



2016 Free the Slaves Freedom Award: Innovative Group Uses Radio Show to Fight Bonded Labor Slavery

In rural India, slavery is woven into the fabric of economic and social structures. Unwitting villagers are forced to work off loans to wealthy farmers that they can never repay. They do not know their rights. Generation after generation is trapped in illegal debt and bonded labor.

'Samarthan' Means Support

[Samarthan](#), a leading grassroots organization in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, fights poverty and bonded-labor slavery by strengthening local communities. Their work to bolster civil society is a crucial aspect of socio-economic development, securing the rights of oppressed people, and establishing sustainable structures of freedom. Samarthan, the Free the Slaves 2016 Freedom Award winner, brings a message of hope to vulnerable villagers.

An Innovative Solution to Bonded Labor

In 2014, Samarthan was an implementing partner of [BBC Media Action's](#) pioneering outreach project: an original radio show on ending the vicious practice of bonded labor and promoting human rights called [Majboor Kisko Bola!](#)—"Who Are You Calling Helpless!"

Samarthan's main mission is to empower people with essential knowledge and to support the creation of citizen's groups. The group's method of organizing people into "listeners' villages" is a scalable way to address and prevent bonded labor.



Samarthan Is Listening

In remote communities of the state of Madhya Pradesh, there is often no radio, Internet, or television. Trained Samarthan organizers travel to small villages across high-migration districts to play the weekly radio program *MKB!* and to moderate discussions in the most marginalized, isolated communities.

Facilitators act as crucial connections between anti-slavery initiatives and the local community. They provide support on the ground to help villagers negotiate their legal rights.



In tiny communities on the outskirts of the Panna tiger reserve, villagers gather to listen on a battery-powered radio. With Samarthan's constant support, listeners come together to hear facts, in simple Hindi, on bonded labor, human trafficking, workers' welfare, relevant legal protections, confront poverty, and safe migration practices.

Once defenseless, villagers now recognize the risks posed by situations they face every day.

Each 30-minute episode begins with a bonded laborer telling a personal story. Over 52 original *MKB!* programs, villagers learn about self-help groups and how to organize themselves into a force for freedom: by collecting a small amount of money from each member and distributing the funds to whoever is in the most need that month.

"Samarthan's approach works. It provides essential information about workers' rights and bonded labor. It has a very broad reach. It is a very cost-effective intervention."

Alex Woods, FTS South Asia Regional Programs Manager

Samarthan's work is often the only way to reach people in "media-dark," susceptible places. Their outreach fosters increased awareness and a vital understanding within high-risk communities about labor rights and the vulnerabilities that lead to slavery.

Samarthan Gives People a Voice

Founded in 1995, Samarthan directly confronts impediments to freedom at the local level. They bring the path to freedom to the people's doorsteps and embolden villagers to stand up for their rights.

Samarthan's dedicated efforts were fundamental to the success of the radio project. *MKB!* listeners are given a mobile number to call with queries and reports of distress. Villager response is vast and inspiring. Many callers ask for concrete solutions to help them fight for their freedom. During the year-long initiative, more than 200 bonded laborers were rescued.



The BBC effort officially ended in 2014, but Samarthan continues to take *MKB!* to villages in Madhya Pradesh to maximize its impact. The group mobilized a follow-up initiative called Listeners' Dialogues, or *Shrota Samvads*, in target districts. These meetings let people present their grievances directly to local government and police. More than 3,000 grievance redressals have been filed. Newly aware, educated listeners have also filed more than 5,000 applications to government authorities demanding entitlements.

The 2016 Free the Slaves Freedom Award is made possible by a grant from the Pegasus Freedom Foundation.

Samarthan Case Study: From Slavery to Freedom



In Prem Bai's village of Koya Gunjapur, people struggle to afford food and water. They borrow money from rich farmers. When they can't pay the interest, they are forced to work in slavery.

"My parents died working to pay off these loans," Prem says. "And we were still stuck with them. It felt like our children would be stuck, too."

Prem learned about self-help groups from *MKB!* Inspired, her village formed its own. "Everyone who had taken money paid off their loans," she says. "I opened a little shop. I now have an income. There are other villagers who are still troubled. I hope that by listening to my story, they too will become free like I am." [Watch Prem's story.](#)



About the Freedom Awards: Free the Slaves periodically honors survivors, activists and organizations that demonstrate outstanding courage, innovation and dedication in the fight to end slavery. The Freedom Awards celebrate anti-slavery heroes and innovators from around the globe by showcasing what some of the best anti-slavery work in the world looks like—and by supporting that work financially. Award winners are setting the standard for successful, sustainable anti-slavery initiatives. By generating public recognition for outstanding achievement, the awards offer inspiration and boost resources for the movement. The awards remind us that slavery still exists—and that it can be overcome. [See previous winners.](#) The 2016 Freedom Award is made possible by a grant from the Pegasus Freedom Foundation.



About Free the Slaves: Free the Slaves liberates slaves, helps them rebuild their lives, and transforms the social, economic and political conditions that allow slavery to persist. We support community-driven interventions in partnership with local groups that help people to sustainable freedom and dismantle a region's system of slavery. We convince governments, international development organizations and businesses to implement key changes required for global eradication. We document and disseminate leading-edge practices to help the anti-slavery movement work more effectively. We raise awareness and promote action by opinion leaders, decision makers and the public. Free the Slaves is showing the world that ending slavery is possible.

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