

Mohammed Bokhari (s2297426)
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University of Leiden
Supervisor: Carolien Stolte
Second Reader: Sanne Ravensbergen

A Weak Thing: Iqbal Masih and the History of Child Labour in Pakistan

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27, NIV).

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>I) Child Labour in Pakistan: a problem of global and local dimensions</i>	9
I.1) International Child Labour	9
I.2) Child Labour in Pakistan as a Global Problem	15
I.3) Peshgi: the local origins of child labour in Pakistan	23
I.4) Legislating Child Labour in Pakistan	29
<i>II) Iqbal Masih as a victim of Pakistan's economic and justice system</i>	32
II.1) Iqbal Masih and carpet production in Pakistan	32
II.2) Iqbal Masih and systemic injustices of the Pakistani justice system	38
<i>III) The Legacy of Iqbal Masih</i>	43
III.1) Iqbal Masih and the role of NGOs in combating child labour in Pakistan	43
III.2) Iqbal Masih's international impact	59
<i>Conclusion</i>	63
<i>Overview of Abbreviations & Acronyms</i>	3
<i>Bibliography</i>	66

Overview of Abbreviations & Acronyms

BLLF	Bonded Labour Liberation Front
CHRI	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIWCE	Centre for the Improvement of Working Conditions and Environment
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EVS	Education Voucher Scheme
FTC	Free the Children
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILRF	International Labour Rights Forum
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NAP	National Assembly of Pakistan
NCCWD	National Commission for Child Welfare and Development
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PCMEA	Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association
PILER	Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research
SCCI	Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
SPARC	Society for the Protections of the Rights of the Child
UDHR	Universal Declarations of Human Rights
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WB	World Bank

WCPF	World Children’s Price Foundation
WTO	World Trade Organization

Introduction

The story of Iqbal Masih is intricately linked to the history of child labour and enslavement in Pakistan. Any history of the exploitation of children for labour in Pakistan is incomplete without studying the short life of Iqbal Masih, a person who has become the face of political activism against the practice of child labour in the country.

Iqbal Masih was born into a Christian family in 1983 in Muridke, a city close to Lahore. Given the poverty of his family, he was put to work at the age of four to pay off mounting debts. He was sold to a local carpet weaver in return for \$12 where he worked every day from dawn to dark in the hopes of paying off the debt. Like other children there, he was tied to a carpet loom with chains to prevent his escape. At the age of ten, he managed to escape the factory where he was held. With the help of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF), a local NGO working to free children from bonded labour, who took him in and sheltered him, he enrolled in school to pursue his studies despite the physical and mental breakdown he had suffered during the years of abuse. Whilst studying, he helped in the release of about 3,000 other children from bonded labour, and travelled the world raising awareness about the problem.

He hoped to become a human rights lawyer in order to better be able to fight bonded labour in Pakistan. But his life was tragically cut short on Easter day, 16 April 1995 by a gunman whilst he was visiting relatives in Muridke. His legacy remains and he has been a source of inspiration for many fighting against child and bonded labour in Pakistan and the rest of the developing world. During the 1990s there was a worldwide movement for the eradication of the worst forms of child labour with countries moving from complete denial of the problem and abject lethargy in trying to curb it towards legislation and positive action.

In his short life, Iqbal Masih had become a celebrity of sorts in his own hometown Muridke. As his biographer Andrew Crofts shows, his visit back home attracted crowds of people.¹ Inayat did not know what her small, fragile son did in Lahore, but she was pleased to enjoy the attention.

¹ Andrew Crofts. *The Little Hero: One Boy's Fight for Freedom*. London: Vision, 2006, p. 5

Pictures of him, cut out from newspaper articles, were propped around the shelves. The biggest newspaper cutting, a grainy picture of him standing on a podium accepting applause, had pride of place. It was taken in Stockholm, thousands of miles away from dusty Muridke. Then tiring of the adult chatter, Iqbal slipped away from the grown-up company to join his childhood friends, Liaquat and Faryad, to fly kites in the hot thermals, feed the homing pigeons, or escape from the stifling heat by joining the buffaloes in the brick-coloured canal waters.²

On one such Easter day in 1995, Iqbal and his friends waited to shake the priest's hand as he closed the tiny church after service. Muridke, like other small Christian villages, was surrounded by Muslim villages. A predominantly Muslim country, the Christian population was less than two percent of the total, and frequently persecuted.

That Easter day, Iqbal and his friends were on their way to Ammanat's house. Ammanat was Liaquat's father and Iqbal's uncle. They went to Liaquat's mother to take Ammanat's hot meal out to him. On their way there, engaged in their boyish antics, they were too busy to notice a man coming out of the trees. Their initial reaction to the man training his shotgun at them was laughter, expecting he was just teasing them. But with an unsettling silence, the man pulled the trigger, and the resulting shot rolled out across the open land sending a cloud of startled rooks up into the sky.³

This thesis uses the life of Iqbal Masih to unfold three interrelated aspects of the history of combating child labour. The first is the influence of global humanitarian laws that created a narrative for the abolishment of slavery and child labour begun in post-Industrial Revolution Britain and exported to the rest of the world. It was this consciousness that allowed Iqbal to understand that the way he and the thousands of children like him were treated was unnatural and criminal. It was this understanding and consciousness that gave him the courage to escape in the first place. The second is the impact that the child Iqbal had on the world. By becoming the icon of activism against slavery in the developing world, he was able, in his own small way, to revive the discourse of modern-day slavery in the developed world, forcing it to take another look at how policies at the

² Andrew Crofts. *The Little Hero: One Boy's Fight for Freedom*. London: Vision, 2006, 7.

³ Ibid., 14.

centre were oppressing millions of people at the margins. This revival issued forth a flurry of legislation, as well as a renewed commitment to fight exploitative labour methods around the globe. The third aspect, is how this reawakened consciousness then influenced activism against child labour in Pakistan itself, both at the federal and grass-roots level.

In an increasingly globalised world, it is necessary to frame the story of Iqbal's short and impactful life as both a driving force against child labour in Pakistan as well as a story deeply influenced by the activism of those who had gone before him. This is discernible in Iqbal's own statements, for instance when he likened his work to that of Abraham Lincoln for the emancipation of slaves in the United States.⁴

Methodology

This thesis draws on interviews with and news reports about Iqbal Masih. Oral history has the advantage of giving voice to the under-classes, underprivileged and the defeated, a voice reconstructed through interviews. This reconstruction of the past is more realistic, a challenge to the establishment which gives it radical implications.⁵ History becomes more democratic, the chronicles of kings is replaced by the lives of ordinary people, and the "use of oral evidence breaks through the barriers between the chroniclers and their audience."⁶ Oral history is the history of people and oral sources can indeed relay "reliable" information. As subjective spoken testimony, oral sources have a special value, which should not be ignored.⁷

I do not deny the bias of reporting built into contemporary news making and what the press presents cannot be accepted at face value without this bias being taken into account. But how different is the bias in old newspapers from the bias in the book cited above, Andrew Crofts' *The Little Hero: One Boy's Fight for Freedom*, given that both are based on eyewitness accounts and

⁴ Susan Kuklin. *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998, 45.

⁵ Paul Thompson. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 7.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Ibid., 118.

oral interviews?⁸ The one-to-one interview method which Crofts used to write his book is conventional to oral history as well as to reporting for newspapers. The potential for bias is frequently present in the research agenda. A work such as Crofts' therefore needs to be placed in context.

The idea for Andrew Crofts' book came from the proposed film *Carpet Boy*, based on Iqbal's life and starring Jamal Malik from *Slumdog Millionaire*. Producer Riff Hinton-Khan conducted forty interviews with Iqbal's family, friends, extended relatives and other people close to him before commissioning Crofts to ghost-write the book. The resulting book, *The Little Hero*, published by Vision Paperbacks in 2006, was the basis for the screenplay adaptation, and was described as "not written in Bollywood gangster style. It is a straightforward, chilling story intended for an international audience."⁹ The fact that Crofts was commissioned to write for a future screenplay poses the danger that his account may have been embellished somewhat to make for an interesting future film. However, my own reading and research does not indicate that this is the case. Most researchers approach an interview with a thesis to prove, assuming any contradicting thesis is wrong.¹⁰ In Crofts' case, it was the innocence of the child activist Iqbal Masih.

