



Bezwada Wilson, 2016 Magsaysay Awardee delivers first Luminary Lecture

The first of the Luminary Lecture Series, organised as part of the centenary celebrations, was delivered by Mr. Bezwada Wilson, 2016 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee, on the 28th of February, 2018. Mr. Wilson, a human rights activist, received the award, in the 'Community Leadership' category for his untiring campaign for the eradication of manual scavenging among the Dalits.

The Luminary Lecture Series is part of a series of events being organised to mark one hundred years of medical education in CMC. "We would look back and remember and celebrate our heritage, review and renew our current educational processes, but also look outwards for inspiration and guidance as we plan our future. And the luminary lectures were conceived as one of the ways of looking out," said the Principal, Dr. Anna Pulimood.

In his soul-stirring speech, Mr. Wilson recounted the various battles he has had with the judiciary and the government, over many decades, to first legally abolish manual scavenging, and then, to make it a criminal offence.



***Mr. Bezwada Wilson: "Ida Scudder shared her future with all of us. That is the reason this institution is here...
Are we ready to share our future?"***

He exhorted the members of the audience, especially the younger generation, to believe in equality and fight for it, and to keep democracy alive by doing their bit to make our leaders accountable.

Mr. Wilson, born to Dalit parents in the Kolar Gold Fields township in Karnataka, hails from a family engaged in manual scavenging for generations.

Manual scavenging is the term given for the cleaning of dry latrines (toilets without flushing facility) by hand and the carrying of human excreta to disposal sites. Traditionally, the work has been carried out by members of a certain Dalit sub-caste, who, the

caste system dictates, are the ones whose job it is.

The day he learned the truth about his family members' occupation was a turning point in the life of Mr. Wilson, the only person in his family who could pursue formal education. Overcoming initial thoughts of suicide, Mr. Wilson sent a complaint to the authorities of his hometown. When that was ignored, he sent a complaint to the Prime Minister threatening legal action. Thus began a resistance that grew into a national movement spearheaded by the organisation he leads, the Safai Karmachari Andolan, which has volunteers in every district in the nation, totalling 6000 in number.

The lecture, delivered with passion, humour and cutting honesty was peppered with the inspiring real-life stories of the manual scavengers he has campaigned with, most of them women; women, who were ready to forego the only livelihood they had for the sake of reclaiming their dignity, in the face of continued disappointments and defeats. "Even today, there are 1.6 lakh women who clean dry latrines," Mr. Wilson pointed out, working in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir. In the Southern states, the workers were mostly involved in cleaning sewers and septic tanks, he said.



The question-answer session, chaired by Prof. K. S. Jacob, Professor of Psychiatry, witnessed enthusiastic participation from the audience comprising not only the staff and students of CMC but also children from various schools in Vellore, social activists, office-bearers from other educational institutions and government officials. Responding to a child's question as to whether

he saw light at the end of the tunnel, Mr. Wilson replied, without hesitation, that every new morning filled him with light and hope.

Mr. Wilson was honoured with a citation, given by the Principal, Dr. Pulimood, and a *ponnadai*, by Prof. Prathap Tharyan, former Head of Psychiatry.

"The goal of the luminary lectures is to inspire the younger generation to do something beyond their professional call, to impact society at large," said the Director, Dr. J. V. Peter.



The spontaneous standing ovation that Mr. Wilson received after his lecture, and two more times, was ample evidence of the fact that not a single person, young or old, went back to their homes that evening, uninspired by the true luminary.