

Documenting the truth of scavenging

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For a life of dignity: Safai karamcharis participating in a seminar on manual scavenging in New Delhi on Monday. – Photo: Rajeev Bhatt

Declaring liberation from the inhuman practice of manual scavenging, the Safai Karamchari Andolan released a nation-wide survey titled “Truth in numbers” and screened a documentary film on manual scavenging here on Monday.

The survey, which was carried out across 15 States over three years by enumerators from within the community, reveals that over 11,400 people were engaged in manual scavenging in these areas until today.

The film “Marching towards freedom” by Gopal Menon captures the lives of people engaged in manual scavenging, their quest for justice, the denial of authorities to grant them a life of dignity and the effect of the SKA movement on their lives. Mr. Menon expressed hope that the film, which had travelled across 20 States, would reach out to the masses through new media and the documentary film-makers' collective.

“No ruling party has ever accepted that manual scavenging still exists. We can now show them all with proof that it does,” said SKA member K. Anuradha.

Addressing the liberated safai karamcharis gathered at Vishwa Yuvak Kendra from all over the country, leading Hindi Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki said: “This is no ordinary movement... we do not want pity or charity from the government, we demand our rights as citizens of this country.”

Law expert and University of Wisconsin Professor Marc Gallanter said laws “do not enforce themselves”. He added that implementation of Acts like the Eradication of Manual Scavenging and Dry Latrine (Abolition) Act, 1993, “requires effort outside the government”. Motivating the community to continue taking action, he said “in a democracy...it is actually the people who are on top”.

National Advisory Council member Harsh Mander appreciated the fight put up by the safai karamchari community for a better life. He said the government was gradually accepting the existence of the practice of manual scavenging.

On the recommendation of the NAC, Congress chairperson Sonia Gandhi had said in a written communication to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in November that “the Central Government coordinate with the States and Union Territories to abolish manual scavenging by the end of the 11th Plan, positively”. Mr. Mander added that rehabilitation measures for the community were also discussed with Ms. Gandhi.

Communist Party of India national secretary D. Raja said he had submitted a memorandum to Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar about “this national shame” existing in all parts of the country. He added that he would soon take up the issue with the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister.

Referring to the manual scavenging community as her “brothers and sisters”, United Nations independent expert on minority issues Prof. Gay McDougall said “liberation from injustice and undignified work” is the right of every individual in the world.

Talking about the film, a liberated safai karamchhari from Bihar, Poonam Devi, said: “I feel happy because the film shows the truth about our caste... it should reach out to a wider audience.”

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