

[I was a contributing writer on this collaborative story]

At just over five feet tall, Urmila is tiny. But on April 10th, 2014 this 75-year-old former slave stood tall as a first-time voter in the world's largest democracy. Her story was so compelling that it propelled her to the front page of the May 1st edition of one of the nation's largest newspapers, *The Hindu*.

Despite her age, Urmila's narrow shoulders are still straight, her smile improbably quick and her spirit robust. It's hard to picture this diminutive grandmother pressed down under the 50 lbs or more of bricks she was forced to carry on her head, load after load, from early morning throughout the day and into the night, until she was finally allowed a few hours of sleep sometime after midnight. That was her daily life as a forced labor slave in a brick factory in India, deprived of her constitutional rights and freedoms.

For some people, it is a short walk to the polls. For Urmila, it was a journey of decades, over a road strewn with poverty, oppression and prejudice.

How Urmila Became a Modern-day Slave

During a recent interview she sits next to her daughter, who, along with Urmila and other family members, was rescued by IJM and their partner organization Jan Jagriti Kendra (JJK) in early 2013. Her daughter, Maduri, is swathed in a sari of pale blue with the red streak of *sindhoor* in the part of her hair that declares her a married woman. She watches her mother with quiet dignity, a shy smile flickering across her lips from time to time.

Urmila's weathered hands, accustomed to work, are restless. She gathers her plum-colored sari over her hair then traces delicate patterns on the table in front of her as she shares her story.

Urmila was a young mother of three daughters when her husband passed away decades ago. Suddenly on her own and desperate to provide for her girls, Urmila accepted a small loan from a trafficker looking for workers and agreed to pay it off through her labor. The loan, called an "advance," was actually a trick – one that would trap the family as modern-day slaves.

Traffickers prey on vulnerable people just like Urmila, offering a lump sum of money and a promise of work and wages to pay back that loan. IJM has met scores of people who have been trapped in this system of forced labor slavery for decades. Entire families are often forced to work together to pay back a single loan, and children inherit their parents' bondage. The first loan Urmila took out years ago was for about \$40. Over the years, she and her daughters moved between different factories, accepting loans offered by other owners who promised a better life. The promise never held true, and Urmila was trapped in a cruel cycle that is real for millions of vulnerable, impoverished people in India.

Rescued from Brutality

In late 2012, Urmila and her family, including two daughters and their husbands and eight of her 14 grandchildren, became forced labor slaves in a brick factory. They were familiar with hard work, but could never have anticipated the inhumane conditions that awaited them. The slaves

received only a one-hour break during their 17 to 18-hour days of labor. There were constant quotas to be met, and the constant threat of abuse.

Despite her age, Urmila was forced to carry bricks stacked ten to twelve high on her head, without stopping. Nor did the owners spare the youngest victims. Helplessly, Urmila watched her grandchildren, including her kindergarten-aged grandchild, put to work turning bricks all day to dry in the hot sun.

Urmila's family had been at the factory for about three months when another slave escaped and managed to find a local NGO that he hoped could help. The NGO is named JJK and is one of IJM's partners. (IJM trains and partners with organizations in six states throughout India to document slavery and present that evidence to authorities, then helps those officials rescue slaves and hold the criminals accountable.)

When IJM and JJK brought evidence of forced labor slavery to the government officials in the district, they responded quickly. [On January 8, 2013, 149 people were rescued from the brick kiln, including Urmila and her family.](#) The authorities interviewed each family and issued release certificates to Urmila and over 100 others, legally canceling any debt or other obligation to the owner and declaring them *free*. The certificates also entitle them to government rehabilitation benefits and programs to help rebuild their lives. Urmila and her family returned to their home state of Orissa. There, social workers from JJK and another IJM partner organization, Aid et Action, offered long-term support to help the families recover and remain free after rescue.

No More Pressure

Asked about the changes in her life now that she's free, Urmila speaks of the long work days in the brick kiln and constant pressure to meet quotas. "Now I can eat when I like, and sleep when I like... there is no more pressure," she says.

A question about her family sparks Urmila's joyful grin that wrinkles her nose and crinkles her eyes.

"I have 3 daughters and 14 grandchildren," she says. "Now I get to see them. They are the joy of my life! Even if I don't eat, they fill my hunger." Now the family is working day jobs in agriculture and Urmila's grandchildren are attending school.

"You're Too Old."

While working with the families in their home village, a dedicated JJK social worker realized that several of the rescued laborers did not have voter ID cards—and India's national elections began this April.

Since India gained independence in 1947, the right of every citizen to vote has been a pillar of the democratic process. But millions, like Urmila, are deprived of this right because they are trapped in forced labor slavery. And for Urmila there was more at stake than her right to vote; under Indian law, she was entitled to a widow's pension and an elderly pension. But without a voter ID card, she could not prove who she actually was.

The social worker set about helping Urmila and her family members apply for voter ID cards. But when she applied, Urmila received a shocking response from one of the staff at the local office: "You're too old...why do you want to vote?" Nevertheless, Urmila persevered.

National elections are held every five years in India, and her voter ID card arrived in time. On April 10, 2014, Urmila went to the polls for the first time in her 75 years.

At first, the electronic voting machine looked intimidating, but when she pressed the button and cast her vote, she was flooded with a sense of empowerment. Because of her age and circumstances, Urmila's vote carries a little extra significance; it represents a citizen emerging from a lifetime of oppression to take her rightful place in the democratic process.

The Future of Her Country

Urmila makes it clear that her vote was her own—she considered the candidates and decided for herself, without pressure from anyone else.

When asked what qualities are important in a leader, she hesitates, appearing a little overwhelmed at the gravity of the question. Then her eyes light and she surprises the social worker sitting beside her—the man from JJK who has accompanied her and her family throughout this journey and helped them obtain their voter IDs; grasping his arm, she says, “Someone like him!”

Urmila goes on to explain that they have witnessed his compassion and leadership first-hand as he has helped them on their road to freedom. As the social worker looks away in bashful embarrassment, Urmila says “He is an example to look up to in a leader!”

And what does Urmila want for the future of her country?

She and her daughter confer thoughtfully, and Madhuri speaks for both of them. “A country that is peaceful,” she says.

Then she adds that she and her family know they were not the only bonded laborers in the country. Ultimately, they hope for relief for others who are suffering as they once were.