

Public Health, Human Rights and Constitutional Values



12th

Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture Series

Hosted by

Anusandhan Trust - CEHAT

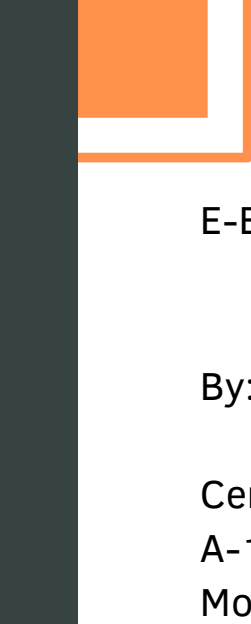
In Collaboration with

**Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar International
Research Centre, University of Mumbai**





Anusandhan Trust has instituted the Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture Annual Series on Contemporary Issues in Health and Social Sciences to honour the intellectual and academic traditions that Krishna Raj set in place, and in his memory. This is a humble tribute to the memory of the visionary editor of the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) for over 35 years (1969 - 2004)



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By:

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12th Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture Series

Contemporary Issues in Health and Social Sciences
Instituted by Ansandhan Trust

Public Health, Human Rights and Constitutional Values

17th January 2026

SPEAKER

**Bezwada Wilson,
Safai Karmachari Andolan**

CHAIRPERSON

Ravi Duggal

Venue:

Auditorium, Rajiv Gandhi Centre of Contemporary Studies,
University of Mumbai, Vidyanagari,
Kalina Campus, Santacruz (E), Mumbai - 400098

About the Speakers

Bezwada Wilson is an activist and one of the founders and National Convenor of the *Safai Karmachari Andolan* (SKA). He has a degree in political science from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad. He is actively involved in community service, especially youth programs. In 2016, Bezwada was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for his work towards eradicating the inhuman practice of manual scavenging

SKA is an Indian human rights organization, which aims to end the practice of manual scavenging and help those engaged in it find dignified work. SKA initially worked on the state level, until 2003 when Bezwada and four other team members moved to Delhi to launch the SKA nationwide. By fighting for the right, Bezwada aligns India's destiny with the ideals of justice and equality celebrated in international law and human rights charters.



**Bezwada Wilson,
Speaker**



**Ravi Duggal,
Chairperson**

Ravi Duggal is a Sociologist with over 4 decades of work on public health issues including health policy, systems, financing, budgets, governance & accountability issues. Worked with International Budget Partnership, Action Aid, CEHAT, SWISSAID, Ministry of Health - Government of India and Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH).

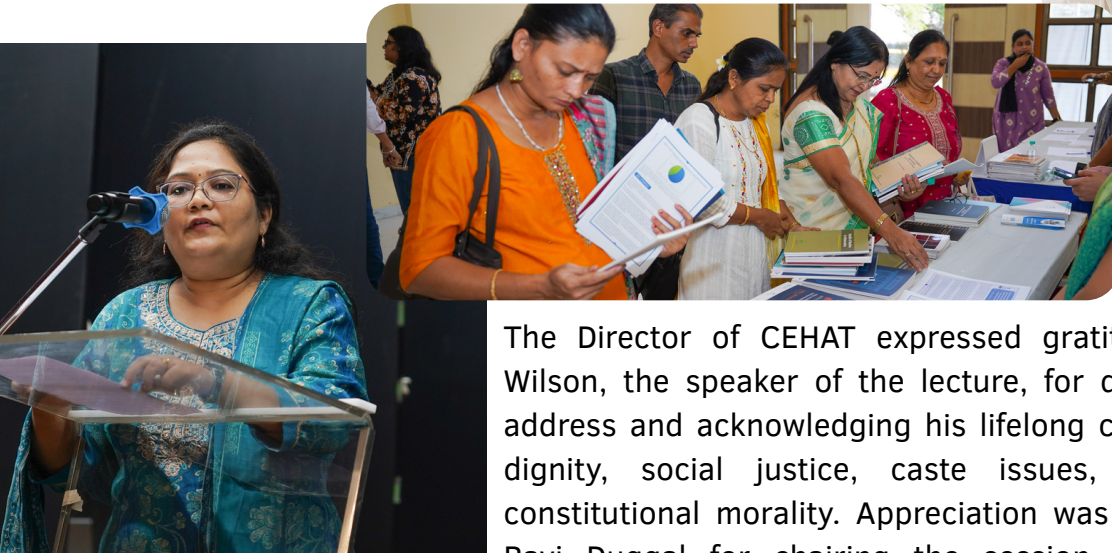
Presently an Independent Consultant and Researcher. His areas of current interest include budgets, social accountability and governance, universal access to health, health systems and financing strategies and ESCR rights. He has authored over 20 books/reports and over 200 research papers and articles published as of now.

