2010 Harriet Tubman Award Winner

JEEVIKA | India

The farm fields of India are one of the world's worst spots for slavery. Trapped by phony debts, entire families have been enslaved for generations.

JEEVIKA is a group that helps slaves understand their rights and free themselves from bondage. By standing together against powerful land owners and complacent public officials, slaves discover that freedom is possible.

Harriet Tubman Award
iis given to a community-based organization that is demonstrating how slavery can be dismantled and destroyed. Named after an escaped American slave who guided dozens of other slaves to freedom on dangerous missions that utilized the network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad.

Kiran Kamal (left) and Shivanna Puttaiah (center) of JEEVIKA help this slave put his fingerprint on legal papers to secure his claim to freedom.

Shivanna was enslaved for 14 years before coming to freedom and joining JEEVIKA to help others.

Centuries of Dehumanizing Slavery

JEEVIKA is a courageous grassroots organization that works in rural villages outside Bangalore, where the Dalits or "untouchable" caste has endured centuries of poverty and humiliation.

Many Dalits are trapped in debt bondage slavery. They've borrowed small amounts from wealthy farm owners to pay for family emergencies. They've been cheated when exploitative landlords claim the debts have never been repaid.

Families are forced to continue working off the loans, sometimes for generations. JEEVIKA estimates up to 500,000 people are in debt slavery in the Indian state of Karnataka.

"This is a heinous system," says Shivanna Puttaiah. He grew up in slavery, yanked from school at age 12 to work off the family debt as a farm hand. "When I was a bonded laborer, I was treated like an animal. When I see bonded laborers, I have fire in my heart," he says.

Shivanna is now free, after learning from JEEVIKA that bonded labor was outlawed in India more that 30 years ago. He slipped away from the farm and filed court papers to win his freedom. Now, he's a leader in JEEVIKA and shows others how to follow his example.

"My parents gave me birth," Shivanna says, "but it is JEEVIKA which gave me a way to lead an independent life. That is why I feel JEEVIKA is just as my father."

An Holistic Approach

JEEVIKA was founded by a former Jesuit priest, Kiran Kamal Prasad, who has vowed to improve life for the marginalized and poor.

“I dream for a world and people living in total equality, freedom and fellowship,” Kiran says.

The name “JEEVIKA” is short for Jeeta Vimukti Karnataka, which Kiran loosely translates as meaning “life free from bondage.”

To achieve that goal, the group’s organizers move on many fronts.

- They run remedial classrooms so child slavery survivors can catch-up on their education.
- They organize micro-credit self-help groups so women can build financial security.
- They stage street theater performances to inform villagers of their rights to fair wages, housing, food, water, land, schooling and local self-governance.
- They even go door-to-door to alert slaves that the law is actually on their side, and then help them file court papers to assert their freedom from debt and slavery.

The goal, says Kiran, is “inculcating in them a sense of freedom and purpose in their lives, and making them resolve to come out of bondage. We motivate them. We encourage them to come out of slavery and be independent, to support their families in a dignified way.”

JEEVIKA has filed court papers for nearly 20,000 bonded labor slaves in the state of Karnataka, and has created an action plan for the government to free them. It has inspired those in bondage to stand together for strength.

“As individuals it is difficult to get our rights,” Kiran says, “but in groups and as a union, we can easily get our rights.”

Several former slaves have run for government office, and they’ve won!

The Importance of Freedom

Shivanna still works on farms, but his life as a free man is dramatically better. “I’m happy to work in my fields because what I earn will actually come back to me,” he says. “I earn this money on my own work.”

He’s a talented actor and singer, who uses his gifts to inspire fellow Dalits to take back control of their lives—just as he has done. He feels that with so many Indians still in slavery, his nation cannot truly prosper.

“In the cradle of bonded slavery,” he sings, “on the mattress of thorns, why are you still sleeping? Arise and get up! Enough of your sleep! To the people who are arrogant, never bend your head. Arise and get up, wipe out bonded slavery!”