

## Statement of Ashif Shaikh, Jan Sahas, India

Your excellences,  
Distinguished Board Member of the UN Slavery Funds,  
Colleagues and Friends,

It is a personal honour and professional privilege for me to be here with you today, and share my story and experience working with victims of caste based slavery.

In 2000, along with four other young Dalit leaders from Dewas, Madhya Pradesh (central India), we came together and founded, Jan Sahas to oppose child labour practices and raise occupational safety concern when four Dalits died in illegal fireworks factory in Ujjain district. Due to the effort of Jan Sahas the families of the deceased received some monetary compensation and the factory was closed. Shortly thereafter, we took part in a study on “Untouchability” conducted by the National Human Rights Commission to determine how widespread the practice was in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh.

The finding of the study revealed that:

- *Untouchability* practiced in all the villages of Dewas district—47 villages, and 12 cities
- Hierarchy among *Untouchables*, leaving manual scavengers at the very bottom rank of the caste hierarchy—the *Untouchable among the Untouchables*
- *Untouchability* practiced in both Hindu and Muslim communities

These findings, demonstrated the widespread practice of manual scavenging in Dewas, and that both Hindu and Muslim Dalit communities were affected by this slavery-like practice.

Jan Sahas estimated that manual scavenging still enslaves approximately 1.2 million across India and we strongly believe that the practice of manual scavenging is not lesser than a slavery (forced) and henceforth we advocate for a liberation from inhuman slavery and their dignified rehabilitation. In the last sixteen years since its formation in 2000, the Jan Sahas and Garima Abhiyan (Campaign for Dignity) has “liberated” 24000 manual scavengers (18504) women, (1200) men and (4296) children.

Manual scavengers (95% women) manually clean the dry latrines, community defecation places used by others in the village/semi-urban areas. They lift and carry heavy baskets to designated sites of disposal. Children of manual scavengers are particularly vulnerable. **According to the Institute of Objective Studies, Kolkata, 20% of children from these communities (below 15 years old) forced to do this inhuman practice and 70% of them are girls.** They are not only forced into the practice, but also face multiple situations of vulnerabilities and denial of rights and justice within all spheres of life. Our work with children has led to the **liberation and rehabilitation of 4296 children. In addition, practices of Untouchability and discrimination in educational set ups were eliminated in 316 Places.**

We have been closely working with these women groups providing them socio-political and technical support especially training on legislations, as well as children support groups on social security and rehabilitation schemes. Jan Sahas and RGA was also actively involved in policy level advocacy through our 'Public Hearing in 2010' and 'knock the Door Campaign 2013' we were able to modify then the Educational scholarship Scheme for children of manual scavenging community and also the financially supported rehabilitation package.

In year 2013, we organized a 10,000 KM "Maila Mukti Yatra", a national Peoples March for total elimination of the practice that was led by liberated women manual scavengers and leaders of Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan. Our women leaders marched through 200 districts of 21 states of India. The former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navi Pillay<sup>1</sup> welcomed this strong movement and expressed her solidarity. European Parliament<sup>2</sup> also referred this March in their resolution on Caste Discrimination in India. After this March, Government Ministries and UN agencies in India initiated various programs for rehabilitations of manual scavengers. Government of India passed the new legislation<sup>3</sup> in September 2013 for eradication of this practice and rehabilitation of survivors. Though the recent positive developments in last one decade are crucial however many things remain to be done to build a slavery free society.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12959&LangID=E>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=%2F%2FEP%2F%2FNONGML+MOTION+P7-RC-2012-0574+0+DOC+PDF+V0%2F%2FEN>

<sup>3</sup> The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013