Introduction

The Director of **Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT)**, Mumbai, **Amruta Bavadekar**, welcomed distinguished guests, colleagues, students, and supporters to the **12th Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture** on “**Public Health, Human Rights and Constitutional Values.**” The lecture was organised in collaboration with the **Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar International Research Centre, University of Mumbai**, Kalina Campus, and supported by the Anusandhan Trust.

The **Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture**, instituted in 2006 by Anusandhan Trust, honours the life and intellectual legacy of Krishna Raj, a distinguished scholar and long-serving editor of the Economic and Political Weekly. His work reflected a deep commitment to ethical reflection, rigorous scholarship, and the defence of democratic and constitutional values. The lecture series aims to continue this legacy by creating a space for critical engagement with contemporary issues.

The theme of this year’s lecture resonates with CEHAT’s long-standing work on health equity, structural discrimination, and institutional responsibility in upholding dignity and justice. It reinforces the belief that public health cannot be separated from the questions of rights, ethics, and constitutional responsibility.



The Director of CEHAT expressed gratitude to Mr. Bezwada Wilson, the speaker of the lecture, for delivering the keynote address and acknowledging his lifelong commitment to human dignity, social justice, caste issues, labour rights, and constitutional morality. Appreciation was also extended to Mr. Ravi Duggal for chairing the session and contributing his expertise in public health and social policy.

The address concluded with thanks to the Anusandhan Trust and all participants, expressing hope that the lecture would both honour Krishna Raj’s legacy and encourage continued reflection on the role of constitutional values in shaping public health practice and policy in India.

A Glance at “Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture”

Dr. Vibhuti Patel, Managing Trustee of **Anusandhan Trust**, welcomed former directors of CEHAT and all the attendees to the 12th Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture. She provided an overview of Anusandhan Trust, established in 1991 to promote democratically managed institutions focused on research, education, training, documentation, and advocacy on health and allied themes, particularly concerning intersectionality and marginalised communities. Over the past 35 years, the Trust has contributed significantly to issues affecting disadvantaged populations.

Anusandhan Trust has had three centres:

CEHAT (Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes)

CEHAT was established in 1994 to bridge academic research and grassroots practice.



SATHI (Support for Advocacy and Training to Health Initiative)



SATHI Pune-based centre focused on advocacy and training using a rights-based approach, promoting accountability and strengthening community health initiatives, especially among rural, tribal, and urban poor communities.

CSER (Centre for Studies in Ethics and Rights)

CSER was active from 2005 to 2013, focused on bioethics and medical ethics.



The Memorial Lecture was instituted after **Krishna Raj's** passing in 2004 to honour his intellectual legacy as a visionary editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The lecture series serves as a platform for critical engagement with issues of health equity, ethics, human rights, political economy, and social justice, in collaboration with academic institutions and civil society organisations across Mumbai and Pune.

About KR Memorial Lecture

Dr. Vibhuti, outlined the **key themes** of the *lecture series* held over the years:

Poverty, social policy, and political economy

including lectures by Anirudh Krishna and Elina Sen, examining poverty as structurally shaped by policy and institutional arrangements.

Gender, population, and structural violence

including Dr. Betsy Hartman's critique of population policies and gendered assumptions.

Health systems, equity, and reform

including lectures by Prof. Gita Sen and Dr. Armando on neoliberal reforms, privatisation, and universal access to healthcare.

