

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper
Sunday, May 09, 2010

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BAREFOOT

Burning baskets of shame

HARSH MANDER

The Safai Karmchari Andolan, a grass roots movement by conservancy workers is working towards banishing the inhuman practice, with admirable success...

SKA is the first sustained movement to end untouchability in Independent India...

Photo: G. Krishnaswamy



Won't take it anymore:Fighting for their rights.

Even today, the memories bring tears of shame to her eyes. She was paid to clean dry toilets each day, by physically scraping the human excreta that accumulated on the latrine floors, and carrying it away in a basket. Several months pregnant, Saroj one day climbed a narrow wooded staircase to reach the latrine in one home. She slipped and her foot broke, and she lay helplessly in agony below. But her employers — of many years — were unwilling to lift her even in this state, because they believed her touch was polluting. Finally they picked her up with a pincer of logs, and her family took her to the local dispensary. She wept bitterly that day. "Do you call this living? Even death is better than this humiliation."

This was the only work that Saroj Bala had known since she was 13 years old. Like many other women in Ambala — a city of more than a million residents on the border of Punjab and Haryana — she would clean dry latrines in nearly a hundred houses each day. In return, she was given two stale rotis by many householders, and eight annas at the end of the month. Two years ago, when she finally left this work, she was being paid Rs. 10 in some homes, Rs. 20 in others. The women scavengers would enter the houses from separate entrances reserved only for them, and climb segregated staircases. Their employers would purify the floor with gangajal after they left. The women

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would collect the shit in baskets, and balance these on their heads as they trudged six times a day to the dump a kilometre away. People would shrink and cover their noses with the edge of their saris or hankies. The rainy season was the most traumatic, because the shit would slip through the baskets onto their hair and shoulders. They had to use separate public water taps, and even vegetable vendors sold them vegetables from separate carts.

Symbol of untouchability

This practice of 'manual scavenging' is the worst surviving symbol of caste untouchability in India. It drives people into this degrading daily work only because of their birth in particular castes. The Planning Commission in 1995 estimated that 6.4 lakh people were employed in this vocation, but activists believe that the numbers were actually more than a million. It is significant that 99 per cent of the people forced to do this work are dalit, and 95 per cent of them are women, reflecting the many layers of shame and oppression imposed by caste, patriarchy, untouchability on this despised livelihood.

The Government of India finally outlawed this practice in 1993, by enacting the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act. But governments in India have a long tradition of defiantly disobeying their own laws if the laws are intended to uphold the rights of the poor. This has been the fate of land reforms, and laws that prohibit bonded and child work, rights of unorganised and migrant workers, and minimum wage laws. This law was no exception. Most state governments had not even notified the law by 2001, and the few that had, did not frame any rules for its enforcement. Governments themselves continued to maintain dry public toilets, and employed women as manual scavengers, but reported that there was no manual scavenging in their states. Not a single person anywhere in India was prosecuted under this law.

What governments and law could not achieve has been enforced by an extraordinary campaign — the Safai Karmchari Andolan (SKA) — which has creatively used non-violent mass resistance, community organisation, and the courts to force governments to end this centuries-old practice. S.R. Sankaran, who heads this remarkable movement, regards it to be a struggle to claim for all people the human dignity assured in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. This dignity has been cruelly violated by human society, by forcing a set of people to do this humiliating work. Law alone cannot end it. It can be extinguished only by awakening the strength and spirit of the humiliated community.

SKA was founded by Wilson Bejwada, who was himself born into a family of manual scavengers. He wept as a young adult when he bore witness to the shame of his own people. They replied, "Do we not know why you cry? We know, because we have lived from our childhoods what you only see. But if we rebel, we lose our livelihoods, and our children sleep hungry." He was joined by fine women and men from various castes and faiths, including Anuradha Konkepudi, Deepthi Sukumar, Moses and more than a thousand men and women from the scavenging community in 260 districts of the country. They believed that manual scavenging was a form of caste-based violence, atrocity and untouchability. They began to spill on to the streets everywhere, agitating, boycotting work, burning the baskets they had used to carry shit on their heads, and forcefully demolishing dry latrines. When state officials objected, they would respond: "We cannot demolish something that you claim does not exist."

Nailing the lies

In 2003, the SKA petitioned the Supreme Court of India against the failure of the central and state governments to implement its own law to end this inhuman practice. In the 21 hearings to date of this case, governments have persisted in filing 'nil' reports of people engaged in the outlawed livelihood of manual scavenging. But SKA nailed each lie, with unimpeachable data, reports and photographs detailing women still engaged in this work, and dry latrines that continue to stand.

The awakened resolve of people who for centuries were forced into this work, combined with the fear of the highest court in the land, finally had its impact, even on complicit and uncaring governments. In many states — Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala — the practice is finally almost ended. In Haryana, for the first time anywhere in the country since this law was enacted 17 years ago, 22 people were sent to jail for employing manual scavengers. It still remains the only state to have punished employers of manual scavengers. People have themselves demolished overnight their dry latrines. SKA has set a target for the country, that manual scavenging must end country-wide by the end of 2010. Wilson

says: "We have dreamed for long to see this day dawn." What seemed impossible a decade ago, now seems nearly within reach.

SKA is the first sustained movement to end untouchability in Independent India, observes legal scholar Usha Ramanathan, who feels that anyone with a sense of history must today join hands with it. The campaigners are so gentle and understated that most people in India are unaware of the enormity of what they have accomplished, eroding centuries of oppression with the unlikely instruments of truth, a conviction about equal human dignity, non-violent resistance, and the law.

Saroj Bala today leads processions to demolish the few remaining dry latrines in Haryana. She sent all her four children to school. Two of her sons run a business of video photography in weddings, and the third a mobile repair shop. Her daughter works in a beauty parlour. No one will ever cover their noses when they walk down the street.

She had never dreamt that she would live to see this day. And even less that she would be a leader of a movement that made this possible.

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