

### **Puran, India**

Puran, 14, is from Village-Salmania, Post-Baroda, Dist-Shyampur, Madhya Pradesh, India. He has 6 brothers and 1 sister. Neither Puran's mother nor his father can read or write.

Puran started working with his parents in the stone quarries of Haryana and Rajasthan when he was only 6 years old. He broke stones and loaded them into trucks, and dug pits for underground cable along the road, 11 hours a day (from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m.), 7 days a week for 3 years. More than half the day, he worked on an empty stomach because he ate no breakfast. He only had one 15-minute break for lunch at 1:00 p.m. The working conditions were very unhygienic and harsh. Puran still bears a scar on his knee from breaking stones without protective gear.

Puran's father, Devi Ram, was indebted to the owner of the stone quarry for Rs. 20,000 (\$443) for the treatment of Puran's sick grandfather. Even after several years of hard labor, Devi Ram and his family were not allowed by the owner to leave the stone quarries as the owner was claiming Rs. 45,000 (\$997) with interest on the capital. However, Devi Ram and the family were never paid their wages, except for a lump sum of approximately Rs. 1000 (\$22) for the work of 5 members of the family to ensure that the family would never be able to pay off the debt and would remain in bondage forever.

As part of an ongoing campaign to identify and rescue bonded children, one day, activists from the Bal Ashram, a rehabilitation center run by Bachpan Bachao Andolan (the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude), found Puran and his brothers working in stone quarries. In the process of pursuing the case of Puran and his younger brothers, the activists were able to convince Devi Ram to let Puran and his brothers lead free lives and receive education at the Bal Ashram. Due to the loss of labor from Puran and his younger brothers, the employer filed a case against Devi Ram on false charges and sent him to jail. Eventually, the BBA activists helped in his acquittal.

Puran now lives with other children who have also been victims of child labor and are receiving educational and vocational training at the Bal Ashram in Viratnagar, District-Jaipur (Rajasthan). At the Ashram, Puran learned slogans, educational songs and street plays. He is part of the cultural team that performs folk theatre to generate awareness of social issues, including child labor. He participates in demonstrations and marches to highlight prevailing social problems in the local area, and helps organize rallies to enroll out-of-school children in school and design campaigns to boycott fireworks and other products manufactured using child labor.

Puran plays an active role in the implementation of *Bal Mitra Gram* (child-friendly villages) near the Ashram. When he returns to his own village, Puran will try to make it a child-friendly village, which aims to eliminate child labor and enroll all children in school through active community participation and the establishment of a children's parliament.

Puran believes that he can accomplish whatever he wants to do. For now, he wants to concentrate on his studies. He recently completed final exams for 8th grade. Eventually, he would like to attain a higher education and join the army. He wants to become "an army man."

Puran thinks that the best way to help him and other child laborers to achieve their dreams is to make friends with them and convince them to go to school. Education is most important for children. "Every child should have access to free, compulsory, quality and meaningful education," he says. "It is essential for children to go to schools."



Puran, Holten-Arms School, Bethesda, MD, April 24, 2006