

Resisting indignity

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Safai karmacharis are set to end their two-decade-long movement for a life of dignity on a victorious note.

DECEMBER 31, 2010. As revellers across the world prepare to celebrate the end of the first decade of the new millennium and the start of a new year, a million women across India will be celebrating not the end of a calendar year but the end of a centuries-old degrading and inhuman occupation – lifting of night soil, euphemistically referred to as manual scavenging.

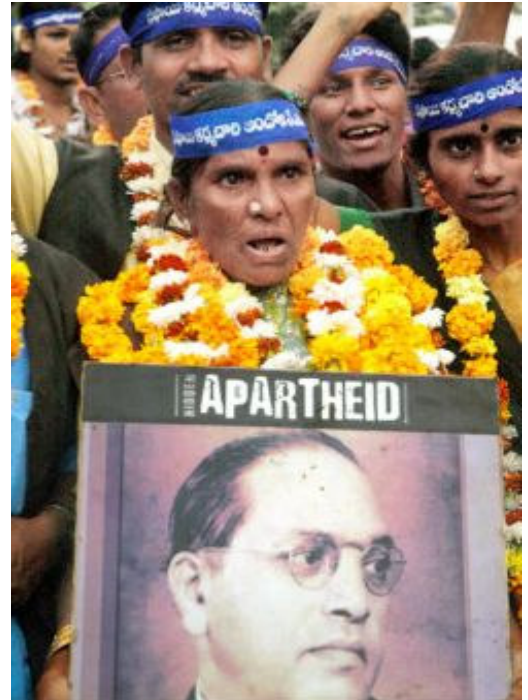
This is the result of India's most moving campaign since Independence. The Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) is a movement for dignity and justice for India's safai karmacharis or Balmikis. It was Mahatma Gandhi who raised the question for the first time, over a century ago, in 1901, at a Kolkata meeting of the Indian National Congress. Several Prime Ministers declared they would eradicate manual scavenging. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, who was reportedly obsessed with ending the obnoxious practice, got the Eradication of Manual Scavenging and Dry Latrines Act passed in 1993. He also created a commission to deal with the problem and allocated crores for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers. Seventeen years after the Act, the demeaning work of removing human excreta with a broom, pieces of tin sheet and a bucket or basket is finally ending.

This has been achieved more because a band of determined people from the community launched the Safai Karmachari Andolan than because politicians or bureaucrats took the initiative. The team of mostly young people from the community, led by a frail, soft-spoken, but charismatic Balmiki leader, Bejawada Wilson, its convener, put in motion a strategic plan about 15 years ago.

First came an awareness-building exercise at the grass roots. A team of youngsters from the Balmiki community were mobilised and trained to spread the message throughout the country that manual scavenging and dry latrines had been made illegal since 1993. They went from house to house, slum to slum, district to district, convincing Balmiki women to throw down their brooms, to stop cleaning excreta. Wilson then appeared, exhorting them to give up their degrading occupation for the sake of dignity.

"The Collector can be jailed for allowing dry latrines in his/her district, no one can force you to clean them," Wilson told them. The women were stunned when they first heard that it was punishable under law to make them clean excreta manually. When they were asked to share their experiences, it was like a dam burst. Years of pent-up anguish and emotion gushed out. "No one ever asked us how we felt, or how we suffered all these years," they said. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, the women repeated the same story, with slight variations.

Lakshmi from Tamil Nadu recalls: "I came from a village, so when I got married to a boy from the town, my friends were envious. 'Now you'll become a city girl with TV and electricity,' they teased me. The wedding was fun. The music, food, new clothes, dressing up. When the



One of the Balmiki women who undertook the bus yatra to Delhi, with a picture of B.R. Ambedkar.

(photographs: Tariq Thekaekara)

festivities ended, my mother-in-law said, 'The wedding is over, it's time to go to work.' In the village, everyone went to the fields in the morning to defecate. But not here in the town, I had never seen a huge latrine like this. I did not know our people cleaned excreta in this manner. I vomited for months. Could not eat my food. Gradually I got used to it. I hated it, but there was no choice. Even today, the sight of dal makes me throw up. It reminds me of what I cleaned for years."

