

Jan Sahas — People's Courage Against India's Most Invisible Violence

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Social Justice & Tribal Welfare

Published: May 2026 · Last reviewed: —

There is a form of labour in India that is technically illegal but practically ubiquitous — work performed in exchange for debt, under threat, without the possibility of refusal. Bonded labour. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act was passed in 1976. Fifty years later, the government reports that over 315,000 bonded labourers were identified and released between 1978 and January 2023. Independent estimates suggest this is a small fraction of the actual total.

And then there is manual scavenging — the cleaning of dry latrines and open sewers by human hands, performed almost exclusively by Dalit women from specific sub-castes who have been doing this work for generations because no one else will, and because their economic alternatives have historically been near zero. This too has been illegal since 1993. It continues.

Jan Sahas began in 2000 in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh, when a child labourer and two Dalit adults died in an illegal firecracker factory. A group of concerned individuals decided that the appropriate response was not a news cycle but an institution. They formed Jan Sahas — People's Courage — to address forced labour and violence against the most excluded social groups in India. Twenty-five years later, they have documented outcomes that shift what we understand to be possible through organised community action.

Who They Are

Jan Sahas is a community and survivor-centric organisation that works on the elimination of sexual violence and forced labour. They work with the most excluded social groups — communities facing gender and caste-based violence — through a framework of Prevention, Response, Rehabilitation, and Systemic Reform. This framework reflects an organisational understanding that individual case resolution, without addressing the systems that produce violations, achieves little at scale.

They work in multiple states with intensive presence in Madhya Pradesh, and their reach extends to over 14,000 villages across India. Their current scale: more than 19,68,000 women and girls across all programme areas.

The Manual Scavenging Numbers

Jan Sahas has liberated and rehabilitated 46,547 women from the practice of manual scavenging. This figure — nearly 47,000 individual women — represents people who were cleaning human excreta with bare hands and no protective equipment, in communities where this was the only labour available to their caste, and who with Jan Sahas's support have accessed economic alternatives, legal recognition as manual scavenging survivors (with associated government compensation), and pathways out.

The rehabilitation work is not simply rescue. Jan Sahas provides skill development and livelihood promotion, mental health support, early childhood care and education for children, and land and property rights assistance. The comprehensive rehabilitation framework reflects a specific understanding: women who have been trapped in manual scavenging face multiple, simultaneous deprivations. Addressing only the economic dimension and ignoring the psychological and social dimensions produces incomplete outcomes.

The Trafficking and Sexual Violence Numbers

Jan Sahas has rescued and rehabilitated 7,256 women from forced labour and trafficking for sexual exploitation — women from the most remote and deprived tribal regions who were trafficked into conditions of extreme violence. They have enabled 6,200 girls to leave caste-based commercial sexual exploitation and helped prevent 5,400 girls from entering sex slavery.

These figures are not comfortable reading. They document the scale of violence that is directed at the most excluded communities in India — tribal women and Dalit girls — that is simultaneously the least visible and the most severe. Jan Sahas's contribution is not only rescuing individuals from these situations but generating the documentation that makes invisible violence visible.

The Dignity March (Garima Yatra)

Jan Sahas's most significant advocacy achievement is the Garima Yatra — Dignity March — which reached 24 states, engaged 25,000 survivors, 2,000 stakeholders, 200 policymakers, and 2,000 lawyers. The Yatra is not primarily a public awareness event. It is a survivor-led policy advocacy mechanism: women who have experienced manual scavenging and trafficking travel across India to speak directly with policymakers about the legal and administrative failures that allow these practices to persist despite their illegality.

The Yatra has produced measurable policy engagement. The combination of survivor testimony, legal analysis, and policymaker convening has influenced how states implement the Manual Scavenging Abolition Act and how the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act is applied in caste-violence contexts.

Safe Migration and the 27,000 Workers

Jan Sahas's safe migration programme has helped over 27,000 workers and their families access direct cash or cash-equivalent benefits — entitlements they would not

have known about or been able to access without Jan Sahas's intervention. The Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC), anchored by Jan Sahas in 2020, aims to enable equitable recovery for approximately 10 million workers and their families across 100 districts and cities.

For Odisha's civil society, Jan Sahas's safe migration model is directly relevant: Odisha is one of India's primary migrant-sending states, with Bolangir, Kalahandi, and Nuapada sending hundreds of thousands of workers annually to brick kilns and construction sites in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat. The structural vulnerabilities that Jan Sahas addresses in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are identical to those faced by Odisha's tribal migrant workers.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: jansahas.org | **For partnerships:** contact via website | Dewas, Madhya Pradesh (registered)

Key evidence:

- Jan Sahas website: jansahas.org/about-us — programme history and documented outcomes
- MIT Solve profile: documented 46,547 manual scavenging survivors and 7,256 trafficking rescues
- Global Fund to End Modern Slavery: Jan Sahas case study — 27,000 workers and entitlement access
- LinkedIn: Jan Sahas — 6,800 bonded labour rescues and 1.5 million migrant workers tracked

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