

MANUAL SCAVENGING

Dignity Remains Elusive

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Over the years, there have been many changes in the Safai Karamchari Andolan [SKA] movement. The biggest change people have seen has been in the safai karamchari community's outlook. There was a time when safai karamcharis were ashamed to admit they did manual scavenging. It was not uncommon for even family members to be unaware that someone was involved in the practice of manual scavenging.

But the community started discussing the issue threadbare and the silence over manual scavenging was broken. They came together and organised themselves on a national platform with the single focus of eradicating manual scavenging. As the state and the judiciary began hearing their voices, they began to break the chains of caste and patriarchy.

'Andolan' gathered the courage to burn the baskets workers once used to collect human excreta in. They began knocking the doors of the district magistrates to implement the 1993 Act of Parliament that outlawed manual scavenging. Ideally the DM should have been approaching the safai karamcharis and helping them leave the practice. It's an irony that they have had to go to the DMs to make them aware of the Act they should have been making them aware of! In doing so, however, 'Andolan' activities have been strengthening the functioning of the Indian democracy. In the twenty first century, safai karamcharis are making stronger the pillars of Indian democracy!

Over the past few months, 1,260 enumerators, who are from within the safai karamchari community, have conducted a massive survey documenting the prevalence of manual scavenging. The community, in many places, has decided to leave the practice on its own. People are still coming out and acknowledging that they are into the work and resolving, trying and managing to leave it.

The changes that have taken place in the community have been reflected at the legislative and judicial levels. Thanks to the work of many intellectuals and activists, the centenary year celebrations of Babasaheb Ambedkar in 1991 resulted in a slew of measures for Dalits.

The Eradication of Manual Scavenging & Dry Latrine (Abolition) Act came into force in 1993. But the aim of the Act has not been fulfilled even today. On 20 December 2003, exactly seven years ago, the Safai Karamchari Andolan and 13 others filed a petition in the Supreme Court to make the state and central government and their bodies implement the Act.

To begin with, the state governments wouldn't submit the affidavits the Supreme Court asked them to. Even after the Supreme Court's reprimands, seven principal secretaries had to be summoned to the court for them to take cognisance of the case! In the affidavits submitted, all of them denied that manual scavenging was prevalent under their jurisdiction.

So the onus of proving that it existed fell upon scavengers, the victims, victimizing them further. Then 'Andolan' started collecting data along with photographic and video evidence in several states. As a result of such evidence they would submit in Supreme Court, the states would simply go and demolish those dry latrines, and reported back to the court that these didn't exist!

In seven years the case has seen eight judges, including two chief justices, preside over the hearings. The process has been slow and cumbersome. The last hearing was in November, 2010 when the court mulled over the issue of whether it can direct state governments who had not notified the Act to do so.

In 2005, 'Andolan' workers went around states demolishing dry latrines. They would be prevented from doing so, in response to which they said that when the government denies the existence of these dry latrines how could they be demolishing them? This way they forced governments to act. The most notable case was that of a dry latrine inside the Nizamabad court complex in Hyderabad!

Just to demolish a dry latrine and liberate a safai karamchari, why should it need an order from the highest court of the land? Can't the government simply implement an Act it has itself passed? Why should social change need the intervention of the Supreme Court?

There have been many schemes and programmes for the rehabilitation of safai karamcharis and many high officials, often prime ministers, have spoken out promising to make India free of manual scavenging. Why hasn't that happened?

The changes may be slow, but they are taking place. These are not just at the level of the community and the state, but also the civil society and the media. Responses to manual scavenging from civil society and the media, until some years ago, used to express sympathy but not support or work towards eradication of manual scavenging. Earlier they would say, 'They don't have the skills for alternative work', 'They should be given better equipment', and so on. Now, many have joined the SKA movement, endorsing their stand that human beings should not be lifting the excreta of other human beings. That they should come out of this practice into a world of dignity and equality. □□□