In an interview to *the Guardian*, Crofts defends ghost-writing much as a historian who uses oral sources would: "Ghosting is like writing monologues for real people and like being a barrister pleading their cases. It permits me to ask the most intimate and interesting questions of people, and to share their excitement. It allows me to take a holiday from my own ego and liberates me from the burden of my own opinions. People become extraordinarily articulate and truthful when they feel you are interested in their stories and you believe what they are telling you."¹¹

The problem with oral history is selection of the informants, whether they are chosen to further a pre-conceived thesis or not, to what degree do they trust the interviewer, what is the

⁸ Crofts, *The Little Hero*.

⁹ Naomi Canton. "Slumdog Star Now Plays Child Slave." *The Hindustan Star*, 11-02-2011.

¹⁰ R. Kenneth Kirby. "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 35:1 (2008): 24.

¹¹ Andrew Crofts. "Their Life in My Hands." *The Guardian*, 22-11-2008.

reliability of their memory and tendency to be nostalgic. Although I have not come across any reason to doubt Crofts' narrative, the key point here is, if one is dismissive of the style in which this book was written, one ought to be equally dismissive of primary sources such as newspaper interviews, because they share in the same bias. Thompson observes that "facts and events are reported in a way which gives them social meaning".¹² "This reflects the phenomenological thinking about the subjectivity of both individual experience and history".¹³ The word 'bias' sometimes carries an unfairly loaded implication. Informants may not agree with how and what events occurred, but "something in the recording or telling of the events just might reveal the important 'expectations and norms' that are the most valuable part of the story".¹⁴ This is especially in the case of Andrew Crofts seemingly hagiographic account of Iqbal Masih's life.

This thesis uses the story of Iqbal Masih's life, as reconstructed from interviews and biographies, in order to show how, firstly, his life illustrates the conditions of child labour in Pakistan, secondly, how he struggled through Pakistan's social, economic, and judicial systems, and thirdly, his lasting influence in Pakistan and the world today.

I) Child Labour in Pakistan: a problem of global and local dimensions

This section contextualizes the issue of child labour in Pakistan in the 21st century. It shall touch upon the issues of globalization, colonialism, and the Pakistani *peshgi* system, then discuss the development of the current legislation on child labour in Pakistan.

I.1) International Child Labour

Not all work done by children is child labour and work that does not interfere with a child's schooling, health and personal development is something positive should not be classified as child

¹² Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 100.

¹³ Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," 25.

¹⁴ Ibid.

labour. Activities such as helping parents at home, assisting the family business, or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays do not fall under child labour. These activities provide children with skills and experience and prepare them to become productive members of society when they mature into adulthood. Child labour, on the other hand, deprives children of their childhood and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development.”¹⁵ The worst form of child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities – often at a very early age.”¹⁶

Due to activism and economic prosperity, child labour saw a sharp decrease in the advanced north. However, what was not completely observable in the beginning was that the problem had merely been exported to the developing world.¹⁷ The first British factory acts provided the world with models for regulation of child labor. This awakening would in time travel to the rest of the world. The Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802 was the first to provide such a model and as the name suggests, it had the dual concerns of healthcare of the workers and their moral provisions.¹⁸

A lot can be gleaned from the first factory act and applied to the case of Pakistan. It was the first of its kind of legislature before government played much part in such matters of humanitarian concern. Its origin was in locally rooted set of concerns. The types of people who fashioned the bill were public-spirited, professional and philanthropic men who brought moral concerns to bear on economic activity.¹⁹ When Robert Peel’s Factories Act was passed in 1802 in Great Britain, societies made efforts to root out child labour wherever British influence extended. However, in the

¹⁵ ILO. *What is Child Labour*. <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.html>, 146.

¹⁶ Ibid., 147

¹⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁸ Joanna Innes. “Origins of the Factory Acts: the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, 1802” in *Law Crime, and English Society*, edited by Norma Landau. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 231.

¹⁹ Ibid., 255.

last 200 years since then, as the world has made strides in economic prosperity, at the second centenary of the Factories Act there still are 186 million child labourers around the world in the year 2000.²⁰

In the developing world the problem remained undetected partly because most child labour is an integral part of other family work. The world slowly awakened to a realization of the problem of child labour as a global problem somewhere in the 1990s after the Convention of the Rights of the Child had been passed in 1989. Other global organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and individual nations began to shed light on the problem. It was then that it was realised, under global scrutiny, that the situation was not that much better than it had been during the Industrial Revolution. Too many children were working for too many hours in “factories” that were little more than sheds and shockingly poorly lit, squalid and a hazard to health.²¹

The first international organization dealing with slavery and child labour in the world was the International Labour Organization (ILO). It was founded in 1919 by the Versailles Treaty. Pakistan soon after independence in 1947 became an active member. The Forced Labour Convention in 1930 was ratified by Pakistan in 1957.²² All the members who signed the treaty were asked to “completely suppress such forced or compulsory labour” including Pakistan.²³ At the 1999 Worst Forms of Child Labour, the ILO addressed the issue of bonded labour, raising the age of a child to 18 years. Two years after the convention was adopted, Pakistan ratified it.²⁴

The League of Nations and its successor the United Nations also worked to ban slavery, child labour and bonded labour. Pakistan became a member of the United Nations in 1947 about

²⁰ Kaushik Basu & Zafiris Tzannatos. “The Global Labor Problem: What Do We Know and What Can We Do?” *The World Bank Economic Review* 17:2 (2003), 147.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ILO. *C029 - Forced Labour Convention*, 1930 (No. 29), Geneva, International Labour Organisation, Article 2 (1).

²³ Ibid., Article 4 (2).

²⁴ ILO. *Database of International Labour Standards*. Geneva, International Labour Organisation.

two months after independence. The League of Nations in 1926 had already passed the *Slavery Convention* asking its member states “(a) [t]o prevent and suppress the slave trade” and (b) [t]o bring about...the complete abolition of slavery in all its forms.”²⁵ The League of Nations’ successor organization, the United Nations, in Article 4 of its summit document, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, is abundantly clear that “[n]o one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”²⁶ Debt bondage and the exploitation of child labour were explicitly included in several other documents as well, such as the *UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*, adopted in 1956.²⁷

There are international jurisdictional remedies that the United Nations or the ILO can use to ensure that member states comply with the treaties they have ratified. Although there is a Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery that has been appointed by the United Nations to monitor the situation of child labour and other kinds of slavery in Pakistan, this office is unable to enforce its writ to force member states to fulfil their obligations. The ILO has often been described as an organisation “without teeth.”²⁸

It has been argued that demanding social rights, and in this case, child rights in a world run by the current kind of political economic scenario dominated by the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a losing battle, because the system is premised on the existence and perpetuation of inequalities intensified by increasing global capitalism.²⁹ In order to be better able to address the

²⁵ ILO. *Slavery Convention*. Geneva, International Labour Organisation.

²⁶ UNGA, *Universal Declarations of Human Rights*, Res. 217 A(III) Art 4.

²⁷ ECOSOC. *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*. Geneva: Economic and Social Council.

²⁸ William Douglas & John-Paul Ferguson & Erin Klett. “An Effective Confluence of Forces in Support of Workers’ Rights.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 26:2 (2004): 273-276.

²⁹ Saadia Toor. “Child Labour in Pakistan: Coming of Age in the New World Order.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575:1 (2001): 195.

root causes of child labour in the world, we need to take a clearer look at the interests and structures in place that encourage, produce and support the practice.

Part of the problem is the World Bank's 1997 *World Development Report*³⁰, which sustains the myth of globalisation as the only path to prosperity.³¹ The present neo-liberal regime, faced with evidence to the contrary, that economic growth does not necessarily by itself bring prosperity for all the people in the world, yet they insist on maintaining that globalization is the only way out of the poverty trap. Even the International Monetary Fund was forced to admit that “in recent decades, nearly one-fifth of the world population have regressed” and that has been “one of the greatest economic failures of the twentieth century.”³²

Historically, protests against globalization have occurred not just in the developed world but also in the developing world. The use of armed force to break strikes by workers is not all too uncommon in Pakistan's history. The consumer attitude in the industrial north set off multiple reactions in the poor south against the multinational corporations. In the north, campaigns against child labour are seen as an increasing awareness of the exploitation rampant and a demand for social responsibility. Thus, globalisation causes child labour, and is backed by the armed forces of the advanced industrial countries, as the fate of Iraq and now Iran under economic sanctions shows.³³ The only option open is through political engagement.

The whole package of rights and freedoms in a liberal political philosophy is to the advantage of the industrial capitalist system. For all its lofty ideals such as equality, freedom, and rights, the liberal creed or the neoliberal creed cannot be trusted to ensure workers' rights. Child labour can be seen as a direct manifestation of the demand being placed on the world's population

³⁰ World Bank. *World Development Report 1997: The State in a Changing World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

³¹ Toor, “Child Labour in Pakistan,” 196.

