

# A historical battle for dignity for India's *balmikis*

*Mari Marcel Thekaekara*  
(January 18, 2011)

**The best news of 2010 was that one million *balmiki* women threw down their brooms after a decade long campaign declaring “We will never clean shit again.” *Balmikis* or *safai karmacharis* are at the bottom of the Indian caste ladder.**

Balmikis are the only community, ordained by the caste structure, to clean toilets. These are not western style toilets but indescribably filthy structures. Normally two footrests create a squat toilet and people defecate onto the ground or a drain. The balmiki woman or man must clean this out with a broom and a piece of tin into a receptacle and carry it to a dump nearby. With small variations, this has been the situation for over a century (see picture). Every other community, even other Dalits, regard them as untouchables and do not eat or intermarry with them. They are the ‘untouchables’ amongst ‘untouchables’. The most discriminated against caste in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Balmikis are Hindu, Muslim and Christian.



## ***Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA)***

I was introduced to the problem of manual scavenging, as the physical lifting of shit is called, by Martin Macwan in 1996. I refused to believe that as India approached fifty years of freedom, human beings in our country were still forced to do such demeaning, soul searing work. Martin's Navsarjan Trust team took me to the public and private dry latrines of Gujarat where I saw first hand, this very shocking spectacle. I wrote an article, then a book *Endless Filth*, published in 1999.

A few years later, in 2003, I was asked by ActionAid to do a review of their work to eliminate manual scavenging. I met the Garima Abhiyaan or Movement for Dignity in Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. It was truly heartening to see change, however incremental, given the vast scale of the problem.

In 2003, I also met Bejawada Wilson, Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA). ChristianAid invited me to do an evaluation of the SKA.

It quickly became apparent to me that SKA's rapid impact, where everyone else moved really slowly, was precisely because the entire team came from the balmiki community. Eliminating

## Time Line Campaigning Against Manual Scavenging

1987 Wilson begins work in Kolar (Karnataka State)  
1995 Wilson starts SKA in Hyderabad  
2002 SKA moves to Delhi  
2003 Files petition in SC  
2004 Demolition of Dry Latrines  
2006 Burning Baskets of Shame  
2007 Nov 30, Dharna (sit-in) at Jantar Mantar Delhi  
2007 December 1, National Consultation  
2008 National Survey for SC  
2009 National Survey completed  
2010 Countdown begins.  
Oct 1, Bus Yatra begins  
Oct 31, Bus Yatra converges in Delhi  
Nov 1, Demands to government issued  
Dec 20, Campaign victory celebrated in Delhi

manual scavenging was their only mission, their sole purpose in life. I went from village to village in Punjab, Haryana, Uttaranchal, Orissa. Everywhere the story was the same. Drunken men showered them with vile abuse but the young team were practically immune to it. Seema from Haryana, put it very simply. “When we first came here, most of the men would be drunk by noon. They would tell us: ‘No one asked you to come here you f\*\*\*ing bastards, mother f\*\*\*ers’. But we were used to abuse. It went like water off a ducks back. It was the same in every village. Our uncles, fathers often came home drunk and shouted the same way. After a few visits, things would calm down. People began to trust us when they understood our families

did the same work. We belonged to the same community, we were balmikis.” This breakthrough was vital to the success of the movement.

### *‘Burning the baskets of shame’*

The SKA strategy was to work at different levels. The core team of Convenor Wilson, Anuradha, Moses and Deepthi were mentored by a dynamic and committed ex IAS (Indian administrative Service) officer S.R.Sankaran who knew the inner workings of government intimately. He was a brilliant strategist, especially when dealing with the government. A team of young people were trained by Moses, Anuradha, Deepthi and Wilson to lead the movement in each state. The State Convenors recruited other people. They were looking for youngsters with fire in the belly, to inspire and lead their own people out of the bondage of manual scavenging.

In 2003, SKA with 13 other organisations and individuals filed a historic Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court. It pointed out that in spite of being declared illegal in 1993, most states in India continued with the practice of manual scavenging and dry latrines. The Supreme Court summoned senior Secretaries of government to Delhi. Most of them lied, denying the practice.

