

## Throwing off the yoke of manual scavenging

Vidya Subrahmaniam



In this July 7, 2010 photo, a sewerage worker clears a choked drain at Anandnagar, Hyderabad. Photo: Mohammed Yousuf

*The obnoxious practice will continue in one form or the other, as long as the government and society treat certain so-called menial jobs as the preserve of one community.*

On November 1, a unique journey will come to a ceremonious end in Delhi. Earlier this month, five bus loads of men and women headed out from different corners of the country with one slogan on their lips: honour and liberation for those still trapped in the horror of manual scavenging.

When the protesters (most of them former manual scavengers) set out on their mission, they knew that the Samajik Parivartan Yatra (national rally for social transformation) would have to be more than a petition to the government. A comprehensive rehabilitation package was undoubtedly at the core of the yatra's demands. But there was equally another objective: To motivate the remaining members of the scavenging community to throw off the yoke — on their own, without waiting for a package. Bezwada Wilson, convener of the Safai Karamacharis Andolan (SKA) and the brain behind the rally, explains the concept of self-liberation: "Manual scavenging is a blot on humanity, and if you engage in it, it is a crime you commit on yourself. So, don't wait for the government, break free."

Given the depth of emotion in this message, it will be a double crime if the government does not do everything in its power to hasten the process of liberation. Perhaps that is why, on October 25, the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council proposed a far-reaching package of reforms to end the practice. Nonetheless, the irony is inescapable. Sixty-three years after Independence, India is still debating the best way to lift manual scavengers out of their collective misery.

Mr. Wilson was a young boy when his family in Karnataka sent him away to study in a school across the border in Andhra Pradesh. He came home for holidays but felt out of place in a community whose defining feature was the uncontrolled violence of its menfolk. It was the early 1970s and they lived in a large, grimy neighbourhood around the edges of the Kolar Gold township. The evenings were always the same. The men would get into a drunken rage and assault the women senseless. The pattern of male aggression and female submission was common to most feudal, patriarchal societies, but even by this yardstick, the violence was excessive.

The teenager knew he had been born to a family of sweepers. The local school he went to as a child was segregated and was known by a swear word. But that still did not explain the anger that erupted around him. His father, a retired government employee, and his brother, mysteriously employed in an unnamed place, stonewalled his questions. Determined, the boy followed his brother to his workplace, where the horror of manual scavenging hit him like a million lashes.

Mr. Wilson learnt that he and his family were part of a huge community of manual scavengers that serviced the Kolar Gold township. They physically lifted and carried human excreta from the township's network of dry latrines. He could now see where the violence came from. But he could also see the unfairness of it all on the women who formed 85 per cent of the manual scavenging workforce. The women of his community were victims thrice over: they were outcasts even among Dalits; they were despised and shunned for the work they did, and they were physically abused by the men who saw the beatings as an outlet for their frustrations.

The employment of humans to clean human faeces was unarguably the worst violation of human rights anywhere in the world. The degrading act stripped the individual of her dignity while the constant handling of excreta brought in its wake crippling illnesses and infections that went untreated because the community bore the cross of untouchability. Over the next decade-and-a-half, Mr. Wilson worked at educating the elders and spreading awareness about the dehumanising aspect of their occupation. But it was difficult to organise a community that was simply unprepared to give up its job.

This was a baffling paradox. On the one hand, there was the daily ritual of the men drinking and getting violent to forget the pain and humiliation of manual scavenging. At the same time, there was a sense of ownership about the job. "It is our job," they told Mr. Wilson, vastly complicating his effort simultaneously to organise them, fight the company management that employed them, and push the government towards banning the occupation and rehabilitating the workers.

Mr. Wilson told *The Hindu*, "Our people had internalised their oppression. They saw themselves as a condemned lot, it was their fate, they had to do this work." If the manual scavenging community, now included among the safai karamacharis (sweepers) to diminish the ugliness of the act, owned up its work due to an acute lack of self-worth, those higher in the caste hierarchy compounded the injury by perpetuating the myth that toilet cleaning and allied activities, like sweeping and picking up garbage, could only be done by the valmiki Dalits, also known as dom, hela, hadi, arundatiyar, madiga, relli, pakhis, chekilliyars, etc.

Incredibly, the ridiculous notion prevailed even at the level of governments — and it continues to prevail — with job reservation for the Scheduled Castes translating as the Dalit castes forming the majority of workforce in Class IV and lower categories. Whatever the official explanation for this, this was nothing if not the Varna system by diktat.

The insensitivity of officialdom to manual scavenging can be seen from the length of time it took India to formally ban the practice. The Constitution abolished untouchability once and for all in 1950. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, which prescribed punishments for untouchability, followed in 1955, and The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act came in 1989. But manual scavenging, which is untouchability at its most violent, was prohibited by legislation only in 1993. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act came into force 46 years after Independence.

