

'Strike while the iron is hot' was the rallying cry issued by Sh. N.Vittal, the Union government's Chief Vigilance Commissioner at the Lok Sunwayi organised by MANUSHI on the plight of rickshawpullers on the streets of Delhi. The proverbial 'iron' was in the form of the unexpected arrival at the MANUSHT offices that very morning, of a nine-page document issued by the Prime Minister's office in response to MANUSHI's campaign for reform of the current laws relating to the plying of rickshaws and hawking in the capital.

The public hearing held on 29th August, was brimming with rickshawpullers, rickshaw owners and street hawkers, with no shortage of individuals waiting patiently in the aisles to narrate their stories to the distinguished panel of guests. Apart from **Mr. N. Vittal**, other panelists included: **Mr. K. P. S. Gill** (former D. G. Punjab Police), **Mr. Ajit Gulabchand.** (businessman), **Sh. Om Thanvi** (editor, *Jansatta*), **Sh. Kuldeep Nayar** (M.P. Rajya Sabha), **Mr. Rajat Sharma** (TV producer), **Mr. Dilip Padgaonkar** (executive managing editor, *The Times of India*), **Mr. Rajdeep Sardesai** (NDTV), **Mrs. Lekha Shrivastava** (India Sponsor Foundation), **Mr. Seshadhari Chari** (editor, *Organiser*), **Sh. Dhirubhai Sheth**(CSDS).

The accounts by individual hawkers and rickshaw-pullers of the treatment they had received at the hands of petty corporation officials and the police in their attempt to eke out a livelihood, both shocked and appalled the audience. A film produced by Madhu Kishwar on the experiences of rickshawpullers, graphically described the way in which the police and officialdom perpetuate a vast extortion racket in the name of controlling unlicensed illegal rickshaws.

Rickshaw pullers also spoke of the violence they endure on a daily basis;

MANUSHI Organises *Lok Sunwayi* of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers and Owners



they were easy prey and regularly beaten by the police or by other road users when allegedly violating traffic rules, or by passengers when it came to paying the fare. Apart from the grievances of rickshawpullers, rickshaw owners also spoke about the numerous in which they are fleeced. (For details see page 4). Towards the end of the public hearing, a rather moving oath was taken aloud by rickshaw owners to refrain from using violence on rickshaw pullers even when they defaulted on hire charges, damaged or stole their rickshaws. They also pledged to protect and stand side by side with rickshawpullers who faced violence or extortion at the hands of the police and MCD officials.

The economic contribution of the rickshaw sector, was highlighted by

both the pullers themselves and the panel of guests. Rickshawpulling is one of the very few trades that does not require any outlay of capital in order to become self employed. As stated by one of the panelists at the public hearing 'It is a matter of supply and demand, rickshawpullers play to the natural market. This level of enterprise is to be encouraged and not thwarted by the corrupt officialdom.'

The meeting ended on an optimistic note because a day before this *Lok Sunwayi*, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) had sent MANUSHI a draft of a new policy prepared by the PMO for rickshaw pullers and street vendors. This responds to most of the concerns raised by the two *Lok Sunwayis* organised by MANUSHI on the plight of rickshaw pullers and street vendors (see issue No. 124). -Nina