

Iqbal Masih Pakistan (1982-1995)

When you see a fine rug like the one in the picture at the bottom of this page, how do you imagine it is made? Do you imagine a man or woman sitting at a loom or perhaps a machine in a factory? If you do, you may be wrong. A child, working 12-14 hours a day, may well have spent 4 to 6 months tying the thousands of knots in that rug.

Iqbal's rug-making career, like that of many child rug-makers, began when he was called in one day from play and sent by his parents to work off a loan (about \$12 US) they got from a rug-maker in order to pay for their elder son's wedding. He was four years old. Unlike most such children, he got free at the age of 10, and started campaigning against forced labor by children to pay off debts. By the age of 13, he was dead, but not before his message reached the hearts of a great many people.



Iqbal Masih

From *ChildrensWorld* website:

<http://www.childrensworld.org/page.html?cid=407>

A Child Rug-maker's Life

Iqbal first had to work an entire year as an apprentice with no pay. After that he was "paid" about 20 cents US per day. (This is in quotes because he didn't receive the money. It was subtracted by the rug-maker, his employer, from what he owed.) However, his employer also added to what he owed the cost of his food and the tools he used to do his work. If Iqbal made mistakes, he was fined, and this, as well as interest, was added to the loan balance.

Iqbal's family also borrowed more money. So, as Iqbal got older, the debt grew. It looked like he would be like many children who never escape, who remain in debt-bondage for life. By the time he was 10 years old, the loan, had grown to about \$260 US.



**A Hand-Knotted
Pakistani Rug**

Iqbal and the other children worked squatting on wooden bench in front of the looms. They worked 6 days a week, 14 or so hours a day, in rooms with poor light. They were not allowed to talk to each other, because this would mean they weren't concentrating on the work.

The rooms had no ventilation and were extremely hot because open windows were considered bad for the carpets. The air was full of particles from the fibers they worked with. Their work requires skill and care in order to tie the knots in the right places.

It requires small hands, and that is one reason why the rug-makers like to use children for this work.

A 4 by 6 foot carpet like the one shown has more than a million knots and takes an experienced weaver 4-6 months to complete. Its retail value in the United States is \$2000— more some say than the worker could earn in 10 years. (Silver, 1996)

Bonded labor is not unique to Pakistan, nor does it involve only children, and it is found in many types of manufacturing besides rug-making. I chose to write about Iqbal because, as you will see, I admire his courage. He happened to be Pakistani, a rug-maker, and a child.

Iqbal Gets Free

Iqbal first heard of the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF) in 1992, when he was ten years old. This organization was founded by a Pakistani named Ehsan Ulla Khan in order to help children like Iqbal. Iqbal learned that the system of bonded labor he was working under had been outlawed in Pakistan in 1992, and that the government had cancelled all outstanding loans to these employers. The BLLF helped him get the papers he needed to force his employer to free him.

Like many rug-making children, after years of bending forward to tie knots and breathing air filled with dust from rug-making materials, Iqbal was sick and looked frail. He was about half the height he should have been at age 10, less than four feet tall, and weighed only 60 pounds. His body had stopped growing. He also suffered from arthritis, and kidney and breathing problems; and his spine was permanently curved. His hands were covered with small scars from cuts made by rug-making tools.

Nevertheless, Iqbal jumped at the chance to study at a BLLF school in Lahore, not far from his home village of Muridke. He studied hard, and finished 4 years of work in just 2 years.

Iqbal Becomes An Activist



Children Making Rugs
From www.socialedge.org

Iqbal became an activist against child labor. He repeatedly took risks, pretending to be a factory worker so he could get information from the children working there. He helped free 3000 children from bondage in textile and brick factories, tanneries, and steelworks. (Sillers, 1996, p. 90).

He became a very good speaker, and began to speak at BLLF meetings about his experiences; then he began speaking to international visitors – journalists and activists.

