

South Asia

Mukesh, India

Mukesh, 15, is the fourth child of four boys and two girls in his family. He is from Papri, Rajasthan. In the year 2000, some activists from Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA)/the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude visited Papri village. The BBA activists told the villagers about the *Bal Ashram* (Children's Rehabilitation Center) located nearby in the beautiful Aravali hills in Virat Nagar, in Jaipur district of the state of Rajasthan, 120 miles southwest of New Delhi, India. They also talked about forming a *Bal Panchayat* (Children's Council) in Papri. At first Mukesh did not want to get involved. However, after hearing more stories about children working, his heart was affected.



Mukesh, 15, Children's World Congress on Child Labor and Education, New Delhi, India, September 4-8, 2005

Now Mukesh is the elected *Sarpanch* (head/leader) of the village Bal Panchayat, which has seven members. Papri became the first *Bal Mitra Gram* (Child Friendly Village) in the world.

The **Bal Mitra Gram** (Child Friendly Village) concept was developed by Bachpan Bachao Andola (the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude). There are four steps to rendering a village "child friendly":
1) Withdrawing all children from work; 2)

Under the leadership of Mukesh, the Bal Panchayat (Children's Council) in Papri village has accomplished much, meeting twice a month. Nearly fifty children, who once worked in the village, cutting wood, doing farmwork, and working in roadside hotels, now go to school instead of to work. Members of the Bal Panchayat went house to house teaching that child labor was "bad" using songs and skits. They also held rallies. Some poor children from Papri asked to be in the Bal Ashram (Children's Rehabilitation Center) and Mukesh asked the Bal Ashram activists to help. Additionally, there used to

be a road going *through* the school property. Now, it goes around it. The Bal Panchayat has also succeeded in getting more classrooms built, installing a water tank, and obtaining things to play with (e.g., cricket equipment) for their school.

Mukesh and his panchayat (council) members meet regularly with the Bal Panchayats of the Bal Ashram (Children's Rehabilitation Center) and nearby villages to share ideas and learn from each other's experiences. When he grows older, Mukesh wants to be a good person and a social activist. He has already succeeded.