³² Ibid., 200.

³³ Ibid., 205.

under the neo-liberal economic regime.³⁴ The feminisation of the labour force meant the end of the family wage, so the use of child labour works to depress wages even further. Strikes by workers are brutally broken up, protesting women are dragged off by the hair. Suicides and self-immolations occur more frequently than one expects in Pakistan.³⁵

Although the ILO has historically worked on behalf of the labour class, activists need to try to make it more potent. There is a certain brutality in the nature of the international regime that keeps child labour in force. In the worlds of the Prague Declaration, “a revolution in economics is called for, one that returns control of economies to the people who live in them. The time has come to put economics at the service of the people, rather than entire societies at the service of economic models that have failed for over 20 years.”³⁶

The problem of child labour in Pakistan should be considered a problem not only of international concern but one that also has global origins. This shift in thinking is touched upon by Basu and Tzannatos in “The Global Child Labour Problem?” wherein they argue that when policy makers craft national policies regarding child labour elimination, it is important to start with a proper theoretical and empirical understanding of the phenomenon.³⁷ A well-meaning but poorly designed policy that does not take into account the broad, global dimension of the child labour, can only serve to further exacerbate the problem. Several critics have voiced their concerns of such faulty international policies as well as the inability such policies to enforce the eradication of child labour. In their article “An Effective Confluence of Forces in Support of Workers’ Rights” Douglas, Ferguson, and Klett take up the argument that the ILO sets international labour standards and monitors compliance but because it “has no teeth”, is unable to deter countries that continue to defy

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 213.

³⁶ Lubna Nazir Chaudhry. “On the Verge of the ‘New Age.’” *Resistance* 1, no. 1 (2000): 221.

³⁷ Basu and Tzannatos, “The Global Labor Problem.”

legislations banning child labour they ratified.³⁸ The motives of international aid also need to be studied in greater detail. The question of the motivation of giving international aid to help stop child labour and the link between aid and political power is discussed by Petras and Veltmeyer in “Age of Reverse Aid: Neoliberalism as a Catalyst.”³⁹ The argument put forward there is that benefits of the recipients are always presumed and to date there is very little research on the motivations of donors. Toor’s article “Child Labour in Pakistan: Coming of Age in the New World Order” argues that without placing the child labour problem against the backdrop of the neo-liberal order, it is impossible to understand and even begin to right the wrongs. The forces of globalization embodied in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization need to be politically engaged in order to give precedence to social and labour rights once more. Toor’s article is fundamental to this essay because it joins the debate around international apathy with Pakistan’s problem of slavery. However, what seems to be missing from the overall debate are two things. The first is how individuals have managed to internalize the message of globalization that keeps slavery propped up and the second, how these individuals as agents of globalization reinforce this message by taking it back and “preaching” it to the source of origin. Iqbal Masih’s life story placed within this context will view the debate on globalization from the “bottom-up”.

I.2) Child Labour in Pakistan as a Global Problem

Pakistan holds the doubtful distinction of having the highest incidence of child labour per capita in its worst forms.⁴⁰ The history of child labour must be seen through both a domestic and international lens. Containment policies by global superpowers propped up right-wing, anti-people regime in the third world. This happened in Pakistan during the Zia years. A thriving feudal system

³⁸ Ferguson Douglas & Klett, “An Effective Confluence of Forces.”

³⁹ James Petras & Henry Veltmeyer. “Age of Reverse Aid: Neo-Liberalism as Catalyst of Regression.” *Development and Change* 33, no.2 (2002): 281-293.

⁴⁰ Toor, “Child Labour in Pakistan,” 214.

has meant only cosmetic land reform even under the populist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia's predecessor. It is only recently NGOs like Bhatta Mazdoor Mahaz and the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) have succeeded in pressuring the government to pass bonded labour laws.

Child labour has been a major problem in Pakistan and continues to be so to this day. In the 1990s during Iqbal Masih's days, there were about 11 million children working in the country, half of whom were under the age of ten. The median age of children in the work force dropped from eight in 1994 to seven in 1996.⁴¹ The city of Multan is where child labour is most rampant because it is a hub of export goods.⁴² According to reports from 2006, for urban areas in Pakistan, an estimated 37 percent of boy child labourers were employed in the wholesale and retail industry, 22 percent in the service industry, and another 22 percent in manufacturing. 48 percent of female child labourers were employed in the service industry and 39 percent in manufacturing. For rural areas, 68 percent of boys and 82 percent of girls were employed in rural work.⁴³

Child labour has increased in proportion to the declining family income. The view most held is that poverty is the cause of child labour. However, the Insan Foundation, a high-profile NGO wants to break the myth about the relationship between child labour and poverty. "Insan Foundation Pakistan sees the problem with a different angle. If [...] we believe that poverty is the reason [for] child labour, we cannot ignore the other side of the picture that Child labour perpetuate[s] poverty. Both poverty and child labour promote literacy and ignorance that is again reason for child labour perpetuates poverty."⁴⁴ "The poor families socially are less inclined towards education and do not hesitate in sending their children to labour" and that "'ignorant people' are unaware of economic opportunities" and the "real benefits of education" and so send their children to work. This is a

⁴¹ Muhammad Younas. "Child Labour and Fairtrade in Pakistan." *Fair Trade Wales*, <https://fairtradewales.com/child-labour-and-fairtrade-in-pakistan>.

⁴² Save the Children. "Pakistan." <https://pakistan.savethechildren.net/>.

⁴³ Xiaohui Hou. "Wealth: Crucial but Not Sufficient – Evidence from Pakistan on Economic Growth, Child Labour and Schooling." *The Journal of Development Studies: Human Development* 46:3 (2010): 439-469.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

typical example of the way the relationship between child labour and poverty is understood, as is the proposed solution: education (whether it is education of families, of communities, or of children). Nowhere do we see any connection to the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and IMF, which have severely reduced employment opportunities, or the link between poverty and globalization through the internationalization of the division of labour. Of course, no one can deny the importance of education and literacy and their connection with social development.⁴⁵

Child labour in Pakistan is not an isolated phenomenon and is an outcome of several economic, social and political factors. It is rooted in poverty, lack of education, a high population growth, obsolete social norms and a plethora of supply and demand dynamics. Of the other views discussed above, I am inclined to go with the theory that child labour is a consequence of persistent poverty.⁴⁶ Several dispossessed people found themselves working because of their illegal status. Afghani refugees, fleeing the Soviet invasion of their home country in 1979 settled in the north-western provinces of Pakistan eager to find work and send whatever remittances they could back to their war-torn country. After the USSR pulled out forces in 1989, millions of Afghans stayed on in Pakistan as illegal refugees, still living in colonies and refugee camps called *katchi abadis*. Employers known as *maliks* provided them with food, shelter, work at low wages, and bribe off local law-enforcement from hurling them back over the border. Afghani children would work at carpet-weaving firms at very low rates, substantially lower than the regular market wages. Alongside other criminals on the run from the law, Afghan children were susceptible to exploitation. Taken in by these powerful *maliks*, and submitting completely to their will with no plans to leave, and unable to forge social bonds with the local population who viewed them as scum and were unwilling to make any social contact with them, these children became victim to the worst form of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Zaighum Abbas Mazhar. *Child Labour in Pakistan: Including the Excluded*. MA thesis, Institute of Social Studies, 2008.

bonded labour in Pakistan.⁴⁷

In the Punjab, low-income families from agricultural communities first entered the carpet-weaving industry in the Sindh province, in the Thar Desert, Hindu and Muslim communities live side-by-side and are engaged in the industry. In Karachi, Mohajir communities made up of Muslims who emigrated to Pakistan following partition in 1947 and the Bihari community migrating from Bangladesh when it split from Pakistan following the 1971 war form the dominant carpet-weaving communities. In Baluchistan, carpet weaving is limited to areas surrounding Quetta where the Hazara tribes are settled and they, like the Afghans in the north-western provinces, keep to themselves.⁴⁸ Therefore, child labour is a consequence of persistent poverty.

Poverty had a sharp increase in rural Pakistan in the 1990s with the rural average income falling well behind the urban. Historically, poverty trends in Pakistan have been on the rise. In 2006, it was estimated that a whole third of the population is vulnerable to low levels of resources.⁴⁹ Poor households use child labour to transfer income from the future to the present. Child labour is used to reduce the risks of falling below the subsistence level and it a way of reducing the potential impact of a bad harvest or potential impact of a job loss or rising food prices. Poor households would use child labour as a way of “augmenting income for survival rather than spending their earning on the education of children.”⁵⁰ Also, because of the historically higher population growth rate in countries like Pakistan, parents optimally invested in number of children to maximise the market value of the household. They may be more mouths to feed but only for a short while until they could be sold off for a decent sum.

