

India: Charting New Routes - Five Rallies, 100 Women and Conversations for Peace

Saturday 13 October 2018, by [MURALIDHARAN Kavitha](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2018).

As part of the 'Baatein Aman Ki' campaign, the activists will be travelling to various parts of India to sensitise people about violence, and to spark conversations on peace and social justice.

Chennai: From five different locations across the country today, approximately 100 women will set out on different buses on in different state to hold conversations for peace.

Called 'Baatein Aman Ki', the rallies start from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and Delhi and culminate in the capital on October 13. The five yatras will have representatives from ten states and are to include women from every strata of society.

The coordinators hope that the rallies will enable the women travelling across the country to hold dialogues about issues affecting India today.

"It is the prevailing socio-political situation in India that forced us to do these rallies" says Annie Raja, one of the coordinators. "The issues of intolerance, mob lynching, increasing violence against women, farmer suicides are affecting our country more than ever. We thought as women - constituting half the population - it is our duty and responsibility to safeguard the constitution. We need to talk to each other and we hope the rallies will help us do that."

Over 500 women's organisations are set to participate in the rallies. This, G. Manjula, the state deputy secretary of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in Tamil Nadu, thinks is success in itself. "We live in an era where violence is perpetrated by those who had to uphold and protect the laws of this land. We just cannot remain silent any longer about this. The entire idea about holding different rallies from different parts of the country is to get as many voices across as possible. We need to strengthen these voices in face of increasing threats to peace," she says.

Kavitha Gajendran of the People's Platform Against Fascism will be part of a rally that passes through Jorhat-Delhi route.

A poster for 'Baatein Aman Ki'.

"I am really excited about it. I am participating on behalf of People's Platform Against Fascism, which is one of the movements that has joined hands in the 'Baatein Aman Ki' campaign to initiate peace conversations across India. I am glad that I was able to pick the Jorhat-Delhi route, covering villages, towns and cities through Assam, West Bengal and Bihar. Travelling and meeting people of the Northeast, which I reckon, has taken up huge political and economic down surge for decades, would be a unique experience. I will be meeting women from other parts of the country merging as a team at Jorhat to travel further. This experience would be as much diverse as the different shades of culture, each of us will be carrying and exchanging along. And I hope to share a dash of Dravidam with the ever-strong anti-fascism rebellion of Tamil Nadu" she says.

In Tamil Nadu, one of the starting points for the rally, a group of young women have come together to make the best of it. So if M. Shreela of Socialist Workers Centre came up with the idea of holding placards that 'promote peace and resist fascism', Selvi of Manidhi - a feminist movement based out of Tamil Nadu, did an awareness campaign on streets among women by distributing pamphlets.

"I was hugely inspired by the #MeToo movement and Gurmehar Kaur's campaign against ABVP. The way they hold the placards to convey a message was in itself a very powerful act and we wanted to do that in this rally too. This campaign on social media really struck a chord" says Shreela.

Selvi says the responses from common women were strikingly different this time. "At Manidhi, we have tried to talk to common women on issues affecting the country at large and women at particular often. But this time, when we did so as part of campaign for 'Baatein Aman Ki' rallies, the responses were strikingly different. This time when we went to houses, we were welcomed and people struck up real conversations about what we are doing. The women did not try to defend an act of violence by pointing to another. The anger was palpable. At a railway station, a young girl wanted to know if such rallies would end the violence against women. I see it as a very positive thing because people are finally angry about what is happening around them."

A series of events, including plays and performances, have been planned around the arrival of the Kanyakumari rally in Chennai on September 25.

Much as it has enthused the volunteers, the programme itself has also witnessed its fair share of problems. 'Apparently under pressure', UN Women, which had promised to sponsor travel for all five rallies, withdrew its support at the last moment. After initially promising vehicles for the rallies, UN Women told the organisers a week before that they could sponsor only three due to a fund crunch. At the last minute, they withdrew support for the other two too.

"We have every reason to believe that they have withdrawn under pressure. And it only strengthens our resolve. The government is evidently afraid of hearing the voices of the women. We knew there would be repercussions when women set out to talk. They (the government) knew it would have an impact in 2019 elections. For us, this only shows we are on the right direction."

Kavitha Muralidharan

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