Ethics, regulation, and institutions

examining regulatory frameworks, clinical trials, institutional histories, and ethical accountability in medical practice.

Global health and technological challenges

including lectures on environmental impacts of medical practices, digital health, surveillance, and the political economy of healthcare.

The *lecture series* became an important intellectual platform bringing together scholars, practitioners, and activists to critically examine public health through the lens of rights and constitutional values.



About Speakers



Dr. Vibhuti introduced the keynote speaker, **Bezwada Wilson**, an activist and National Convenor of Safai Karmachari Andolan. He holds a degree in political science and was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2016 for his work towards the eradication of manual scavenging. Safai Karmachari Andolan works across the country to eradicate manual scavenging and ensure dignified rehabilitation of the communities involved. She then introduced the chairperson of the lecture, **Ravi Duggal**, a sociologist with over four decades of work in public health policy, health financing, governance, and accountability. He has authored extensively, worked with national and international organisations, and previously served as a trustee of Anusandhan Trust and Director of CEHAT.

Dr. Manisha Karne, Director In-charge, **Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar International Research Centre**, provided an introduction of the centre, which was established in 2005-06. The Centre offers academic programmes including postgraduate diplomas in Ambedkar Thought, Ambedkar Studies, and Development Studies. Dr. Manisha expressed gratitude to CEHAT and Anusandhan Trust for the opportunity to host the lecture and conveyed honour in instituting the memorial lecture at the Centre. She acknowledged the keynote speaker, Bezwada Wilson, and the chairperson, Shri Ravi Duggal, for their longstanding work in Human Rights and Health-related issues. Dr. Manisha concluded her remarks, by inviting Bezwada Wilson, to deliver the keynote address.



Keynote Address

Bezwada Wilson initiated his keynote address by acknowledging the organisers for taking forward the legacy of **Krishna Raj** through “**KR Memorial Lectures**”. He shared that, when he first heard about Krishna Raj, he began reading about his life and work and learned about his contributions and engagement in public life and intellectual spaces. He emphasised that recognising such individuals is important because their work forms our real inheritance, our *Virasat*. He said we often think of our heritage in a limited sense, it is expressed through words which I don't even know. He reflected that people often use grand and loaded words while discussing about the culture, heritage and national greatness. However, for him the true legacy of the country lies in knowing and understanding the work of those who struggled in the past so that people today could live freely. Many individuals fought long before independence so that future generations could experience dignity and freedom. Remembering them through constructive initiatives, such as annual memorial lectures, helps to keep the collective spirit alive and high. It becomes a learning space even for those who are unaware about such individuals, and their contributions.

He further added, that multiple institutions such as Anusandhan Trust, Ambedkar Chair and CEHAT is coming together to organise this lecture series, symbolises a shared responsibility and true contribution towards society. He specifically noted about the efforts of organising the lecture that it is not merely a responsibility-*Ek jimmedari nahin* - nor is it only one person's responsibility, but a collective effort which is necessary to move the society forward. He mentioned the significance of organising such events by explaining how he himself came to know and learn about the figures like Krishna Raj.



Glorification of Exploitation

While talking about forms of exploitation, he drew attention to the perception of the country's beauty in people's minds. He reflected on a deeply embedded idea in Indian society- that the country worships and honours women. In this regard, he noted that people often make such claims and clarified that he had never objected and there can never be an objection to 'respect' itself. However, he added that excessive glorification makes him cautious, as it tends to conceal deeper and more troubling realities.