Education systems in developing countries are also weak and not effective enough to attract and hold children. The definition of literacy, structured at the time of the population census in Pakistan in 1998 is as “anyone who can read a newspaper and write a simple letter in any language”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

renders nearly half of the population of Pakistan illiterate.⁵¹ Poverty-stricken children are unable to afford the mounting costs and leisure to pursue education while illiterate parents unaware of its importance drive their children to work. Parental education plays a persistent and significant role in lowering the incidence of child labour.

An over-abundance of cheaper, labour intensive technologies has also been a historic cause for the prevalence of child labour in Pakistan. Easier to maintain and docile, and assisted by a cultural milieu that did not historically differentiate between childhood and adulthood to the sharp extent we do today in modern times, and still resists it, it was the sensible alternative to invent sophisticated and advanced technologies.⁵² Related to the ready availability of cheap labour, another determinant of child labour has been the specific characteristics of child workers. This is also known as the “nimble fingers theory.”⁵³ Children’s small stature and hands make them particularly effective at performing certain tasks. Certain evidence of this was presented in the 1992 UNICEF report that around ninety per cent of workers in the carpet-weaving industry in the Punjab province in Pakistan were children.⁵⁴ In areas with a concentration of such industries, children had the advantage over adult workers because of their “nimble fingers.” This would drive wages for children up encouraging even more children to work at carpet weaving.⁵⁵ However, studies also show that although there is anecdotal evidence that supports this theory, it is debatable if children really do possess certain physical traits that have historically made them stand out in the workforce in Pakistan. Results of research done in the past as well as the present show that in Pakistan, most children work in activities where their labour is substitutable for adult labour. This result, combined with evidence that child labour is mainly explained by household specific factors rather than

⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

⁵² Ibid., 18.

⁵³ OECD. *Combating Child Labour: A Review of Policies*. Paris, OECD Publishing, 2003, 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

community factors, may show that the old “nimble fingers” theory has no empirical support.⁵⁶

There is a case to be made that the historical reason Pakistan has failed to protect the rights of child labourers and bonded labourers is not necessarily because of the poverty of individuals or the state, but the improper functioning of institutions in Pakistan that is at the heart of the issue.⁵⁷ Democracy is supposedly the only political system under which human rights are guaranteed. A ruler cannot act against these laws and if the laws are violated the ruler is held responsible. Citizens can exert control over their rulers by institutional checks and balances. Welzel and Ingelhart identify “the most serious violation of effective democracy in corruption.”⁵⁸ Corruption undermines in informal ways the formal rights of citizens. It undermines the effectiveness of civil rights.⁵⁹ On paper it is institutions that determine democratic rule and human rights in Pakistan while the reality is quite different. Why do the institutions that are supposed to safeguard human rights and democracy in Pakistan fail?

Institutional failure and social dynamics are just as responsible for the failure of Pakistan to prevent slavery. Widespread corruption and caste-based discrimination hinders the rights of bonded labourers. The written law is apparently not “the only game in town.”⁶⁰ The slaveholder knows the police will not hold him accountable because of a system that allows the acceptance of bribes with impunity. A culture of rights is important for democracy. Self-expression values, which include “personal and political liberty, civilian protest activities, tolerance of the liberty of others, and an emphasis on subjective well-being reflected in life satisfaction.”⁶¹ Slavery in Pakistan reflects a lack

⁵⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁷ Christine Molfenter. “Bonded Child Labour in Pakistan: The State’s Responsibility to Protect from an Institutional Perspective.” *ICL Journal* 5:2 (2011): 260-319.

⁵⁸ Ronald Ingelhart and Christian Welzel. *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 192-193.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 193.

⁶⁰ Juan Linz José & Alfred Stepan. “Toward Consolidated Democracies.” *Journal of Democracy* 7:2 (1996): 14-15.

⁶¹ Ingelhart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*, 248.

of self-expression and reduced value of lower castes. Rehman, former executive director of the HRCP, confirmed this cultural attitude by a part of the Pakistani society: “There is a general lack of comprehension of the dignity of ordinary humans among the government and upper classes here in Pakistan.”⁶² Social hierarchy in Pakistan is due to the feudal system, an institution that is 200 years old going back to the British rule in India. Big farms to produce more goods increase economic exploitation, and these farms were distributed among only a few thousand families and this has remained unchanged since independence in 1947. Most agricultural labourers are landless. The landed elite control the higher echelons of economic and political power. This relationship has practically not changed.⁶³

The media, instead of providing information to the people, serves the purpose of control.⁶⁴ The National Project Co-ordinator of the ILO in Pakistan, Benyameen, awards a very powerful role to the media regarding bonded labour by saying that “the media can rid the people from this repressive practice.”⁶⁵ During the 1960s the dictator Ayub Khan cut the freedom of the press. The Martial Law Ordinance of 1959 allowed the government to seize newspapers in order to ensure the security of the state. Bhutto granted the press some relief in the 1970s but Zia ul-Haq reversed the trend in the 1980s. The situation has improved a little since then but not by a lot. Practices of intimidation by state and non-state actors are still prevalent.⁶⁶

The authoritarian legacy of Pakistan has devastated the influence of civil society. The role of NGOs in shaping politics has been negligible. Several of these were founded during dictatorships as

⁶² Sarah Stuteville. “Walking Out of Slavery.” *The Independent*, 01-07-2006.

⁶³ Goodson, “The 2008 Elections,” 5, 10; Mezzara and Aftab, *Pakistan State-Society Analysis*, 18, 22.

⁶⁴ Wolfgang Merkel. “Embedded and Defective Democracies.” *Democratization* 11:5 (2004): 33-58.

⁶⁵ “Bonded Labour is Denial of Basic Human Rights: ILO.” *Business Recorder*, 08-02-2009.

⁶⁶ Aqil Shah. “Pakistan. Civil Society in the Service of an Authoritarian State.” In *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 336.

expression of resistance to authoritarian rule and impending violations of human rights.⁶⁷ The BLLF, founded in 1967, is one of the oldest organizations mentioned here that deals with bonded labour.⁶⁸ PILER was founded in 1982 and works on labour rights and is active in research and advocacy.⁶⁹ Mehergarh is an institute near Islamabad with an office in Hyderabad, mainly working on awareness raising and education.⁷⁰ Since 2006, Mehergarh is active in freeing labourers from bondage.⁷¹ The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) came into existence in 1987 and was instrumental in advocating for the Bonded Labour Act in 1992.⁷² PILER has documented the liberation of more than 8530 slaves between 1990 and 2005. The release of 722 slaves has been forged by concerted action of NGOs and state officials. Only a few more than 563 slaves were freed solely due to state action. The remaining 7250 escaped from bondage, in several cases with the help of NGOs.⁷³ Between 1988 and 1996 the BLLF has supposedly been the most active and successful human rights organization in freeing bonded labourers. According to Silvers they set free about 30.000 bonded labourers in the mentioned time period of 8 years and won about 25.000 cases.⁷⁴ The role of labour unions has been marginal in fighting child labour and bonded labour in Pakistan. Resistance from employers, police corruption and the Acts of 1958 and 2002 demonstrate the employers' and the government's curbing of the labourers' interests. Restrictions bar most of the workforce from unionizing.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch. "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan." *Human Rights Watch*.
<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Pakistan.htm>.

⁶⁹ PILER. "Our Organisation." *Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research*. <https://piler.org.pk/our-organisation/>.

⁷⁰ Mehergarh. "Background Concept." <https://mehergarh.org/background-concept/>.

⁷¹ Mehergarh. "Implementing the Dream." <http://www.mehergarh.org/annual%20report.html>.

⁷² Shah, "Civil Society in the Service of an Authoritarian State," 2.

⁷³ Upadhyaya, "Poverty, Discrimination & Slavery."

⁷⁴ Jonathan Silvers. "Child Labour in Pakistan." *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1996.

In addition to these factors related to colonialism and globalization, there is an important local factor: the institution of *peshgi*, discussed in the section below.

