

Ashraf, Pakistan

Ashraf, 16, is a gypsy of the Qalander subcaste. He lives in Chachuwali on the outskirts of Lahore, Pakistan with his parents. He has five sisters and four brothers.

Ashraf started working as a "street beggar" and performer when he was only six-years-old. He remembers people asking him why he begged instead of worked. He said that he did not like begging, but it was all he had been taught by his parents.

After the non-governmental organization Godh Lahore approached the gypsy community leader of thirty families, a special school called "Naya Din School" was opened up in a jhuggi (makeshift tent resembling the homes in which gypsies live). Thus, Ashraf said the atmosphere of the school did not seem alien. All the children who came to the school were gypsies who belonged to various sub-castes, such as Changar, Meerasi, etc. Now 450 gypsy children attend Naya Din schools. These schools are special because they can be built, or torn down, quickly if the community needs to move.

Ashraf attended school for three years at night, but is not attending school now. When asked why not, he said, "I am too big and my parents say, 'go to work.' "

To earn money, Ashraf sings and dances at weddings and other festivals, or entertains people by dressing up (himself) as a policeman in the market. Sometimes people verbally abuse him and push him around. Ashraf also performs with monkeys, bears, goats and dogs for food, such as flour and rice.

Ashraf explained that he needs to work because there is no alternative to support his family. His father is sick and cannot work. "My mother keeps the buffalo," from which she earn no income. Ashraf's two older brothers have left to be with their own families. There are no government programs for the gypsy communities.

Ashraf said, "In my community it is tradition for the whole family to work." Thus, it did not take Ashraf long to learn his trade. It was just natural. When asked if he wanted to continue this tradition after he was married and had children, Ashraf said, "No, never."

Ashraf was selected from Naya Din schools to be a member of a street theater group formed by Mr. Nazir Ahmed Ghazi, the Executive Director of Godh Lahore. Ashraf said that proper training in theater has really polished his talent. He has had an opportunity to tour cities in Pakistan, like Islamabad, Haripur, Peshawar, etc. They perform plays on the



Ashraf (in blue), 16, Children's World Congress on Child Labor, Florence, Italy, May 10-13, 2004

importance of education and peace. Ashraf has also participated in many workshops, walks, rallies and seminars.

Ashraf has an amazing singing voice. He sang while accompanying himself on a special gypsy instrument at the Children's World Congress on Child Labor in Florence, September 2005. Ashraf loves singing and would like to stay in theater. When asked what it would take to free him to receive more professional training and schooling, Ashraf said, "I would have to give my parents 2-3 lakh (hundred thousand) rupees (\$3,363-\$5,045 dollars)." Ashraf also said that one day he would like to own a car. Right now his family has a bicycle.