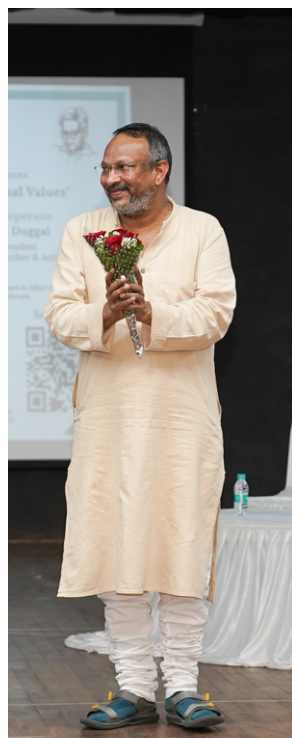
Talking more about this aspect, he narrated how women scavengers are told, “*you are like my mother, my mother cleaned me when I was a child and today you are cleaning for me, so I must treat you like a mother.*” He admitted that hearing this initially moved him and he would feel happy, but later he realised such glorification conceals exploitation and came to see it differently. Through such praise and emotional framing, society normalises inhuman practices and continuation of degrading labour. It makes a person feel honoured for cleaning the human excreta for a lifetime. He said it took him more than a decade, almost about fifteen years of his life to fully understand this kind of contradiction.

Language, Social conditioning and humiliation

He spoke at length on the aspect of how language plays an important role in manifestation of discrimination. He said, women and men who are manual scavengers often do not initially recognise the discrimination they face. He described that usage of derogatory terms is very common and normalised. Derogatory terms such as *Bhangi* and *Thori* are used in everyday language.

When he was a child, and others laughed while calling him such names, he laughed along because everyone else was laughing; only later did he understand that they were mocking his social status. These words diminish a person’s dignity, and over a period of time, people start internalising this humiliation. That is how social conditioning works.

He further said, “In schools, children recite the pledge which grants equality to its citizens, as it is stated: ‘India is my country; all Indians are my brothers and sisters’ and yet at the same time, they are taught to feel inferior. Pride is granted selectively. This type of contradiction shapes young minds.” As a child he said, he had nothing to claim as pride except that his mother was good.



Questioning the Poverty & Illiteracy, and the influence of Mother

He began by asking what may seem like a very simple question; “why we people are only cleaning? Why do only my parents clean? Why only my brother? The explanations to these questions he received were poverty and illiteracy and he also accepted them initially. We were poor, what else could we do? My mother, sister, brother were all illiterates” so he believed poverty to be the main reason.

Over the years, he started to reflect that property in this country is not merely a commodity, it also confers identity and dignity. Dalits, Adivasis and oppressed communities have historically been denied land and without any such resource, one also loses social standing. There was nothing in his childhood that he could point to and say, that ‘I had this.’ He said his mother was all he had. As he put it, *‘My mother was so good, so I had to feel happy, more than that nothing was there.’*

He was also told that scavenging was in fact convenient work, that it could be finished in an hour or two, and then there would be free time to go to the cinema. He did not even know what a morning show was at that time, but he accepted that too. He said these narratives shaped his early thinking. He concluded that education and hard work were the real solutions and in the 1980s he began coaching and tuition centres for school dropouts. This was how his journey started.

Bezwada Wilson shared a personal memory of his mother asking him to promise never to hold a broom and sweep as she did. He said, even as a child, before any of his understanding had formed, something had already been said to him that he could only grasp much later. His mother once called him, asked him to show his hands, and made him promise one thing, that he would never hold a broom or sweep with those hands.

She told him that he should go and study. For education, if needed he should leave the whole family and move away, but never do the cleaning work in his entire lifetime. She reiterated that even in situations when there was nothing to eat, he should not take up the cleaning work. He further said that, when his mother told him all this, at that time he took it casually. His mother had never spoken to him that seriously ever before, and by his own account, he was a child who lived mostly for fun. He made the promise without fully understanding it.

It was only through his work, through years of questions and encounters and the movement he became part of, that he came to understand what she already knew. Manual scavenging continues not because of poverty or illiteracy, and there are many poor and illiterate people in this country who do not do this work. It persists because of caste and patriarchy. That realisation changed everything for him. He remembered his mother’s words and understood for the first time, their full weight. That word he said- how much value it had, it was worth a revolution for my life, what my mother told him that day.

Freedom and constitution

The speaker reflected on the freedom struggle, reading about the sacrifices made before 1947, he mentioned that he wished he had been born earlier so that he could have participated in that noble struggle. He conveyed deep admiration for those whose struggles and aspirations made it possible for future generations to live with freedom.