I.3) *Peshgi*: the local origins of child labour in Pakistan

The phenomenon of child labour in Pakistan can be traced back to well before independence in 1947. The institution of *peshgi*, that is the making of bonded workers, contributes to keeping this phenomenon alive. Antonio De Lauri, in “The Absence of Freedom” investigates the systems of dependence and debt-relationships that characterize not just Pakistani but South Asian capitalism, which represent a big challenge to creating sustainable, international standards for human labour.⁷⁵ Nasir, in “A Rapid assessment of Bonded Labour in the Carpet Industry of Pakistan” assesses the rise of the bonded labour industry in Pakistan, and argues that the corruption of modern-day institutions is also responsible for sustaining the practice of child labour.⁷⁶ Noor, in “Institutional Dynamics of Governance and Corruption in Developing World: The Case of Pakistan” studies corruption as a driver of child labour. Christine Molfenter, in “Bonded Child Labour in Pakistan” studies the state's responsibility to establish strong institutions. The corruption of the police, media, judiciary and the democratic process creates an environment that encourages the exploitation of children.⁷⁷ Jamal and Patil⁷⁸, writing in “Police Organisations in Pakistan” explore the detrimental effects of a corrupt police on reinforcing child labour. Jasam in “Islamisation and Pakistani State” studies the institutional discrimination against minorities in the judiciary and society on a whole.

⁷⁵ Antonio De Lauri. “The Absence of Freedom: Debt, Bondage and Desire among Pakistani Brick Kiln Workers.” *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1 (2017): 122-138.

⁷⁶ Zafar Mueen Nasir. “A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour in the Carpet Industry of Pakistan.” *Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour*. Islamabad, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2004.

⁷⁷ Molfenter, “Bonded Child Labour.”

⁷⁸ Asad Jamal & Sanjay Patil. *Police Organisations in Pakistan*. Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2010.

Prejudice and negative stereotypes reinforce child labour.⁷⁹ Corruption of democratic institutions is studied by Linz and Stepan in “Toward Consolidated Democracies.”⁸⁰ Shah in “Pakistan: Civil Society in the Service of an Authoritarian State” shows how democratic institutions have failed to get a solid foothold in Pakistan, thus indirectly perpetuating child labour.⁸¹ Hou in “Wealth: Crucial but Not Sufficient” examines the relationship between wealth and child labour and schooling in Pakistan.⁸² This last paper helps to shatter the popularly held belief that wealth is crucial in determining households’ decisions about a child’s schooling. What the literature on the causes of child labour in Pakistan seems to be lacking is the same as in the above section: a fresh look at how the causes are interconnected from the perspective of the individual child or family involved in and coming to terms with bonded labour.

The first and most important cause of child labour to discuss, as suits the purpose of our story, is abject poverty. It was this crippling sense of shamefacedness because of a penniless existence that landed Iqbal into slavery. Technically, the day his older half-brother Aslam decided it was time he got married was when Iqbal had become a slave without ever realizing it.⁸³ Aslam, tired of scrounging off his stepmother Inayat Bibi, and wanting a wife to come home to, realised that to get married required money. The only way out to Aslam was to sell his two younger half-brothers off to work and pocket the money himself.⁸⁴ An alternative account is Iqbal was sold into bondage in exchange for money used for his mother’s operation but multiple sources confirm Crofts’ reconstruction of events.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Saima Jasam. “Islamisation and Pakistani State (A Historical Account).” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 30-04-2008.

⁸⁰ Linz and Stepan, “Towards Consolidated Democracies.”

⁸¹ Shah, “Pakistan: Civil Society.”

⁸² Hou, “Wealth: Crucial but Not Sufficient.”

⁸³ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 15.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Eraas Haider. “He was 12-years-old and wanted to liberate slaves in Pakistan. He is dead now.” *The Express Tribune Blogs*, 16-01-2016.

This is the *peshgi* system. A weaver takes an advance from a contractor to pay off some other debts, usually for marriage. The advance is a sign that the worker is now engaged and will until the debt is paid off. The amount is usually to be repaid in small instalments, which is hardly ever how events proceed. Due to family emergencies (as Aslam's "urgent" need to marry, in this instance), the weaver is forced to borrow larger amounts, before long entering vicious cycle of continued borrowing. There is evidence to suggest some weavers end up taking loans that they cannot pay back even after ten years of bondage. Due to the weavers' weak economic standing, they are never able to leave or refuse to work, and several suicides are also reported as a result.⁸⁶

Peshgi is common in the carpet business and once the weaver child is committed, he cannot leave the village, town, and in many instances, the factory without the permission of the employer. As they work, carpet weavers pay off the borrowed amount in small weekly instalments, as discussed above, but balance almost always remains standing due to high interest rates. The prevalence of children being put in bondage, against an advance payment for their labour is the highest in Thar desert in the interior Sindh province.⁸⁷ The employer charges interest in advance for boarding and lodging expenses. Many parents sell off children to pay for funeral rites. Because the bonded workers are usually illiterate, there are no written accounts and the workers are unaware of the outstanding amount. They are unable to maintain accounts of their own. In Karachi, the vast majority of *peshgi* workers are widowed females.⁸⁸

Overall, children were the true victims of *peshgi*. They received half the wages of older workers and as observed were often not allowed to leave the premises until the debt was paid off in full. For lunch, they were given some rice mixed with an assortment of locally grown vegetables. Meat made the menu only once per week. They were required to clock in longer hours than adults. After several non-government organizations began to shed light on the plight of these children, the

⁸⁶ Nasir, *A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour*, 19.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 19.

contractors' inadequate responses were often that these children were learning a valuable skill that could be used in the future. Older workers would routinely sexually abuse the younger, and children rescued from this life of misery often weep as they recount the injustice of the treatment meted out to them. What was pitiful was that many parents did not consider the work these children were doing was harmful and considered it a future job guarantee for their children.⁸⁹

The advent of capitalism in India in the nineteenth century needs to be addressed for a fuller grasp of *peshgi*, especially of how capital infiltrated into the land through professional moneylenders' acquiring a new interest in land. This took the form of wealthy families in the service of the aristocracy or the colonial government who were attracted by land-profit.⁹⁰ This was the key moment of capital's penetration of agriculture, or in other words, the capitalization of the land. The new owner's main goal was to extract surplus from the land, and not necessarily its development. Physical exploitation of labour, not its expanded productivity, generated that surplus. The global triumph of capitalism and also its Indian version gave voice to the doctrine of progress and development as it was articulated in colonial discourse. It is possible to understand how the history of debt bondage is intertwined with a movement towards free labour.⁹¹ As capital penetrated agriculture, demand for labour to cultivate it rose with unavoidable rise in wages. Since only low wages and long working hours, not high productivity, could guarantee surplus, it was usury through the instruments of indebtedness and debt bondage that governed the labour force.⁹² To hedge against the supply and demand dynamic which if allowed would have allowed for a rise in wages, the vulnerable position of the labourers and their dependence on loans was exploited: loans in the credit market were given at high price, but extracted as low wage in the labour market, significantly below the rate which could have been produced by the trends of supply and demand in the market. In order to consolidate this system, it was of fundamental importance that the labourers should be

⁸⁹ Nasir, *A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour*, 20.

⁹⁰ De Lauri, "The Absence of Freedom," 127.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

chronically in need of debt and unable to get out of the debt trap.⁹³

Although *peshgi* is a force for bad, there are other voices that argue it has good effects for the worker-employer relations. This is made possible due to the mediating effect of a shared common origin between employer and employee.⁹⁴ Two cases come to mind, the industries of Sialkot and Hyderabad, in the Punjab, Pakistan. Perhaps indiscriminately linking *peshgi* to bondage is inaccurate and has been used wrongly in the past, some scholars argue.⁹⁵

The strength of Sialkot's industrialists is that they went from being artisans themselves to business owners. This has led to feelings of pride of ownership of the industries they set up.⁹⁶ They all formed a *biraderi* that is, "a fraternity, a group of caste brethren who live in a particular neighbourhood and act together for caste purposes."⁹⁷ It is a primary factor in the primordial loyalties that govern organization in villages in the Punjab. All *biraderis* in Sialkot are associated with stitching footballs. The employers often remind the employees that they emerged from within the group of workers and this creates a bond, not necessarily bondage. Sialkotis have come to see sports manufacturing as being their "own." It was not indigenous to the region and began as a response for the British demand for repair of their sports goods, mostly racquets, cricket bats and footballs.⁹⁸ The Hyderabad glass-bangles industry was established by a group of entrepreneurs who came to Hyderabad from India with their wealth and connections. They were mostly Urdu-speaking Siddiqui migrants from the area of Ferozabad in western Uttar Pradesh in modern day India.⁹⁹ In Hyderabad, the feeling of belonging to a particular group is strong and is shared by the workers and

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ali Khan. "Peshgi Without Bondage: Reconsidering the Links between Debt and Bonded Labour." *Cultural Dynamics* 22, no. 3 (2010): 248.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 250.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 252.

