

## **Remembering Devi, Leader of the Mathamma Movement**

Devi, the leader of the Mathamma\* Liberation Movement in Tamil Nadu, died on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2013. It is a big loss to the movement. She was a very strong leader and a good singer. At many public meetings, she spoke on behalf of all women who are called Mathamma.

When she was three months old, Devi was kept in the Mathamma temple and dedicated to the goddess by her parents, who believed that her health problems would be cured. She could not open her eyes or drink milk. After being kept in the temple, she got better. She was then married to the goddess and became public property.

Devi was forced to dance during temple festivals. She once had to dance for five consecutive days, which caused her serious leg pain. Anything she earned from dancing was taken away by her family.

Devi built a small hut with the support of the movement, but later her son expelled her from the house, so she stayed at the movement center. After joining the movement, she stopped dancing and mobilized more than 60 Mathammas into the movement. She went around different villages and convinced people to stop such practice. When the Mathamma movement was officially registered, she became its president.

She travelled to Mumbai and Hyderabad to participate in social forums, including a sex workers forum in Calcutta. Her village people did not like her working for the Mathamma movement, and strongly opposed it. In 2006, Devi was encouraged by the movement to run for election. As a powerful good orator as well as a good singer, she was respected by all people in the villages.

She changed her name to Devi from Mathamma. She met many government officers to get benefits for the Mathammas. Before her death, she removed the Mathamma thali (the marriage symbol to the Goddess), and threw it back at the Goddess to whom she had been married. She had so much grief, pain, and anger as a leader. She bravely confronted villagers trying to dedicate their children to Mathamma and force them into sex work as public property.

Devi will be remembered as a liberated woman who fought against the religious practice. Devi is with us in Spirit. She brought about a social change in her village by stopping the practice of dedicating children to Mathamma.

(Burnad Fatima, Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement)

\* Hindu religious practices observed in some parts of Tamil Nadu, India.  
Girls with ailments are dedicated to the Goddess Mathamma to be cured.  
After they are cured, they are forced to "marry" the deity.