SKA then produced documentation, both video footage as well as lists with addresses and door numbers of houses with non flush latrines, names of such house owners and names of the women cleaning those toilets, as well as photographic evidence. TV channels came and filmed the houses much to the embarrassment of the owners who did not want to be shown up on public television. This was a huge success especially in Punjab and Haryana. Word spread like wild fire “build a flush toilet or the TV wallahs will come and everyone will laugh at you.”

In 2004, SKA began a demolition drive going from town to town demolishing dry toilets. This got a lot of media coverage.

In 2006, balmikis derived immense courage from a new campaign, “Burning the baskets of shame”. Everywhere, the women carried their baskets to Collectorates, the administrative epicentre of every District, and set fire to them, shouting slogans and demanding justice and dignity. Many women told me they could never have dreamed that they could stand in front of a District Collectors office demanding their rights. Before the campaign hardly anyone knew they had rights, or that cleaning shit was illegal since 1993.

In 2007 SKA conducted a national consultation to take the movement forward. From this three themes emerged. One, to focus on manual scavenging as the stark reality of untouchability. Two, exploitation and violence against Dalit women. And three, manual scavenging as a violation of human rights. A special Summit of Dalit Women was held to highlight the aspect of violence against Dalit women.

### ***Grassroots mobilisation continued***

SKA then focussed on conducting a nationwide survey to present to the Supreme Court as almost every state remained in denial about the presence of manual scavenging and dry latrines. A mobilisation and training of a CRP team (community resource people) was held at district level to conduct the survey. The young team worked like people possessed to complete their task. They were committed and passionate. Usha Ramanathan, Senior Supreme Court advocate, said. “The data collected, collated and presented was truly impressive. I have rarely seen such a water tight case presented in the Supreme Court. The success and the SC response rested largely on the facts and figures they presented in the SC.”

With the survey completed and presented, SKA moved into a focussed campaign called Countdown 2010. Delhi was full of posters announcing a Countdown to the Commonwealth Games. Sankarangu, beloved mentor of SKA, said. “We should have a cut off point or we will go on forever. Wilson saw the posters and thought 2010 sounds good. So they announced an all out fight to end manual scavenging. A Bus Yatra (March) was planned from Kashmir to Kanyakumari at the southern tip of India. Balmikis from Tamil Nadu in the deepest South wound their way up to the Himalayan mountains and Kashmir to exhort their fellow balmiki women to “throw down those brooms, stop cleaning shit. Do it for your children’s future.” And the women did.

Everywhere the buses stopped, they responded. In hundreds of thousands. On October 31st, the five buses converged at Delhi amid cheers and jubilation. The next day, a memorandum of demands was presented to the government.

On December 20th, SKA held a meeting to celebrate the victory. They calculate that of the 1300000 women engaged in cleaning dry latrines, 1000000 have thrown down their brooms. Sonia Gandhi as Chair of the National Advisory Committee to the government had sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking for urgent steps to be taken to finally wipe out this shameful practice and create a package for rehabilitation for the women.

### **SKA Demands to Government of India**

1. An official apology by the government for the violation of their dignity and man rights.
2. The demolition of all dry latrines in the country; punishing those violating the 1993 Act.
3. Dry latrine owners and those forcibly making balmikis do manual scavenging must be punished.
4. The government releases Rs 5 lakh (€ 8000) per manual scavenger for rehabilitation, excluding Rs 10,000 (€ 160) as immediate relief.
5. Government should authorize 5 acres of land and proper housing to every balmiki family.
6. Government must issue Antyodaya cards (for subsidised food) and houses.
7. Special pensions for balmiki women who are either single, widowed or aged.
8. Free education for the children of balmiki parents and support in finding a job.

Wilson knows they still have miles to go before they can sleep. He has been criticised for giving a green light to the government by saying manual scavenging has been eliminated from

major parts of the country. SKA will soon give a report card to each state, based on elimination of manual scavenging and dry latrines as well as the rehabilitation of the women. But for the women who have thrown down their brooms it is indeed time to celebrate. And SKA has achieved an amazing victory. They have achieved something Gandhi set out to do 100 years ago, but failed to complete. The SKA victory is a landmark in Indian history.