The SKA then launched a campaign to destroy illegal dry latrines. In 2003, the SKA with 18 other organisations, filed a public interest litigation (PIL) petition in the Supreme Court. They sought eradication of manual scavenging, liberation of all safai karmacharis from their degrading jobs and initiation of measures for their rehabilitation. A shameful and scandalous game ensued. After several delaying tactics, which prolonged the case over many years, the government finally took some action. But it was not to end manual scavenging but to subvert justice. In an attempt to cover up the States' failure to implement the 1993 Act, almost all of them submitted false affidavits stating that manual scavenging and dry latrines were non-existent in their territories. They implied the SKA was lying. The Supreme Court asked the SKA to furnish proof of the existence of dry latrines and manual scavenging.

The SKA embarked on a nationwide survey to gather proof. Wilson recalls: "This wasn't just a survey. It was a question of our life, of human dignity." An army of 1,260 SKA activists panned out to 274 districts in 18 States. They went from house to house photographing and documenting evidence. They took pictures and video footage of individual house owners with their names and door numbers and the names and photographs of the women who cleaned their private latrines. They were aided by NDTV; the TV channel aired the footage, to the embarrassment of the house owners. The unintentional "name and shame" campaign made people, especially in Punjab and Haryana, quickly demolish the dry toilets.

S.R. Sankaran, the legendary Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who was Wilson's guide and mentor and a co-founder of the SKA, personally wrote letters to every Collector under whose jurisdiction dry latrines still existed. Some took action. Many were indifferent, callous and brusque.

Intensification of campaign

In 2004, the SKA decided to intensify its campaign by destroying illegal dry latrines. In Andhra Pradesh, there was a dry latrine in the Nizamabad Yellareddy court, used by lawyers and judges. "You cannot demolish this," the authorities told them. "You will be arrested." "We can and we will," SKA campaigners retorted. "It is illegal; it is not supposed to exist!"

Sankaran declared, "We should have a closing date. We cannot go on forever." Wilson saw the 'Countdown to the Commonwealth Games' signboards and decided Campaign 2010 had a nice ring to it. And December 31, 2010, sounded like a great deadline.

The 2010 Campaign began with plans for an all-India bus yatra in October 2010. Five buses drove triumphantly into Delhi on October 31. One had started from the northernmost part of India, Kashmir; another from the southern tip, Kanyakumari. The third meandered from Dibrugarh to Delhi, and the fourth from Orissa. The last bus was from Dehradun in Uttarakhand. There were 250 safai karmacharis from 20 States. They converged on the Vishwa Yuva Kendra, Chanakyapuri, exhausted but victorious and happy, after a marathon, month-long mission. They had undertaken the pilgrimage through 172 districts, exhorting every Indian Balmiki, from bastis throughout the country to throw down their brooms and vow that they would never clean human excreta again.

On October 7, 2010, the SKA received a huge blow. Their mentor, Sankaranga, as he was fondly called, suffered a heart attack and died. The poor from every corner of Andhra

Pradesh, whom he had served, turned up in their thousands to mourn the passing away of a man who had touched the lives of millions. But his dream lived on, soon to be realised.

Some 1,000 safai karmacharis from 20 States, who until recently had worked as manual scavengers, assembled in New Delhi on November 1 and resolved to return to the capital on January 1, 2011, if their demands were not met. At a meeting at Mavalankar Hall, they shared their experiences and put forth their demands.

As each bus appeared, at Chanakyapuri, yatris were greeted and garlanded by a cheering band of supporters and well-wishers. They clambered down travel-weary but triumphant, shouting the slogans they had learnt from different States. "Rookhi sookhi khayenge, maila nahi uthayenge!" they yelled. (We'll eat half a dry roti but never carry filth again.)

The slogans were sometimes difficult to decipher, but once you sorted out the myriad languages, they were upbeat and infectious. The effect was cacophonous – Bengali and Marathi merging with Oraon and Ho from Jharkhand, Kashmiri mingling with dialects like Bhojpuri, Oriya and Punjabi. The southern presence was pronounced and loud – Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada.

The yatris had been together for an entire month. Many had picked up a few phrases of each language. They learnt new customs, new food habits and new languages. Tamilians shouted Johar (from Jharkhand), but strangest of all was to hear Punjabis and Kashmiris shouting "Velaga Velaga Velaga vay", a victory cry from the deep South. North Indians ate sambar and idlis, while southern Balmikis learnt to enjoy aloo paranthas for breakfast.