" I had to sit in one position for many hours. I couldn't even move during work. We weren't allowed many days off. Even sick children were not allowed to rest. They also hung children upside down until they got sicker. Children were beaten. If children fell asleep or were slow in their work, they would be punished by being beaten or starved. If we were slow we often got lashed on our backs and heads... If we tried to escape, we were threatened with being thrown in boiling oil. We were too frightened to help each other. "

--**Iqbal Masih**

--From: Kucin, 1988

He eventually started going to where he was invited outside Pakistan. For example, he went to Sweden, where he was honored by the International Labor Organization.

In 1994, he was invited to the United States to receive the Reebok Human Rights Youth Action Award. While he was there, he visited Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, Massachusetts for a day. This visit was to have far-reaching consequences, as we shall see.

Soon after his visit to the US, Iqbal was murdered. There is disagreement about exactly how and why. One story is that a local farmer shot at him and the friends who were with him because he was drunk and angry at something they did, and that killing Iqbal was not his intention. Many people don't believe this story. They think leaders of the carpet industry had him murdered because of his work to free their workers. About 800 people attended his funeral.



Iqbal Masih

<http://childrensworld.org/page.html?pid=11>

Iqbal Fires Up 7th Graders

Broad Meadows Middle School was chosen for Iqbal's visit because its students were Iqbal's age, and because they had done active work for human rights at the local and international level. He spent a day there. He met with some classes and spoke about his experiences. He had lunch with them. The kids started on their own to bring him gifts like gum, stickers, t-shirts, baseball cards, food, bracelets, and pictures. Then a group of them got together and bought him a backpack to put it all in.

In his talks to them, after telling his experiences, Iqbal asked the kids to try to educate people and to get people to stop buying rugs that are made using children as workers. One of the students who was there said in an interview 3 years later: "Here was this kid talking kid to kid who felt so much toward what he was doing, he was like burning fire, you can't just say 'Oh, okay, great. Good job. Bye-bye now.' You just look at him and say, 'I want to help.'" (Amanda, New Design Interview, 1997).

In the same interview, Amy said, "I just felt it was very wrong that children are being sold into slavery. So I joined the campaign. And then after Iqbal died, I was just so angry at it that it gave me an urge to do more." (Amy, New Design Interview, 1997)

These 7th-graders first organized an educational campaign. They got kids to write thousands of letters to anyone they thought could help change things--senators, congressmen and women, government officials. They called local carpet stores asking if the rugs they were selling were made with child labor. The store owners got so angry that they even called the school and demanded that the school stop the kids from asking questions (which the school refused to do). They asked their city government what their policy was on buying carpets. They did all of this on their own time, before or after school. (It would take several pages to everything they did. If you want to know details, please see: New Design Interview, 1997).

A School For Iqbal Campaign

Then the students decided to build a school in Pakistan in Iqbal's memory. They called the project "A School for Iqbal," and they organized it themselves¹. Since Iqbal was 12 years old when he got the Reebok human rights award, and because he was sold into bonded labor for \$12, they decided the number 12 was symbolic, and sent email out to 30 middle schools asking for donations of \$12. And 12 schools answered that they would join the campaign.

As Amy summarized it (New Design Interview, 1997): "Anybody could get corporate donations..... but what we did was unique in the sense that we collected \$130,000 by \$12 donations from schools who donated in pennies or other stuff." She goes on to explain that people also donated computers, things they made for the kids to snack on, and they donated time, and skills, such as typing. Schools ran campaigns to raise money, like selling popsicles (flavored ice on a stick). People made things for the kids to sell.

Many students who were involved in this effort have continued to be involved, even though they have graduated from Broad Meadows and gone on to other schools for high school. They ended up raising \$350,000, enough to not only build a school for 250 children in Iqbal's village (completed in 1997), but also enough to pay the staff long into the future, as well as to pay for getting 50 kids out of slavery.

Other Schools For Iqbal

The "A School for Iqbal" campaign has gone on to work in other countries. The April 2004 Campaign Update reports: "We try to make a small part of that dream (to have all children free and in school) come true each school year by building a school in Iqbal's memory in a developing country. We call this effort 'Operation Day's Work— USA'. After we built 'A School for Iqbal' in Pakistan in 1997, we were invited by USAID to share lessons learned with other US schools. We accepted, and became one of 6 co-founding schools of Operation Day's-work –USA."

