

Bhagi, Nepal

Bhagi, 18, is from Mirauli, Dang, a district in the far-west region of Nepal. He has one sister, who is 12-years-old. Bhagi's father is a farmer who plows other people's land for a living.

Bhagi's family belongs to an indigenous ethnic group called the "Tharu" (people from the forest) of Nepal. This tribe is known to be one of the most underprivileged, uneducated, and poverty-stricken sections of Nepalese society.

Bhagi's grandparents and parents are illiterate. His father and mother are Kamaiya (bonded-laborer). Kamaiya are prevalent among the Tharu tribe in Nepal. Bhagi's ancestors have been Kamaiya since time immemorial.

Bhagi's parents could not afford to send their children to school. When Bhagi was five-years-old, he started working as a domestic laborer in the house of his father's employer, a local rich landlord. He grazed cows, cut grass, cleaned utensils, and did other housework from early in the morning until late at night. While working at the landlord's home, Bhagi completed a course consisting of public school curriculum.

In 1995, Backward Society Education (BASE) liberated Bhagi from a life of slavery and admitted him into Adarsh, a private boarding school in Tulsipur, Dang. BASE liberated his parents from slavery in the Kamaiya (bonded labor) system in Nepal in July 2000. BASE is a local non-governmental organization working to empower poor, rural people, especially Tharu and disadvantaged communities of the mid-west and far-west regions of Nepal.

Bhagi attended Adarsh in Tulsipur for seven years, from kindergarten through sixth grade. Subsequently, he lived at home and went to a public school for two years because BASE could not longer afford the boarding school fee. While going to public school, Bhagi had to work in order to help his father earn extra money to meet the needs of household. He was paid daily for grazing cows, cutting grass, and doing seasonal labor for their landlord during his winter or summer vacations.

In 2004 the Unik Academy in Ratnanager-4, Bhoka, Chitwan was seeking to provide scholarships to the children of ex-kamaiyas. BASE chose Bhagi Ram and two other children to attend, and Bhagi transferred to the Unik Academy.

Bhagi is currently attending high school at the Unik Academy and living in a hostel in Chitwan, which is a 6-hour journey away from his family. He is in ninth grade. He goes to school six hours a day from 10 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. and plants or harvests crops (including



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rice, wheat and maize) seven hours a day before and after school (4 - 9:00 a.m. and 4 - 6:00 p.m.). He receives a partial scholarship from the school and BASE covers the rest of his expenses, including stationary, etc. Bhagi's sister stays home and attends a public school in Dang district.

Today, Bhagi's parents make a living as farm laborers and sharecropping. Sharecroppers cultivate the field(s) of a landowner in exchange for a certain percentage of the crops (often forty-fifty percent). Bhagi's parents have saved enough of their earnings to buy one kattha (333.33 square miles) of land in his village.

Bhagi would like to be a successful lawyer against slavery. He aspires to work for the improvement of his society and the abolition of child labor. According to Bhagi, quality education for all is needed to abolish slavery and to remove the gap between the rich and the poor.