He then asked, whether people are truly experiencing freedom today. The constitution of India provides a path based on equality, liberty, justice and fraternity. However, those who capture power often move away from this direction. He mentioned that votes are taken from us but the governance does not always function in alignment with constitutional values.

If the constitution is truly functional there would be no poverty, he highlighted that there are people in India even today, who struggle for food, housing, education and health. If there was moving in the right direction, the practice of manual scavenging would not have continued even after seventy-five years of independence. He emphasised the fact that manual scavenging still persists in several districts across Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir and other states as well and that women continue to manually remove human excreta from dry latrines.

Despite massive investments in sanitation, dry latrines continue to remain in use. He described them as symbols of shame and denial of dignity. He questioned, 'why in a country that claims technological advancement, women still carry human waste by hand?'

He referred to a Supreme Court case from Ambala, Haryana, where officials admitted that women were cleaning dry latrines but argued that, since they were not carrying excreta on their heads, it did not qualify as manual scavenging. He questioned the logic and reasoning and the kind of justice system that permits such interpretations.



Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's intervention

Bezwada Wilson then also spoke about his journey of discovering Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in 1989, around the time of the Ambedkar birth centenary celebrations. He mentioned that until that year, he had no idea who Dr. Ambedkar was. He also spoke about his roots and that he comes from Kolar Gold Fields (KGF), after taking a brief pause he said "Please don't relate me with the movie, it has completely no connection." He further said that he grew up surrounded by statues of Dr. Ambedkar in KGF. He highlighted that, even though their MLA was from the Republican Party of India for several years, he was unaware of Dr. Ambedkar. He noted that although he came from a Scheduled Caste, the community most closely connected to this struggle, he still could not relate with Ambedkar, pointing to the way the system operated.

Around this time, he began attending rallies and yatras organised by Dalit Organisations. He did not always know where he was going or how long the journeys would take; he would travel with these rallies by cycle. The plan among the groups was to travel across the country on cycles for an entire year to understand what India truly was. He added that people told him his thinking was sound and that his anger was an asset. He wanted to go and see things for himself.

At one of these gatherings, pamphlets were distributed. When he opened one, it was about Ambedkar, and this marked his first real encounter with Dr. Ambedkar. Within twenty to thirty days of reading and attending meetings across different states, he began speaking about Ambedkar in small gatherings. It was then that he realised, for the first time, that he could speak in public. It was not something he had planned or prepared for, it simply came for him, from reading, from the travel and from the anger that had been building since childhood without a framework to hold it. He learned during that time, that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had already spoken about manual scavenging in Bombay Presidency Council debates, even before the independence and long before he himself was born. He spoke about the debates that there was a proposal that had been made to penalise scavengers if they refused to work, on the grounds that their absence posed a public health risk. Ambedkar opposed it directly stating that no human being can be compelled to clean another human being's excreta. Bezwada Wilson spoke about the greatness of Dr. Ambedkar saying, Dr. Ambedkar had condemned the practice of manual scavenging and forced labour even before India became independent and while he was still struggling to understand it. This condemning the practice of scavenging fearlessly and openly made him see the significance of Dr. Ambedkar and his greatness.

He also spoke about the debate between Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi had stated that in his ashram, everyone cleaned, implying that there was no discrimination and that all were equal in this act. Dr. Ambedkar responded with clarity, saying: 'In your ashram, you clean the toilet, that is fine, you have established equality. But in this country, if I am born into a scavenging community, even if I never touch a broom in my life, society will still call me a Bhangi. You may clean every day, and no one will ever call you that. Whereas for me, even if I do not do it, I will still carry that label forever, simply because of the family I was born into. The act is the same, but the consequences are entirely different and that is Caste.

What struck him the most about Ambedkar, he said, was the complete absence of ambiguity in this thinking. There were no contradictions, no hidden meanings, and no need to read between the lines, it was crystal clear. He said this with admiration, noting that even a simple person like him could understand it. One did not need to be a scholar; the argument was plain and the logic unshakable. That clarity he said gave him and continues to give him both the framework and the courage to speak.

