

## THE STORY OF IQBAL MASIH



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Born on 1 January 1983, Iqbal Masih was a child laborer and activist who hailed from an impoverished Catholic Christian family in rural Pakistan. He was brought up in Muridke city. In 1986, Iqbal's father required funds to finance the wedding of one of his sons but lacked access to monetary aid, leading him to borrow a loan of 600 rupees from a local contractor (*thekedar*) by using his children as collateral, the only assets he possessed. The debt had to be repaid by the then four-year-old Iqbal, who became a bonded labourer in one of Pakistan's severely exploitative carpet manufacturing factories, as undisclosed expenses and interests were added to the initial amount. This, however, was not an uncommon occurrence. Iqbal Masih was one of 7.5 million bonded child laborers in Pakistan, most of whom were employed under hazardous conditions within carpet factories or brick kilns. This institution of modern slavery was established by the exploitation of marginalized Pakistani Christians in Punjab and Sindh, who were often illiterate and unable to protest against their circumstances. The informal nature of the lending practice (*peshgi*) allowed lenders to control and manipulate the terms of the contract, confining entire families across multiple generations in bonded labor.

For the next six years, Iqbal spent 14 hours a day chained to his carpet loom, earning just 1 rupee per day. Expenses encompassed the cost of a year of training (when he remained unpaid), tools, food, and fines for possible mistakes. Due to the high interest rate on the loan, the debt had ballooned to 13,000 rupees by the time he had turned 10 years old. Due to the long hours of labor, his spine had constricted while his lungs became infected by inhaling noxious carpet dust. As he frequently attempted to escape, Iqbal was subjected to severe physical abuse and rarely fed. When he died at the age of 12, he weighed only as much as a 6 year old.

"Today, you are free and I am free too."  
-(Late) Iqbal Masih, a child laborer-  
activist, 1994



Iqbal escaped for the first time when he was 10, but was brought back to his employer (a man called Ashad) by the Police. Even as bonded labor was declared illegal by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the officers returned him due to the incentive of gaining a "finder's fee" for catching escaping bonded laborers. An entire institutional and social nexus controlled and legitimized this abhorrent cycle of exploitation, one that specifically targeted young children. Iqbal succeeded during his second attempt and managed to contact Ehsan Ulla Khan, the founder of the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF), who eventually managed to gain Iqbal's freedom.

For the next two years, Iqbal campaigned against child labor and bonded exploitation, freeing over 3,000 enslaved children. Iqbal also traveled the world, testifying before the International Labor Organization in Europe and visiting multiple countries to share his story, presenting the cruel realities of marginalized children of Pakistan. Iqbal's voice beckoned the world to turn their attention to children trapped by child labor with his efforts garnering him international attention and coverage. Inspired by Masih's visit in 1994, 325 pupils of the Broad Meadows Primary School of Quincy sent over 600 photocopied letters with three hundred signatures in each one, demanding the then Prime Minister of Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto), two senators of the state (John Kerrey and Edward Kennedy) and the managers of local carpet shops, to curb bonded child labor in Pakistan. He also influenced the renowned afterschool program 'Operation: Day's Work' (ODW), led by teacher Ronald Adams and received the Reebok Youth in Action Award by the Reebok's Human Rights Foundation. Brandeis University in Boston had even promised Iqbal - who wished to be a lawyer and liberate bonded laborers - a full scholarship upon the completion of his schooling in Pakistan.

However, tragedy was soon to strike. On 16th April, 1995, Iqbal was shot dead by members of a gang responsible for killing those who had escaped carpet factories when he was visiting his hometown for Easter Sunday. Only 12 years old, Iqbal died instantly due to hemorrhaging from 120 pellet wounds to his back and legs. His funeral was attended by approximately 800 mourners. In the week that followed, a protest of 3,000 people - half of whom were younger than 12 - took place in Lahore, demanding an end to child labor. Simultaneous processions were carried out in other countries and cities, including New Delhi. Following the incident, sales of Pakistani carpets dropped dramatically as countries demanded for an immediate intervention by the government. In response, economic elites in Pakistan denied the use of child labor and harassed workers for the BLLF with the help of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). To this day, his killers have not been brought to justice.

Iqbal's cause inspired the creation of several organizations, including We Charity, The Iqbal Masih Shaheed Children Foundation, and GoodWeave International and others. Sixteenth April was declared as '*International Day Against Child Slavery*' in Spain and South America in 1996. In Italy, the Istituto Comprensivo Statale "Iqbal Masih" was named after him in 1998. Iqbal was awarded the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child posthumously in 2000 and the United States Congress founded the annual Iqbal Masih Award for the Elimination of Child Labor in his honor in 2009. Iqbal Masih's story is one of suffering, perseverance and determination, inspiring millions across the world - to fight, to lead and to live a life of quality and substance.

