw men and women from across the country mobilise efforts to eradicate the scourge of manual scavenging.



For A Social cause: Samajik Parivartan Yatra participants being felicitated in New Delhi on Sunday to mark the culmination of national efforts to eradicate manual scavenging. - Photo: Sushil Kumar Verma

The journey to eradicate this inhuman practice began with five buses heading out on different routes to cover 20 States in late September from Delhi. Liberated *safai karamcharis* set out to inspire and motivate others engaged in the same profession to give it up. The programme was charted out by SKA convenor Bezwada Wilson.

On Sunday evening, people from all five routes -- Jai Bheem Marg, Birsa Munda Marg, Periyar Marg, Jhalkari Bai Marg and Savitri Bai Marg -- were welcomed at Vishwa Yuvak Kendra here with garlands by members of SKA and supporters of the movement.

Many *yatris* spoke about their experiences. “I used to pick up 17 baskets [of excreta] in a month. With helps from SKA and Mr. Wilson, I decided never to do this work, even if I die,” said Narayanamma, who cleaned dry latrines in Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh nearly a decade ago. Having given up the inhuman work, she proudly told the gathering a school had been erected in place of the dry latrine where she used to work.

Activist-writer Harsh Mander, who worked for the Yatra and has also written Narayanamma's story in his book *Unheard Voices*, said: “The way I see it, this is not a struggle against injustice... but for human dignity. In our culture, people are treated in a certain way because of their birth. Through the use of courts and people centric research... 70 to 80 per cent eradication of this practice has been achieved over the last ten years.”

He said it was the “lack of outrage at human indignity” on the part of civil society that has caused this inhuman practice to prevail. Another liberated *safai karamchari*, Riyaz Ahmad Bhat from Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir rued the government's indifference towards his community. “To make sure that the Supreme Court Act was not violated, the government changed our designation from *safai karamchari* to sweeper, while the nature of our work remained unchanged.” Mr. Krishnan concurred.

Talking about the recent case of *safai karamcharis* in Ambala being suspended for not working hard enough, he said, “Authorities should not put in half-hearted efforts at rehabilitating these people. They should consider the market, the individual's interest, provide them training and make sure adequate facilities exist.”

Sandhya, another liberated *safai karamchhari* from Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu, talked about how she quit her manual scavenging job and began making products from coconut fibre. And how, at each step of liberation, she had to face discrimination. “The government should apologise to us for forcing us to do this work for so many years,” she said amid an approving applause.

All *yatris* were felicitated with shawls and certificates by special invitees. The special invitees, including Mr. Krishnan, MP J. D. Seelam and social scientist Yogendra Yadav, spoke about the need to continue the “process” of eradicating manual scavenging from India.

Mr. Wilson said the community of manual scavengers will settle for nothing but a “complete package” that includes demands put forth by the SKA. “Our demands are important not just for our freedom...[we have to ensure] that our future generations do not see people carrying the baskets we

(original article <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article862423.ece>)