He understood that he was not a scavenger by choice. Society had imposed that identity. Therefore, shame should belong to the system, not the individual.

Sewage Deaths and Policy Failure

Bezwada Wilson drew attention to the continued deaths in sewers and septic tanks, especially among young men aged twenty to thirty. He described these deaths as another dimension of the same crisis. Even in a city like Mumbai, he said, people are sent into sewers and septic tanks, where they die, often without public concern. Further he said, we think technology is available somewhere and that is enough but he questioned who developed the technology? He gave the example of a small group of students from Kerala who built a prototype robotic cleaner, the 'Bandicoot', but he asked, "do you think a prototype built by a small group of students can provide a solution for the problem of 140 crore people? Neither the Government of India nor any state government has invested even a single rupee in developing technology. To replace this labour, the money exists, technology is not the shortage. The lack of will to adapt and invest in it is the problem. Instead, he said, what the government does is it offers schemes under programs like NAMASTE (National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem).

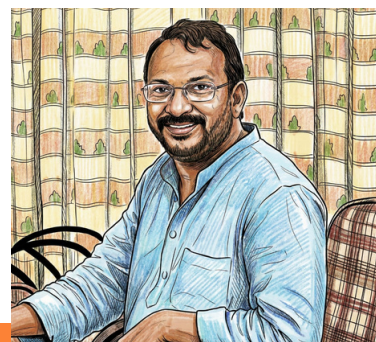


Scavengers are told to form a group of 45 people, take a loan of 60 lakh, buy a machine, come and clean our city and then repay the instalments to the bank every month.” He asked the audience directly “are we understanding what we are doing? We are asking the very people we have exploited for generations to now take on debt in order to continue doing that same work. You are born as an untouchable and you remain as an untouchable. You come and clean the cities and villages. You cannot expect money and now on top of that you must also repay a loan that he said is the new form of untouchability and we are not even able to recognise it as such.” He said between 2013 to the present day we have lost over 2600 people to sewer and septic tank deaths in this country. The majority of them were between 20 and 30 years old people who died before they could even reach the age where they might receive a pension, most *Safai Karmacharis* he noted die before retirement age. In 2026, alone we have already lost two people and we continue to stay quiet. He asked, plainly, how long will we keep quiet? He further said there is data available on every tiger and lion in the forest, but there is no data or information on how many *Safai Karmacharis* are working in the city, he says, this contradiction tells you everything. In summary, He criticised the lack of investment in mechanised cleaning technology. Instead, government schemes offer loans to scavengers to purchase machines and continue cleaning, meaning you are born into this community, and you must do it continually. He described this as a replication of untouchability under modern policy frameworks.

No Longer Being Part of Government Committees

The speaker also reflected on his past engagement with government institutions, such as the Planning Commission of India, The NITI Aayog and nearly sixteen other committees across the country. Despite this involvement, he highlights persistent concerns, challenges with institutions. He said *“preparation is necessary to ensure accountability from people and institutions. I was a part of several bodies, including the Planning Commission of India, NITI Aayog, and sixteen other committees, but the critical voices are often not heard, people do not want to take them in. How, then, can leadership be exercised?”*

This is what truly worries me, where I am present or not is not the concern. The concern is that if someone speaks the truth and there is no willingness to hear it, then what use are missiles and weapons? One must have the courage to hear the truth. Without that courage, nothing, not the military, navy or air force can save you, individually one is completely lost.”





The speaker further argues, without the courage to confront the truth and injustice, even the most powerful institutions remain fragile. He reflects on his engagement with bureaucratic training institutions; he notes that he was earlier invited to speak at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, where civil servants are trained. However, he said, that such invitations have ceased over the past decade suggesting that this withdrawal reflects a broader discomfort with critical perspectives within institutional spaces. He raises concerns that if even trained administrative officers continue to hold regressive views, meaningful social change becomes unlikely.