Far worse, manual scavenging continues to this day, with many Central and State government departments themselves employing manual scavengers in violation of the 1993 Act. The worst offender in this respect has been the Union Ministry of Railways: the open discharge system of toilets in train carriages results in excreta having to be manually lifted off the tracks. Many municipalities too continue to use dry latrines.

In 2003, the Supreme Court directed all the State governments to file affidavits on manual scavenging, taking a serious view of a PIL petition filed by the SKA and 18 other social action groups. The Uttar Pradesh government admitted to the practice as did the Railway Ministry. But most other State governments brazenly lied that their States were "free from manual scavenging." The SKA, which has an entire library devoted to the documentation of the practice, has clinching photographs and data that establish the lie. The Andolan estimates that there are currently over 3 lakh manual scavengers, down from 13 lakh a decade ago. However, it attributes the declining numbers as much to voluntary liberation as to official intervention.

So far, manual scavenging has been tackled at two levels: The conversion of dry latrines into pour-flush toilets and the rehabilitation of those engaged in the practice. The rehabilitation itself has been terribly half-hearted; a shocking report in *The Hindu* shows that the district administration in Ambala fired manual scavengers it had re-employed as sweepers. The crucial issue, therefore, is a vital third element: the de-stigmatisation of the so-called menial jobs via changes in recruitment patterns and policies. Without this overhaul, manual scavenging will continue in one form or another.

It is also necessary to expand the definition of manual scavenging to include other kinds of unhygienic toilet cleaning. The Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation has been overseeing the elimination of dry latrines since 2004. According to the Ministry, the numbers of dry latrines have declined from a total of 6 lakh in six States to about 2.4 lakh in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Uttarakhand.

But significantly the Ministry makes the point that while dry latrines may be on their way out, this does not necessarily mean the end of manual cleaning of excreta. A recent paper prepared by HUPA says that in the poorer areas in many towns and cities, the dry latrines have given way to "bahao" latrines. These are not connected to septic tanks or underground pits but flow out directly into open drainage, resulting in the "sludge and excreta" having to be manually removed. Says the paper: "These unsanitary latrines require continuous cleaning, which is done by municipal staff and almost always manually, with the most rudimentary appliances."

And no prizes for guessing which castes form the municipal staff. As Union Minister for HUPA Kumari Selja says: "It is ultimately about attitudes. As long as society treats toilet cleaning and sweeping as menial jobs to be done only by certain members of the caste system, it will be difficult to end the obnoxious practice. The scavenging and sweeping community will be truly liberated when cleaning jobs become respectable with the workforce drawn from all communities."

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## **Yatra for a new life of dignity**

Vidya Subrahmaniam

*A journey across the country against manual scavenging*

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*Yatra is spearheaded by those who have voluntarily given up the practice*

*The call to manual scavengers is to break free, without waiting for job or rehabilitation*

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NEW DELHI: Towards the fag end of September, five buses, each carrying a group of highly motivated, mostly women protesters, headed out from different parts of the country — Srinagar, Dehra Dun, Dibrugarh, Khurda and Kanyakumari.

Since then, the buses have been winding slowly through 160 districts across 20 States. On October 30, they will converge here. Along the way, many more will have joined the stream, lending the journey an air of joyous reunion — between the already liberated and those being urged to throw off the yoke and start a new life of dignity.

Mercifully for the National Capital, the Samajik Parivartan Yatra (national rally for social transformation) will reach the city well after the end of the showpiece Commonwealth Games.

For what could be more shameful than the country having to admit to the reality of manual scavenging — unarguably the worst human rights violation in the world — at a time when it was seen to be spending thousands of crores of rupees on a sporting extravaganza?

Spearheaded by the Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and consisting of men and women who have voluntarily given up manual scavenging, the yatra was an idea born out of frustration.

Sixty-three years after Independence, a section of the country's citizens continue suffering the indignity of having to manually lift and carry human faeces, euphemistically referred to as “night soil,” to hide the benumbing ugliness of the act.

A decade ago, an estimated 13 lakh people, 85 per cent of them girls and women, were engaged in manual scavenging, a good number on government rolls. With some official effort made at converting dry latrines into pour-flush toilets and the enactment in 1993 of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, today the numbers have declined.

But the scourge is far from eradicated. Recently, the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment put the number of manual scavengers at just over one lakh — a statistic hotly contested by members of its own Parliamentary Consultative Committee.

The SKA, which has surveyed manual scavenging in 18 States and has an entire library devoted to the documentation of the practice, estimates the current numbers at more than three lakhs. Its national convener, Bezwada Wilson, attributes the decadal decline as much to governmental intervention as to the Andolan's success in persuading manual scavengers to free themselves from the demeaning, dehumanising job.

