

Maila Mukti Yatra: A Struggle for Freedom and Liberation

'Maila Mukti' refers to freedom for those involved in the practice of carrying human excreta of others on their head for generations.

The practice of manual scavenging is continuing in India from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from backward states to developed states. Even after making a law to abolish it in 1993 and extending the time limit eight times by government, this practice has been continuing. Various individuals and organization have been making efforts to abolish this practice for more than a century and they have used various methods to do this. One of the tools we identified during our work was that the women engaged in the practices take the decision that **"I will not do this work from today. I condemn it"**. This strategy proved to be successful in our campaign and till now, thousands of women have decided to free themselves from this practice. Through these freed women, we have been successful in spreading the message to 14 districts. Freed women become role models for other women as well.

To spread the campaign through these women to neighboring districts and states as well, a 26 day *Maila Mukti Yatra* was organized in 34 districts of four states - Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Around 50 women freed from this evil participated full time in the *Yatra*. They went to colonies and houses of women engaged in this evil and motivated them to free themselves from this practice instantly. They explained that though they may be deprived of a few stale *chapattis*, some old clothes, some money, and though they may be pressurized or boycotted, they should not continue to do this work. "We won't do this and will live with dignity," was the motto. "We won't take human excreta on our head and will live a life of dignity."

After such discussions, most of the women would decide to leave this practice. At some places, if their family members didn't agree, they were convinced through songs and bhajans. Once decided, the pots were burnt at a public place in the village and it was announced that manual scavenging has been abolished in the village from that day and if someone pressurizes the freed people to do this, action would be taken against them. *Kacche* Toilets were broken at some places whereas at some places the untouchability was finished during the *Yatra* itself. Admission for community members was ensured at water sources, tea shop, barber shop etc. At some places, people from non dalit communities opposed as well. In villages where dalits were not allowed to wear chappels in non dalit colonies and weren't allowed to take marriage processions, rallies were organized with drum beats and these were headed by women who used to practice manual scavenging till date. After the whole process, the freed women were felicitated at a public place in village, were given sweets and a memento.

The *Yatra* started on 6th November 2009 from Mhow, birthplace of the great fighter against caste system, Dr B R Ambedkar, and culminated at Bhopal on 1st December 2009. During the *Yatra*, communication was established with more than 1400 women who were engaged in the practice, and 502 women members decided to leave this work.

When at the last day of the *Yatra*, people related with the march shared their experiences, Lali Bai from Dhariyakhedi village of Mandasaur had this to say: *"I was freed from this practice 5 years ago. During the Yatra, I came to know about the sudden demise of my Grandson due illness to but neither I went back to*

home, nor did I inform anyone here about this. I thought that Yatra was more important for me to participate in rather than be at home and today, I am proud that we freed 502 women from this."