employers. However, despite the shared origin story and shared geographical region, and a shared history, which gives rise to feelings of solidarity between the workers, the subcontractors and the industrialists, there is a social and economic distance that is maintained. Inter-marriage is ruled out, while industrialists maintain ostentatious mansions in their native villages next to modest two-room houses of their employees.¹⁰⁰

It is true that in the absence of social securities, *peshgis* are often the only way to make ends meet especially at times of high expenditure such as weddings and funerals, and in Hyderabad and Sialkot, around half or more of workers in the industry were involved in this credit relation with the employers. The employees see *peshgi* as a safety net and the sub-contractors, known as *thekedars* often said that unless they had *peshgis* to offer, stitchers or bangle-makers would not accept work from them.¹⁰¹ However, this does not also mean that *peshgi* did not provide some sort of Gramscian leverage to the employers, such as propagation of the shared history story. The same tool that is used to keep violence at bay is used to keep wages drastically low. This sense of indebtedness makes it extremely difficult for workers to break out of this dyadic relationship and demand rights and increased wages.¹⁰²

The lives of the children employed as carpet-weavers are impoverished and extremely unhealthy towards a thriving childhood. Awan and Nasrullah perform a study on children at carpet-weaving firms in the province of the Punjab, Pakistan. The impact of an ergonomically designed loom and workplace modifications were studied too see how alternative technology can be used to reduce instances of child labour in carpet-weaving firms. The individuals who made the necessary workplace modifications and adopted the new looms reported a decrease in better respiratory health and less joint pain, thus demonstrating that ergonomic intervention has the potential to reduce

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 258.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 259.

¹⁰² Ibid., 263.

hazardous child labour from the industry.¹⁰³ The literature on the conditions of the carpet-weaving children seemed inadequate because the experiences of the children and the families undergo seems to have been ignored and instead the focus has been on a few disjointed interviews to support the main argument. Since there is no detailed study of a singular individual or family struggling against bonded labour, the present thesis hopes to fill that gap in studies.

1.4) Legislating Child Labour in Pakistan

The elimination of child labour in Pakistan sadly has quite a short history, partly because of government apathy and partly because of cultural acceptance of the phenomenon. The apathy of successive governments in Pakistan to take on the issue of child labour is worrisome, as demonstrated in Fasih's article "Analysing the Impact of Legislation on Child Labour in Pakistan."¹⁰⁴ The Employment of Children Act 1991 which was the first of its kind of legislation in Pakistan to prohibit the employment of children less than fourteen years of age. Several non-government organizations have stepped in to fill this lacuna. Denice in "Towards the Eradication of Child Labour in Pakistan" takes a look at the various attempts at eliminating child labour spearheaded by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC).¹⁰⁵ Partnerships between NGOs and the government are on the rise. David Husselbee's article "NGOs as development partners to the corporates" explores this cross-sectoral partnership and the implications these partnerships have on the vision of development.¹⁰⁶ Mazhar in "Child Labour in

¹⁰³ Saeed Awan & Muazzam Nasrullah. "Use of Better Designed Hand Knotting Carpetlooms and Workplace Interventions to Improve Working Conditions of Adult Carpet Weavers and to Reduce Hazardous Child Labor in Carpet Weaving in Pakistan" *Work* 44:1 (2013): 95-103.

¹⁰⁴ Tazeen Fasih. "Analyzing the Impact of Legislation on Child Labor in Pakistan." *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 4399. World Bank, 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Doreen Denice. "Towards the Eradication of Child Labor in Pakistan." *Al Nakhlah*, 2005: 1-7.

¹⁰⁶ David Husselbee. "NGOs as Development Partners to the Corporates: Child Football Stitchers in Pakistan." *Development in Practice* 10:3/4 (2000): 377-389.

Pakistan: Including the Excluded” studies the same issue.¹⁰⁷ The literature seems to be missing the fact that the struggle to eliminate child labour in Pakistan has the potential of being a greater “export” than the carpets themselves. What is meant by that is the distinctly home-grown methods of challenging bonded slavery and its influence on international methods needs to be further studied.

The Employment of Children Act of 1991 came in the wake of the government of Pakistan ratifying the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.¹⁰⁸ The Act provides that “no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed in any factory or mine or any hazardous employment or in specific occupations, making employment of children a cognizable offence punishable by fine and imprisonment.”¹⁰⁹ After the 1990s, there was a reported decrease in the proportion of children involved in work and the Employment of Children Act 1991 had an important part to play in this. We can thus discern that even before Iqbal Masih’s activism, there was an increasing consciousness to curtail the employment of children above 14 years of age, if not to eradicate it altogether.

There were several labour laws that preceded the Act of 1991, as previously mentioned. These were being passed since the 1920s, which is about forty years before partition. However, these laws did not define the cut-off age for work for children consistently and were only applicable to a strict number of occupations making them essentially useless. The Factories Act of 1934 applied only to factories, even when amended in 1997. The definition of a factory was too broad, defined as “a premises where at least 10 or more workers work on a manufacturing process.”¹¹⁰ This did not include establishments in the unorganized sector, which shares a large section of the economy. The Employment of Children Act 1991 is an advancement in child labour laws in the sense that it specifies the minimum age for work and specific occupations where children may not

¹⁰⁷ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*

¹⁰⁸ Fasih, “Analyzing the Impact of Legislation on Child Labour,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

be employed. This made it both applicable, enforceable, and universal.

What is considered to be the landmark anti-slavery legislation is the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act passed in 1992.¹¹¹ This is when for the first time, in the history of Pakistan, a specific law dealing with critical issues involving the lives of millions of people on a whole was enacted. The law, a result of a decades long struggle of human and labour rights organizations and individuals, demanded the end to universal bonded labour and was aimed adults as well as children. The Bonded Labour Act came in the wake of a Supreme Court verdict in 1989 which abolished the practice of *peshgi*.¹¹² The practice of taking an advance from an employer and working to pay off the debt (which in practice was never fully paid off but increased incrementally by the employer) was used to keep millions in subjugation. Till the advance remains outstanding, the worker is bound to the creditors and in event of sickness or death of the worker, the debt is transferred to the next in kin. In the case of children, *peshgi* is usually paid to the parent or the guardian who sells the child to pay off the borrowed sum. Now, at least in paper, every bonded labourer, adult and child alike, stood free under no obligation to work in an inhumane fashion for the money owed. Special committees were put in place to enforce the Act but failed to be effective.

It is a rare occasion when the government of Pakistan expresses concern for bonded labourers, and this reflected in the enforcement of the Acts discussed above. To the best of my knowledge, the federal government, showing its indifference, has not undertaken any surveys to establish the magnitude of debt bondage in Pakistan.¹¹³ This has been a historic problem and even today, governments view the problem of bonded labour and child slavery as a law and order problem rather than a state obligation to protect human rights. One of the reasons there is no comprehensive push at the federal level for data collection is because that will be seen as an acknowledgement of the widespread incidence of child labour and a consequent obligation to take

¹¹¹ NAP, *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992*.

¹¹² Shah, "Civil Society in the Service of an Authoritarian State," 10.

¹¹³ Ereclawn and Mauman, "Bonded Labour," 3.

prompt action, something which cannot be done considering some of the very elite in government, are wholly part of the practice.¹¹⁴ Islamic groups also seem too complacent in this regard and are not vocal enough about the oppression of bonded labour, despite frequent calls for moral regeneration. This lack of general concern is surely affected by the fact that bonded labourers are largely either non-Muslim or Muslim converted from lower caste Hindus.¹¹⁵

The international context and specific Pakistani conditions of child labour have been described and analysed in the preceding section. This shall serve as the frame of reference to understand the story of Iqbal Masih, as not just an anecdotal tragedy, but as a product of a globalised system of exploitation.

II) Iqbal Masih as a victim of Pakistan's economic and justice system

This section of the thesis will intertwine the particular story of Iqbal Masih with that of the general historic, economic, and social conditions of carpet production in Pakistan. It will blend biographical narrative with objective data in order to show how his story of child labour fits an all-too-common pattern in Pakistani society, one which is interwoven into the Pakistani economic and legal system. This narrative is compiled from interviews, new reports, and books written by people who had direct contact with Iqbal Masih before his death.

II.1) Iqbal Masih and carpet production in Pakistan

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From the first day he was taken away, going to work in the early hours of the morning and returning late at night became normal things to do.¹¹⁶ At the factory, he crouched in front of a loom and worked the threads in and out as fast and as accurately as his little fingers could manage. He

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ I am using triple dots to mark the biographical account of Iqbal Masih's life and I will be doing this throughout the thesis.

would pull the knots so tight that the rich, colourful pattern that made the carpet so desirable would never come undone, regardless of how many years the carpet would serve on the buyers' floor.