“Self- liberation”

Indeed, on the yatra, “self- liberation” has been the rousing call, prioritised over the demand for a rehabilitation package.

As Mr. Wilson explains: “Our message to manual scavengers is to break free, without waiting for a job, without waiting for rehabilitation. That will happen and we will fight for it.” The rationale for “self-liberation” is two- fold. Manual scavenging is horrifically degrading. It is a perpetuation of the Varna system and a form of apartheid. Besides, the wages are so low — a maximum of Rs. 250 a month, according to the SKA — that not earning the amount will make no effective difference.

In 2003, the SKA, a handful of individual safai karamcharis and 18 other social action groups filed a public interest litigation petition in the Supreme Court against the continuing practice of manual scavenging in many States; there were instances of government departments themselves violating the 1993 Act.

The State governments denied the charge and filed affidavits claiming their States to be “free from manual scavenging.”

Ministry's “helplessness”

The Railway Ministry, considered the worst offender, pleaded helplessness, citing the vastness of the railway network and the absence of alternative facilities to clean the tracks. In a later update, the Ministry said it had begun to install the required facilities.

The SKA's sample survey, complete with photographs and personal details, conclusively established the falsity of the State government affidavits. The SKA's demands include strict implementation of the 1993 Act, severe punishment to those violating the Act and a rehabilitation package consisting, among other things, of cash compensation, land, housing, free education and jobs.

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## India's secret shame



Illustration: Bhaskaran

I felt that I needed to create a piece I could take to well-off schools and colleges, where the so-called leaders of tomorrow are being reared, to introduce to them the real plight of India and Indians, to help them break through the false comforts of middle- and upper-class cocoons of plenty their parents and teachers have placed them in. I felt that a performance based on the stories in the book would be ideal.

By Mallika Sarabhai

It is strange to write a person into a character, direct that character on stage, live with him in your thoughts for months on end and then finally meet him in person. This is exactly what happened with me and Bezwada Wilson.

I was working on my friend Harsh Mandar's book Unheard Voices. The moment I started it, I knew I had to create a performance around it. For many months, I had

I spent months internalising the material with stories to inspire. But the story of Narayani Amma, the manual scavenger, and her empowerment through a series of meetings with Wilson, chose me the first time I read it.

Wilson's father was a manual scavenger in the Kolar gold mines but managed to become a gardener. By the time Wilson was born, he belonged to a church. Wilson started attending the seminary, and was confronted by dry latrines and manual scavengers. He fought with the priests to banish it but they wouldn't listen. He tried to join the brotherhood to abolish this disgrace but the priests threw him out because they thought he was bringing shame to them by talking of such things. He then started working in a factory.

In 1988, Wilson filed a PIL and won the right for his community to be employed in other work on the shop floor. The young stopped working in the latrines. Things began to look up till there was a sanitation workers' strike in 1998. The management immediately called for the young of the community to clean the shit. Imagine their plight, to be cleaning the shit of colleagues of ten years!

He fought for 15 years before he set up the Dalit Human Rights Group to jointly fight the indignities. The greatest difficulty, says Wilson, was to convince his own community that carrying other people's excreta—manually picked up and carried on the head in baskets—was not their destiny; that it was not their past sins that had condemned them to a life of such humiliation. Their lot was due to the apathy of other humans and a selfish caste system.

After about 10 years, his community started gathering together to fight for their rights as Indians. The Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) was born with Dr Wilson as its powerhouse. SKA is on a mission, and they have launched a nationwide yatra currently making its way across India, to end manual scavenging, still prevalent in most of our states. Their aim is to end it by the end of this year. Will they be able to?

The question is whether this is an issue only of the Dalit community or of all Indians. Most of us will try and stop a wrong-doing committed in front of our eyes—a child being beaten, a woman being molested or an old person being heckled. Why then do we remain so immune to this inhumanity around us? In spite of an official ban on manual scavenging since 1993, panchayats and even city municipalities heap this indignity on our brothers and sisters.

Do we still want to remain silent? Does that sit with our sense of ourselves as humane human beings?

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## **NAC to monitor abolition of manual scavenging**

Siddharth Varadarajan

New Delhi: The Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council (NAC) on Saturday urged the Centre to coordinate with all State and local governments and also Central government departments, including the Railways, to ensure that the pernicious practice of manual scavenging is fully abolished the latest by the end of the 11th Plan period.

This, it said, would require a new survey in every State and Union Territory, with wide public involvement, of the remaining dry latrines and manual scavengers, demolition of all dry latrines, psycho-social and livelihood rehabilitation in modern marketable skills of all manual scavengers and their families, and special programmes for education including higher education and computer education of all children of manual scavengers.

