

Former manual scavengers demand apology from government

Vidya Subrahmaniam (*The Hindu*, Nov 2, 2010)



Women scavengers gather during the 'Samajik Parivartan Rally' in New Delhi on Monday. Photo: S. Subramaniam

The capital's Constitution Club resounded on Monday to cries of “Jai Bhim” as a huge gathering of former manual scavengers rose as one to demand an apology from the government for the wrongs done to the community. “Apologise now for the violation of our dignity,” they said.

The choice of venue, with portraits of Babasaheb Ambedkar forming the backdrop, was perhaps intendedly ironic. It was to remind the country of its failure to redeem its pledge towards the most wretched of its citizens — the Scheduled Castes, and among them, those condemned to the obnoxious practice of manual scavenging. Sixty years after the Constitution abolished untouchability and decreed all citizens to be equal and free, one section continued to be subjected to the most abhorrent of all human rights violations.

Expectedly the audience roared in approval, each time a liberated “safai karamchhari” narrated her personal story of sufferings and vowed never again to go back to “that life of shame and indignity.” The speeches were punctuated by shouts of *sukhi roti khayenge, maila nahi uthayenge* (it does not matter if we have nothing to eat, we will not do manual scavenging) and “apologise, apologise.” Each speaker spoke in her native tongue but the accounts of pain and humiliation were similar.

Anita, a former manual scavenger from Uttar Pradesh, said she and her mother worked long hours, often without water, because they were outcasts who could not touch any utensils. Anita wanted to know if India had really gained Independence. “I will celebrate Independence Day when we are treated as equals.” Saroj from Haryana spoke of people covering their noses and waving her away in

disgust. Anita from Punjab said she once slipped and fell while in an advanced stage of pregnancy. As no one gave her a hand, she lay covered in excreta.

The star of the day was the spit-fire Umayal from Tamil Nadu. Recalling her school days, she said she used to be made to stand in a corner and was ordered to bring her own plate because her mother cleaned human excreta. "This is happening even today. I want to ask the government: You spend so much money on advertising on TV. Why can't you use some of it to spread awareness about us? Why can't my children study? Why can't they become Collectors? Why not? Why not?" The tearful Umayal was led away to screams of "apologise, apologise" from the audience.

Social activist Aruna Roy asked for reservation for the community, not in sweeper categories, but in higher education and in the higher bureaucracy.

Communist Party of India general secretary D. Raja said the clean-up should begin from the Railways which was the largest employer of manual scavengers. "If this is not a national shame, what is," he asked, wondering at the paradox of a government willing to spend Rs.70,000 crore on the Commonwealth Games but not mustering the will to uplift the manual scavenging community.

The Safai Karmachari Andolan has demanded a comprehensive rehabilitation package, including stringent punishment to those found to be employing manual scavengers in violation of the Manual Scavengers and Dry Latrine Construction (Prohibition) Act, 1993.

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