Iqbal, his most willing worker, soon became his favourite.¹¹⁷ Of course, he felt that was a mistake, growing emotionally attached to his child-workers. But Iqbal started taking liberties; to him, it did not seem right that children should work until their fingers begin to bleed or their backs ache and bend out of shape. It was not long before the master took the child to Aslam, complaining of the "rotten goods" he had bought. "Beat him when he disobeys or sell him to one of your friends who does not have such a soft heart," the reply came.¹¹⁸

The next day, Iqbal was trotted out to a new buyer, a man named Ghullah, who was impressed with the speed with which Iqbal's little fingers moved and the neatness of his woven patterns. At the new factory, the sullen faces of the other children greeted him, none of them daring to lift a gaze to observe the new arrival. Set to work, his hands trembling with fear, his fingers were soon covered in blisters. Soon he was struggling to stop himself coughing from the dust. The other children had pieces of cloth over their noses and mouths to keep the dust out. Iqbal, too timid to try find a cloth for himself, took short sharp breaths through barely parted lips.¹¹⁹

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Carpet-weaving as an industry flourished during Mughal rule from the 16th to the 19th century. The emperor Akbar (1556 -1605) was the first monarch to introduce the Persian carpet to the main cities of India at the time, Agra and Delhi. The first carpets to be produced also blended Persian and Turkish designs which were known far and wide for their intricate patterns that caught the buyers' eye. This blend of Persian and Turkish design, quite a natural occurrence given the Mughals themselves were Persianized kings and nobles of Turkic stock, soon became a unique look

¹¹⁷ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 22.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁹ WCPF, "The Story of Iqbal Masih." accessed 1 May, 2020.

of the region.¹²⁰ The unique look is now characteristic of Pakistan, and these carpets are in high demand all over the world.

Although there is a large variety of carpets made in Pakistan today, two designs have dominated the market from the early experiments of a Turco-Persian mix. The first is called the Bokhara carpet, after the city in Uzbekistan which inspired the design. It is single-knotted, lower-piled, of a simple-design with fewer knots per square inch. The most famous Bokhara types are the More, Jaldar, Saruk and Jhoomar designs which make about ninety percent of the production. The other is the Indo-Persian, which is double-knotted, higher-piled with a detailed design and colour variation with a higher number of knots per square inch. Among the Persian types are the Khorasan, Ispahan, Tabriz and Samarkand which are named after the major Iranian and Central Asian manufacturing centres. Completely local varieties are the Chand Chothai, Shajarkari, Shikargah, Nani, and Mohenjodaro produced in the Sindh province.¹²¹

Pakistani carpets were introduced to the West first in the 1950s. British aristocracy, attracted to their unique design took them back to the Isles and introduced them there. In the last thirty years, Pakistan has emerged as a leading exporter of hand-knotted carpets to western markets. They are long lasting, and the designs show the dedication of the weavers, which further increased their demand. In 2002, Pakistan exported 5.1 million square meters of carpets and rugs with the carpet industry accounting for 0.64 percent of the total GDP and 2.5 percent of total exports.¹²² Although Pakistan began producing machine-made carpets when the technology was introduced a few decades after independence in 1947, western markets historically preferred hand-knotted ones carpets and still do because they are of a better quality and are more durable.

Most carpets produced were done so in small centres called “sheds” and in people’s homes instead of large workshops or big factories. When the labour laws and the Factory Act was

¹²⁰ Nasir, *A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour*, 1.

¹²¹ Ibid., 2.

¹²² Ibid., 1.

implemented in the 1970s, big centres for carpet-weaving disintegrated into small units that eventually moved into residential areas to operate in private homes. Until the early 1970s, the carpet industry received little patronage from the government. During the 1970s, when the socialist-minded Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power, he adopted policies that encouraged carpet weaving and set up numerous centres across the country for that purpose. There was a significant increase in carpet weaving after that. Foreign markets began to demand hand-knotted carpets and their sales surged in the 1980s and 1990s. During the 2000s, the United States was the largest buyer of carpets from Pakistan, with exported carpets worth USD 70-80 million annually.¹²³

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By the time he would get home, every part of his small body would ache with pain, too tired to release the sobs he had been holding in for hours. He expected his mother to understand, to have a word with the master. But Inayat would respond gruffly, “Do you think my life is any easier? We all have to work till we die. It is the way things are.”¹²⁴ From the moment he arrived, Iqbal was a particular source of irritation to his new overseers.¹²⁵ They knew not to trust his obedient nods and words. However obedient his actions seemed, his spirit was unbroken, and he was still watching for an opportunity to escape. If it had not been that he was not a productive worker, they would have beaten him to death within weeks of his arrival.¹²⁶

Within a few months, Iqbal could not remember a time when he had not spent all his waking hours in that one room, working all the time. Fearful of the consequences, the children would rarely make mistakes. Now and then one of them would cut their fingers too severely on the sharp tools and a great deal of screaming would follow from the overseers. They dipped the wounds in burning hot oil to seal them and return to work as soon as the blood stopped flowing. Any working time lost

¹²³ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁴ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 28.

¹²⁵ WCPF, “The Story of Iqbal Masih.”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

would have to be made up that night, and their debts would grow yet again. A life of blood, toil, tears, and sweat. And oil. The amount owed in fact increased because of all the fines that had been imposed for slow and bad work, plus the fees levied for the meagre rations of rice and water they were given to keep their strength up enough to stay awake and working.¹²⁷

Many nights, when he was delivered back, the master took him to the door of the house so he could personally inform Inayat Bibi how bad his son had slacked at work. Once the man was gone, Inayat would slap the child in frustration. Iqbal was caught between the blows of a mother and a master. Each night his sister Sobyia brought him a cup of tea to drink. Too tired to drink, he would fall asleep and the cup would still be there when the overseers woke him in the dark. It made little difference whether it was night or day: inside the factory the light was always shut out. The only thing that occasionally changed was the temperature. The shuttered windows may have kept out the light, but the heat would build up through the walls like an oven.¹²⁸

There was constant pain in Iqbal's joints from having to crouch in one position all the time. He had grown so used to it; he was hardly ever aware of it anymore. Whenever he had the chance to move his limbs around because during break, it caused new pains in unexpected places, so it was better to stay locked into the hunched position that his body was used to. Sometimes, one of his fellow workers would give up the will to live. The last of their strength would seem to drain away from them until eventually they did not respond to the blows from the overseers' sticks and their bodies would be carried away like tiny blades of wool, their empty place taken the next day by a new recruit.¹²⁹

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Hazards associated with the hand-knotted carpet industry, as demonstrable in Iqbal's life experience, include Carpal Tunnel Syndrome because of repetitive and forceful use of wrists,

¹²⁷ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 30.

¹²⁸ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 33.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 38.

impaired vision and blindness due to improper lighting and long employment history in carpet weaving industry, and poor hygiene, and nutritional deficiency. The Centre for the Improvement of Working Conditions and Environment (CIWCE) in Lahore, Pakistan published research whose aim was to study how to reduce the musculo-skeletal stresses on the adult and adolescent workers to encourage them to work on the loom instead of the children.¹³⁰ It was possible the problem of child labour was exacerbated because of bad technology. To remedy that, it was suggested new looms be made of steel, a bench with a seat of 20 inches above ground to avoid squatting on the floor, and stooping during long working hours, while at the same time, making it difficult for children to work on the new loom.¹³¹ These changes it was hoped may enhance the comfort and reduce the risk of injury of adult workers and influence adults to weave themselves, rather than pushing the task onto their children.¹³² The problem, is of course, much larger than simply introducing a new loom.

As hand-knotted carpets are mainly for export, the manufacturing process starts with orders received from abroad. The exporter next contacts middlemen to engage weavers and completes the order. The commissioned child-weavers are given an advance, the *peshgi* to begin the work. The exporter and contractor arrive at a mutual understanding of the payment schedule. Because the exporters are usually rich and influential in the business, and also usually well-connected politically, contractors usually avoid cheating on them and abide by the terms of the agreement.¹³³

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The older he grew, the more determined he became to make a break for freedom. The idea festered and spread in his imagination for months as he played out possible ways in which he would achieve his freedom.¹³⁴ The plotting and scheming helped to pass the dreary hours of work, keeping his mind alive and allowing him some hope.

¹³⁰ Awan and Nasrullah, "Better Designed Hand Knotting Carpetlooms," 95.

¹³¹ Ibid., 96.

¹³² Ibid., 102.