Few of these women had ever left the slums they were born in or travelled, except to a relative's house for a wedding or a funeral. Yet the fervour and emotion generated by this mission to end manual scavenging had given them the courage to embark on a totally unknown journey, hundreds, even thousands of kilometres away, to a distant dream – to Delhi. Several had taken babies and small children with them. Each person who disembarked from the buses looked exhausted but exhilarated. Each one had grown in confidence and self-esteem. The excitement and pride were palpable.

People poured out of the buses and into the hall. The women were invited to take the stage. The first was Narayanamma from Andhra Pradesh. In October 2000, The Hindu reported Narayanamma's plight as she cleaned a 400-seat dry latrine in Anantapur town. The toilet was immediately demolished, and Narayanamma became a crusader in the fight to end manual scavenging. Ten years later she glows with pride and joy as she speaks about her fight for justice for her people.

Umayal from Puddukottai district in Tamil Nadu is all of 20 years old. She spent a month on the bus with her two-year-old daughter Sandhya. Tiny, with delicate, perfect features, she rapidly became the darling of the media after her firebrand speech. "I started doing this work when I was around 10 years old," she began. "Once, I was working for some people and they would not let me sit on the mat. I had to sit far away in a corner on the floor. I wept and thought, I am untouchable because of the filthy work I do. When the SKA people came here and asked us to stop this work, I was only too happy to do so. I received a bank loan and now buy and sell coir. Even if someone offers me one lakh rupees, I will never do this work again."



Bejawada Wilson, convener of the SKA. He carried to the logical end an action plan he helped put together 15 years ago to eradicate manual scavenging.

When Wilson took the microphone to speak, his words, deriving from his years of experience as a member of the Balmiki community, came straight from the heart. He said: "How many of our women have wept tears of shame as they did this filthy, humiliating work to feed their children? Our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, wives, sisters and daughters. They crept out from back doors, believing their touch pollutes. Today, with no promise of livelihood, no guarantee of rice or roti, they have bravely thrown down their brooms, those symbols of shame and oppression. They have travelled through the length and breadth of this country begging our people to do likewise. To throw down their buckets, baskets and brooms to liberate their children and future generations from life-long shame and oppression."

A list of demands were announced, aimed at helping safai karmacharis to rebuild their lives with dignity. "If the government does not accept our demands within 60 days, we will all come to Delhi and stay put here until our demands are met," Wilson declared.

The main demands were that the government must apologise to all safai karmacharis for the violation of their dignity and the degradation of an entire community over centuries; all dry latrines must be demolished; those violating the 1993 Act and forcing safai karmacharis to do manual scavenging must be punished. They also demanded that the government must release Rs.5 lakh for the rehabilitation of every safai karmachari, a separate Rs.10,000 as immediate relief, five acres of land, and Antyodaya cards and houses. A special pension for women safai karmacharis who were single, widowed or aged was also demanded.

There were loud cheers when Wilson issued his ultimatum to the government. There was a feeling that it was possible for the safai karmacharis to realise their dream. The dream does seem less impossible now. Wilson has appeared in national dailies, on television, even in British newspapers; he has held meetings with Ministers, senior IAS officers, the National Advisory Council and the Planning Commission. On October 23, an NAC meeting chaired by Sonia Gandhi issued a note ordering a crackdown on manual scavenging, with specific directions for State governments to end the shameful practice. An outline for rehabilitation was also issued.

A padayatra, launched on December 1 and culminating in Delhi on December 31, will bring this historic campaign to an end. After December, the SKA will start a "name and shame" campaign, naming Collectors who are guilty of dereliction of duty.

Few people took Wilson seriously when he started his work in 1987 in Kolar in Karnataka. The SKA has since spread to Kanyakumari, to Kashmir, to Kumaon. Its campaigners have persuaded lakhs of women to throw down their brooms, bringing down the number of manual scavengers from 13 lakh to three lakh. It has taken more than two decades, but he has achieved what even Mahatma Gandhi failed to do.

To dream an impossible dream takes courage. Yet this simple, unknown man with a small team of people has managed within two decades to sweep away the degradation of centuries for one million women with little more than the power of persuasion. It places him in the company of giants like Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King. A bit over the top? Some people would say so. But not those one million Balmiki women.

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