The NAC has asked the Ministry of Social Justice to formulate 100 per cent Centrally-sponsored schemes to support the rehabilitation initiatives.

The law also needs to be amended, the NAC said, to ensure sharper definitions of manual scavenging, and greater accountability on the part of officials who employ, or fail to prevent, manual scavenging.

The NAC has recommended that the implementation of this law be monitored at the highest levels of the Central and State governments.

It will itself monitor, on a quarterly basis, progress in abolition of manual scavenging, in order to ensure the final end of this most degrading practice of caste discrimination.

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## **It's shortlived rehabilitation for scavengers in Ambala**

Vrinda Sharma

AMBALA: Back in May 2010, sixty Dalits, who had worked their entire lives as manual scavengers, burned the baskets they used for collecting human excreta outside the District Collector's office here. They had just been employed as sweepers by the local administration under a rehabilitation scheme. Five months later, all of them are without work, having been suspended, astonishingly, for not working hard enough.

“It took us a lot of courage to set those baskets on fire and announce that we were free. But now, for many of us the only way to feed our family is to pick up the same basket again,” said a disheartened worker. Difficult, demeaning

The district administration's charge against the suspended Dalits is that they were “not working properly, being non-serious and lazy.” But the fact remains that they had spent the better part of their lives in one of most difficult and demeaning occupations — the inhuman practice of manually disposing of human excreta from dry latrines with brooms and baskets, work which violates human dignity and which is today banned by the statute.

“It is amusing that some time ago the government claimed that the district was free of manual scavenging. Now they say that no one in the administration is lazy except the manual scavengers! At least now they accept that the obnoxious practice still exists and by not eradicating it they are violating the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993,” said Rajkumar, State president of the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA).

Collector S.P. Srow said that even though over 200 manual scavengers were offered jobs on a salary of Rs. 4,400 a month, they did not work properly and hence had to be fired. “It was ensured that they were rehabilitated even though the Supreme Court gave only guidelines and not directions. I made sure that they were employed as sweepers but they were not working at all and it would have been wrong to waste government money on them anymore.”

The Collector said he condemned manual scavenging and wished that the practice were eradicated. “Even today if they give an affidavit saying they will work wholeheartedly, I will happily make arrangements for their employment.”

A few women who had left scavenging after decades started the degrading work again because they are the sole breadwinners. “But we talked to them, made them realise that resuming the inhuman act will lead to greater health problems for themselves and be an impediment to a thousand others who are trying to end this practice once and for all. Finally, they pledged that they would die rather than contemplate manual scavenging as a job option,” said another woman, who had left the job.

Asked why the manual scavengers were employed only as sweepers, the Collector said: “There is an obvious lack of education and skill among the women but they were employed as sweepers because the administration needed more sweepers at that time.” He did not respond to a query how the need for sweepers was being met in their absence.

### Occupational dignity

“The least that can be done is to provide a dignified occupation for them. A few months as sweeper can only be a temporary relief, not a sustainable rehabilitation package for the entire family,” said Wilson Bezwada, president of SKA, who has spearheaded the fight against manual scavenging and is now leading the Samajik Parivarthan Yatra, a strategic programme of bus trips from five different corners of India, through 20 States, culminating in New Delhi.

The aim of the yatra is to motivate and inspire others who are still engaged in manual scavenging to free themselves.

“Apart from a rehabilitation package to ensure a dignified livelihood, free education should be provided to those many generations of a scavenging family in order to ensure that the coming generations do not fall into the trap of poverty and caste,” said Mr. Bezwada.

“Instead of giving them grants for permanent employment, the administration employed them [the Dalits] before floods hit the area, made them clean the gutters and the sewerage system, which is as bad as manual scavenging. Then it claims that they are not working,” said Mr. Rajkumar. “For the satisfaction of the Collector, I gave an affidavit taking responsibility that the women would work. Also, residents signed that they were working properly, but none of the submissions helped. We met the Haryana Chief Minister, who gave us a patient hearing, but nothing was done,” he added.

“There is a law which makes this work illegal but the world gives enough reasons for an uneducated poor Dalit to still do scavenging,” said Mr. Bezwada.” Manual scavenging is integrally linked with the caste system and is imposed on certain Dalit sub-caste groups. Invariably, women, comprising 82 per cent of the caste, carry the burden.

### Apology demanded

The andolan demands an official apology from the Government of India for having violated human dignity and human rights of safai karamcharis for so many years. Other basic demands include demolition of dry latrines and punishment to dry latrine owners and all those who forced safai karamcharis to clean those latrines under the SC/ST Atrocity Prohibition Act, 1989.

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