

Suman, India

Suman, 12, is already a freshman in high school. He attends school in the Biratnagar Block of Jaipur, Rajasthan, some 124 miles from Delhi. He loves to play cricket and badminton. Suman has traveled across the length and breadth of the vast country of India and to distant Pakistan to play a cricket match between Pakistani and Indian children.



Suman, 12, India, Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC, September 16, 2005

Suman is from Saharsa, a remote town in the state of Bihar in eastern India. The worst forms of feudal and agrarian power relationships are exemplified in Saharsa. The poor and down trodden in Saharsa are not only poor, but are also voiceless. They are born in poverty and humiliated in life by being asked to perform the most menial jobs that the rich and higher class would not like to do themselves. The community to which Suman belongs does not have the strength to refuse to do the work for the rich and mighty.

Of the six children born into Suman's family, only Suman and his elder brother have survived. Suman does not remember how his four brothers and sisters died except for one sister, who died by snake bite at the age of 11.

When Suman was two-years-old, his father, who was a rickshaw driver, died of tuberculosis. After his father died, Suman's family no longer had a place to live. They were no longer welcome in the joint family house they had shared with Suman's paternal uncle and his family. Although his family was entitled to land from the Indian government that would provide them with some measure of food security, Suman's mother was too weak to stand up and demand her rights. Therefore, Suman's mother did not have any land on which to cultivate and grow food.

Suman's mother was hired to work in the house of a government utility engineer in Saharsa. Her job was to help with the household chores, like washing utensils, cleaning the house, washing, drying and ironing the clothes, and looking after the children and the cows of the owner. She was allowed to build a thatched hut for herself in the backyard. Several years passed like this and Suman's mother worked every day until she got sick.

Up until that time, Suman's brother was doing the same job as his mother in another house about 1.24 miles away from the house where Suman and his mother lived. Suman, then seven-years-old, had to take on his mother's responsibilities, as she was unable to work, in order to pay back some money she had accepted from her employer for medicine. So it was obligatory for Suman to work in her place in the engineer's house. For three years, he worked there and suffered from humiliation and indignities heaped on

him every day. When he could not work because he was sick, the engineer beat him. However, Suman had no place to go.

One day an activist from Bachpan Bachao Andolan/South Asian Coalition Against Child Servitude rescued Suman from the engineer's house. This activist is from the same community as Suman and is from a nearby area. He learned about Suman and insisted on rescuing him. The engineer resisted releasing Suman, saying that Suman's mother had taken money from him and not paid it back. However, the activist threatened to take legal action against the engineer if he did not relent. That is how Suman came out of the clutches of poverty. After his rescue, Suman was reunited with his family for a few weeks before he was enrolled in the rehabilitation center of Bachpan Bachao Andolan. At the center, Suman was provided with counseling and went through accelerated learning. He is now doing well in formal school.

Today, Suman exemplifies the story of an ordinary kid who is gifted with and engaged in extraordinary commitments to make the world a better place for all children. Suman recently traveled to New York to carry the messages of the 200 child laborers from Asia, Africa, and South and Central America who converged in New Delhi, India, September 4-8, 2005, for the second Children's World Congress on Child Labor and Education to the world leaders gathered at the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit, September 13, 2005.

Suman is an articulate speaker on issues of child labor, poverty, and education. He spoke to a host of media representatives in India and New York. Suman expressed the view that child labor perpetuates poverty and the vicious circle of poverty and ignorance can be broken only by providing education for all children. Suman believes that child labor provides cheap labor, which keeps adults out of jobs and children out of school, and this is the core reason for nations' lack of progress. He spoke at the Round Table on Child Labor, Education, and the Millennium Development Goals with Ad Melkert, Dutch Executive Director of the World Bank, Christovam Buarque, a Senator from Brazil, and various other world leaders including representatives of the International Labor Organization, the International Confederation of Fair Trade Unions, and the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Center. Suman also delivered the paper friends, prepared for the Global Campaign for Education's *Take My Friend to School* campaign, to the wife of UN General-Secretary Kofi Annan in New York to remind world leaders of the children who are missing from schools.

Suman aims to be a pilot and wants to continue studying. He recently asked for some additional support for his education and for some private tuition to support his study of Math, Algebra, and Geometry. Suman thinks that the quality of Government school education is not as good as it should be to prepare him for the tough competition that will immediately following his completion of high school. He wonders why the quality of Government school education cannot be as good as that of the private schools. Bachpan Bachao Andolan aims to discuss this issue with the school authorities. There are four children like Suman in the rehabilitation center who need additional help in their studies.

Suman is happy that his mother is now living with her maternal uncle and does not have to work in anyone's house doing daily chores. She and her brother are sharecroppers. Sharecroppers cultivate the field(s) of a landowner in exchange for a certain percentage of the crops (often forty-fifty percent). Suman dreams of giving his mother rest and looking after her some day when he has a job. He thinks that he will continue to work all his life to bring dignity, love, and justice to the 182 million children who continue to work full-time and are unable to attend schools.