Public Health and Rights

The speaker, in the context of public health, expands the conventional understanding of health by arguing that it cannot be reduced to medical care alone. He emphasised that "Public health is not just the hospital, health means food, shelter, water, sanitation, dignity; almost everything comes under the health" he represented a holistic view that links health to everyday living conditions. He further said, "health is not just giving medicines, we have to come out of that understanding" and challenge the narrow, treatment focused approach that dominates the public discourse. Building on this, he asserts that health must be recognised and be treated as a fundamental right rather than an act of charity. He clearly states that *"getting healthy and being in good health should be a right, it is not like you are giving me and I am taking."*

He further emphasises on the accountability of the state, arguing that it is the responsibility of the state to construct sufficient hospitals, primary health centres across the country. He also questions and rejects the idea of gratitude-based welfare, asserting that the citizen is not a receiver, receiving these things are their rights. He drew attention to the lived realities of *Safai Karmacharis*, highlighting the severe health consequences faced by sanitation workers.

Conclusion

He concluded by urging participants to actively engage in raising critical questions, especially on behalf of those who remain unheard. He emphasised that everyone should raise genuine, simple questions on behalf of the most marginalised voices. He called for a collective responsibility to amplify these concerns. Stressing the importance of wider engagement, he added that there is a need for sustained dialogue across spaces, and forums.

The speaker located the ultimate solution within the framework of constitutional values, asserting that we must make the Constitution of India work within a good spirit in the country again. He concluded with an assertion that the only solution is our hope, underlying that adherence to the Constitution remains the most viable path towards justice and dignity. He asserted that abiding by constitutional values remains the only sustainable path forward.

Chairperson's Address

After the Keynote address, the chairperson **Ravi Duggal** reflected on Bezwada Wilson's powerful and emotionally compelling speech, noting that it forced the audience to confront the undignified and inhumane conditions that persist in the country. He emphasised that the issue at hand is fundamentally about the lack of respect and dignity for human rights.

He highlighted the contradiction between living in metropolitan cities with flush toilets and the continued existence of manual scavenging and dry latrines, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. He referred to the *Swachh Bharat Mission*, pointing out that although large sums of money were spent and millions of toilets were constructed, many were found to be non-functional due to lack of water, maintenance, and cleaning services. In many cases, toilets were repurposed as storage spaces. Various micro-studies across the country have documented these failures resulting in continued disparities.

He noted that the second phase of sanitation reforms is increasingly technology-driven, with innovations such as robotic cleaners like the Bandicoot and other mechanised systems. However, their implementation remains limited. Instead of direct state investment, the government often offers loans to traditional cleaning communities to purchase equipment, effectively shifting responsibility onto them. He argued that civic services such as sanitation must be publicly funded and provided by the state as a core responsibility.

The chairperson also raised concerns about the denial of manual scavenging by the government despite documentary evidence and data compiled by civil society organisations showing significant underreporting. Official figures on deaths and prevalence are much lower than ground realities. He stressed the lack of reliable occupational data and the failure of national surveys to adequately capture such work.

A central theme of his remarks was the caste mindset embedded in decision-making structures. He argued that there is upper caste dominance in bureaucratic and policymaking institutions which influences how sanitation and labour issues are addressed. Referring to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's call for the annihilation of caste, he stated that caste-based thinking remains a major barrier to eliminating manual scavenging.

He also briefly reflected on Mahatma Gandhi's position on cleaning and non-violence, acknowledging his contribution but suggesting that caste thinking persisted in different forms.



Finally, he emphasised that health, education, housing, and sanitation are fundamental rights. Providing strong public systems in these areas enhances dignity and reduces inequality. He called for greater mechanisation of sewer cleaning, elimination of dry latrines, and structural reforms to remove caste-based occupations. According to him, technological advancement and public investment, combined with a shift in social mindset, are necessary to eliminate work that violates human dignity.

He concluded by reiterating that addressing caste mentality and strengthening public responsibility are essential to ensuring dignity and human rights for all.