As of 2004, these young people had reached out to provide education for youth in Haiti, El Salvador, Nepal, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Sierra

There are people who defend child labor. They say that you have to see the situation from the child's and from his/her family's point of view.

The income a child earns might be important or even crucial for a family. If it disappears – as happened when Iqbal was rescued – the family and the child might be worse off rather than better, unless the child can earn money in a different and better way.

As bad as conditions are for many of the child laborers in the world, it could be better than the alternatives available to them (for example drugs or prostitution).

It's also important to remember that school is not yet an option for poor children in much of the world.

Some defend child labor as a necessary stage in a country's economic development, and point out that there was plenty of child labor in the United States and Europe in the early part of the last century.

(See Wikipedia article for leads to these topics.)

¹ According to their teacher at the time, as well as the kids themselves, it was all organized by the students, not adults. For more information, listen to the New Design Interview.

Leone. (A School For Iqbal Campaign, 2004).

Before he came to the US, Iqbal also spent 5 weeks in Sweden, and the results of that visit could be a whole article all by itself. To find out more about this, go to the link *Iqbal Travels the World* at *The World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child* website.

So, never underestimate what kids can do! The fires Iqbal started are still burning brightly! If you want to know more, be sure to read the interview. Also, see *Courage*, the video available online about Iqbal, narrated by kids who have participated in the Campaign. (see References and Further Reading).

References and Further Reading

The information in the article above came from the following sources. Not all articles agree on details. I relied heavily on Silver, 1996 and Kukin 1998. Be sure to check out the video reference (Schloat and Young, 2008).

A School For Iqbal Campaign 2004. *April 2004 Campaign Update*.
<http://mirrorimage.com/iqbal/updates/04-04update.html> (Accessed , 2009)

A School For Iqbal Campaign. 2007. *July 2007 Update*.
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New Design Interview. 1997. An interview with Amanda and Amy, two of the organizers of “The Kids’ Campaign to Build a School for Iqbal”, and Mr. Ron Adams, their 7th grade teacher. At the time of the interview, Amanda and Amy were in 10th grade. <http://mirrorimage.com/iqbal/media/newdesgn/ndesign1.html> . I got to this through the following link: <http://mirrorimage.com/mi/links/lance.html> . (Accessed , 2009)

Rosenberg, J. No date. *Iqbal Masih*. From the About.com website, 20th Century History: <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1990s/a/IqbalMasih.htm> (Accessed 4/ /09)

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Silvers, J. 1996. Child Labour in Pakistan. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1996: 79-92. Available online, without pictures, at the Atlantic Monthly web site: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199602/pakistan> Accessed 4/8/2009.

The World’s Children’s Prize for the Rights of the Child website. *Iqbal Masih*. At the ChildrensWorld website: <http://www.childrensworld.org/page.html?cid=407>

(Accessed _____). They awarded him a prize posthumously, in 2000. There is quite a bit of detail here too, and links to other child labor sites. Many of the “facts” supplied here disagree with the Rosenberg article.

Wikipedia No date. Child Labour. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour
(Accessed _____, 2009)

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Do you consider child labor to be an important issue or problem in your country? Explain your answer. Why or why not?
2. Assuming a country decided to eliminate child labor, what other kinds of changes would be necessary in order to accomplish it? List some and explain.
3. Nowadays in many countries children work pretty hard once they start going to school. In your opinion, is this better for them than the kind of labor Iqbal was doing? Explain.
4. Is all work bad for children? When in your opinion and experience is work like Iqbal was doing – hard labor for 12 hours a day – OK? Assume you are talking only about your own country and culture.
5. Do you know personally or through local newspapers of things or projects children have done that you admire? If so, write or tell about it. If not, search under “child heroes”, and visit one or more of the web sites that come up. Find a child who has done something you admire. Write or speak in your own words about what you find.

Notice to Reader

This is one out of fifteen stories written especially for English-learners featured in *Extraordinary People From Around the World*, by Patricia F. Neyman, at http://pats-educent.net/xpeople_intro.htm

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