Discussion and Reflection sharing

After the keynote address, the discussion opened with a question linking constitutional values, public health and the growing communalisation of medical education. The participant raised concerns about increasing religious polarisation, suggesting that minority communities are being treated as new “untouchables,” and asked how does this fit into the larger context of caste and public health. Bezwada Wilson responded by situating communal discrimination within the broader structures of caste and patriarchy. He argued that caste has historically functioned as a tool to exclude communities from resources and opportunities, while patriarchy similarly normalises inequality within households and everyday life. He emphasised that these systems persist because of a deeply internalised “mindset” describing caste and patriarchal thinking as a form of social and psychological conditioning that continues to shape behaviour. In this sense inequality is reproduced not only structurally but also mentally.

He stressed that simply speaking against inequality is not the same as practicing equality. Since society is fundamentally unequal, equality requires conscious and deliberate efforts. He emphasised the need for moral courage, urging citizens to openly condemn injustice regardless of religion, caste or gender and to have the courage to criticise wrongdoing even within their own communities and families.

He also spoke about institutional failure, including his experience litigating manual scavenging cases in the Supreme court. He described how, over the course of the case, it was heard multiple times by as many as 23 judges across nearly 39 hearings, yet not a single judge issued a concrete directive to end the practice. Instead, the court repeatedly described manual scavenging as a “national shame” and an “obnoxious practice,” without translating these observations into enforceable action. He also noted that petitioners were asked to prove the existence of manual scavenging, which he saw a deeply flawed and unjust expectation. For him, this reflected how structural power, whether in the name of caste, religion or patriarchy, continued to shape governance and the functioning of justice systems.



Wilson further highlighted how systems of power attempt to neutralise dissent through co-option. He shared that he was once invited to stand on a public platform to declare India "manual scavenging free" despite knowing that the practice continued to exist. He refused to endorse such claims, asserting that as long as manual scavenging persists, he will continue to name it as reality. While talking about this experience he said, this is how even at the highest levels, narratives are managed to deny structural injustice.



He emphasised that citizens hold significant democratic power, particularly through the vote, describing it as an "unstoppable power" in the hands of the people. Governments change every five years and citizens must use this power responsibly, questioning authority, demanding accountability and refusing to remain passive.

The chairperson Ravi Duggal added that voting alone is not sufficient; democratic responsibility also requires continuous engagement. Citizens must question elected representatives and bureaucracies to ensure that systems function effectively. He illustrated this through the example of the decline of Mumbai's public healthcare system, arguing that when the middle class shifts to private or insurance-based models, public systems deteriorate. In contrast, systems that are universally used, systems such as public transport, tend to remain stronger and more accountable. He emphasised the importance of universal public systems, citing examples such as the UK and Canada, where public health services are accessible to all.

Another question asked whether manual scavenging is a by-product of caste supremacy and how caste can be eliminated. Bezwada Wilson responded by framing caste and patriarchy as the forms of unhealthy mental conditioning. He argued that the tendency to see others as inferior reflects a deeper psychological problem. Importantly he located this responsibility within himself as well, stating that as a Man he carries patriarchal conditioning and must consciously work against it every day; otherwise he cannot become a "good human being." This emphasis on self - reflection highlighted that dismantling caste and patriarchy is not only a structural task but also an ethical and personal one.



When it was asked what a caste-conscious public health policy would look like, the chairperson responded that the aim should not be to design systems around caste, but to build universal and equitable public systems that are accessible to everyone. Since society is already shaped by caste inequalities, the goal should be to create systems that minimise and eventually make such stratifications irrelevant.

Finally, a question on reservation policies was raised with reference to calls to abolish reservations. Bezwada Wilson responded that communities historically deprived of opportunities require support for a certain period to achieve equality. However, he extended this argument by pointing out that caste-based advantages continue to be reproduced across generations through property, social capital and even caste identity itself. As long as such inherited inequalities persist the demand to end the reservation is premature and ignores the structural realities of exclusion.

Overall, the discussion reinforced key themes: the persistence of caste, patriarchy and communal discrimination as deeply embedded structural and psychological forces; the need for moral courage, self-reflection and active democratic engagement and the importance of building a universal, equitable public system in health, education and social policy.



Vote of Thanks

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