¹³³ Nasir, *A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour*, 6.

¹³⁴ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 39.

Eventually the day came when the master was out on business and the overseers were obviously in a lazy mood, expecting to have an easy time.¹³⁵ The overseers had gone outside to make themselves cups of tea. After he had felt sure it had fallen silent and the overseers had dozed off, Iqbal stood from his loom. He crept through the door left carelessly unlocked. The main gate to the compound was standing open and the street outside was deserted. Once outside, he ran until his legs and lungs felt like he could not take another step. He asked passers-by for directions to the nearest police station. Most ignored him, as if he did not exist. Eventually a teenage boy gave him directions.¹³⁶

II.2) Iqbal Masih and systemic injustices of the Pakistani justice system

Pakistan has the legal mechanism of public interest litigation which applies, as the term expresses, in cases where the public interest is concerned.¹³⁷ In public interest litigation “collective rights of the public are affected and there may be no direct specific injury to any individual member of the public.”¹³⁸ This concept is in contrast to the concept of *locus standi*, which requires the applicant of a lawsuit to be directly affected by a rights violation.¹³⁹ The standing of public interest litigation allows third party actors, who are not affected by the violation of a right, to file a lawsuit. Therefore, NGOs or other organizations such as trade unions are able to become proactive.¹⁴⁰ It acknowledges the disadvantaged situation of poor people and opens opportunities also to them to have access to justice. However, one serious impediment for cases to be tried is the prevailing

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹³⁷ Jona Razzaque. *Public Interest Environmental Litigation in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2004.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁹ Hassan and Azfar, “Securing Environmental Rights,” 215; 225; 233.

¹⁴⁰ Razzaque, *Public Interest Environmental Litigation*, 35; ILO. *Forced Labour and Human Trafficking, Casebook of Court Decisions*. Geneva, International Labour Organisation, 2009, 41.

corruption in the system. It is already expensive to pay a lawyer and to pay the fees for a process, which might be expenses impossible to be covered by bonded labourers. Considering the additional payments of bribes, as well as their low societal status, it seems very likely that bonded labourers themselves never get access to justice being either unable to pay the price and/or being discriminated as religious minorities or member of a low caste. Therefore, it can be assumed that with enough money at hand any actor can prevent a bonded labour case by manipulating the judicial process.

The Police Act of 1861, first installed by the British, has remained practically unchanged till today, and remains inefficient because it is not independent and the executive branch of the government controls it.¹⁴¹ The police of Pakistan have the reputation of being the most corrupt police force in the world.¹⁴² The police collaborate with the landlords and factory workers. Before going on raids, the police often inform landlords and factory owners in advance before coming, when they have been issued a court order so the slaves can be hidden.¹⁴³ Charges are usually dropped by the police. Corruption of the judicial system is also endemic in Pakistan.

Returning to Iqbal Masih's own story, we can discern the corruption of the police as part and parcel of keeping him a slave. When he escaped from the factory, the first thing Iqbal did was make his way to the local police station, called a *thana*. In his own retelling, the police station was the last place a person seeking to redress a grievance would go because people were afraid of the police. But in his naivety, he went there.¹⁴⁴ Iqbal reeled off the information and what seemed like an eternity later, the commander beckoned Iqbal to follow him to the car. He was to think that they

¹⁴¹ Jamal and Patil, *Police Organisations*, 8-10; 18; 20.

¹⁴² Muhammad Noor Tahir Institutional Dynamics of Governance and Corruption in Developing World: The Case of Pakistan. Unpublished PhD diss., University of Heidelberg, 2009, 123.

¹⁴³ Ahmad Saleem. "A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour in Pakistan's Mining Sector." *Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour*. Islamabad, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2004, 11.

¹⁴⁴ Haider, "He was 12-years-old."

were going to free his friends and punish the carpet master and his lieutenants for their years of cruelty. But when they reached the factory, the commander accepted a 'gift' from the master snapped, "Get him out!" Before Iqbal had time to take in the collapse of his fortunes, he found himself being marched firmly in through the gates and handed to the carpet master, who took a painful grip of his arm to make sure he did not escape again.¹⁴⁵

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The overseers who followed the master dragging Iqbal in were terrified to be on their own in the outside world; they had been inside the factory walls for too long, they would not have known how to survive without the master to feed them and tell them what to do. Most of the children who survived their early years of slavery ended up like them, frightened of the world and unable to find make a place in it. This is the fate that befalls most slave children in Pakistan.

The punishment room, in Iqbal's retelling, was a windowless cell. The master threw Iqbal down on the floor and kicked him hard in the stomach and the ribs before Iqbal had a chance to curl himself into a protective ball.¹⁴⁶ He tied Iqbal's wrists together and then did the same to his ankles, leaving a length of rope free. The master lifted Iqbal upside down from the floor while the overseers climbed on top of some sacks of rice in order to reach the ceiling fan with the spare end of the rope. Iqbal swung by his feet like a pendulum. Iqbal recalled the master shouted, turning on the fan as he slammed the door shut.¹⁴⁷ He tried to remember all the prayers he had learned in church as a small boy, but only certain phrases seemed to come to him, and then they would repeat, over and over again. By the time they came to cut him down the next day he was only half conscious. They took him straight back into the factory as an example to the others. Iqbal was given a drink of water and a few mouthfuls of rice, before being chained to his loom and left to make what attempts he could at

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 55.

working.¹⁴⁸

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The Pakistani justice system is plagued with legal discrimination. This discrimination finds its roots in the constitutional amendments made by the former dictator and President Zia ul Haq. His policies of Islamization of the law targeted women and scheduled castes by discriminating against them.¹⁴⁹ Even though “all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection,”¹⁵⁰ the reality is quite different. An example is the requirement of the head of state of Pakistan to be Muslim – a provision which has not been changed by any government.

There are other laws that are injurious to the minorities and women. For example, the Hudood Ordinance based on the shariah or Islamic law and enacted first by Zia ul-Haq in 1979 in the wake of his Islamization policies was particularly disastrous. In one section of the Hudood Ordinance, a female rape victim was required to produce four Muslim male eyewitnesses of the act. If she failed to do so, she could be imprisoned for adultery. Since this was impossible, many exploiters would get away by exploiting female bond labourers. Women could rarely meet the requirements to defend themselves in court because of the Hudood Ordinance, they additionally had to fear prosecution for adultery.

Blasphemy laws are another example of discriminatory laws in Pakistan. A typical blasphemy in Pakistan is to utter a word denigrating the person of the Prophet Muhammad or desecrating the Quran. Punishment for blasphemy is usually death as per Shariah but that is rarely carried out. Victims are imprisoned instead. The blasphemy law is often used to threaten and exploit minorities and other marginalized groups. These laws were also introduced by Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s.

In Pakistan, the law banning the use of children as forced labour is quite clear in writing.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁹ Jasam, “Islamisation and the Pakistani State.”

¹⁵⁰ NAP, *Constitution of Pakistan*, Article 25.

The vast majority of bonded slaves are minority groups in Pakistan such as Christians and Hindus, the legal discrimination that these groups are already subject to provides room for persecution whether by other members of society or the police, whom the bonded labourers particularly fear.

Because of tensions between Christian and Islamic communities, several apologists on the Christian side would wish to portray Iqbal's death as that occurring because of religious matters. This does appear as smoke screen and matter are not that simple or straightforward, at least not in Pakistan. On the other hand, a connection between Iqbal's being Christian and his slavery and ultimate death cannot and must not be ruled out. His being a Christian has everything to do with the fact that he was pressed into slavery in the first place.

The subtext of Iqbal's story is both political and economic. As Timothy Ryan wrote in his essay about Iqbal Masih's life: "Politicians and businessmen in Pakistan form a tight web of relationships based on kin, clan, and caste. They count on family members who occupy positions of authority in local, provincial, national, and police bodies to look the other way when laws are violated, or, in many cases, to actively participate in crimes against workers and minorities."¹⁵¹ In this way, poverty often becomes the excuse for deeper lying problems and it is folly to see Iqbal's death as merely caused by economic hardships. It must be seen in the light of crimes committed against minorities also. This is a cruel fact of life in Pakistan that most of the people subjected to slavery are non-Muslim Hindus, Christian, indigenous tribal people, and converted Muslims. The link between poverty and intolerance is laid bare here.

As this section has shown, this is more than the story of one little boy's death a deeper problem. Enslavement based on religion is the slow grinding death of people who are denied economic advancement, education opportunities, decent housing and even clean water. In the end, Iqbal's death must have greater meaning beyond the tragedy of a bright meteor snuffed out by greed and corruption.

¹⁵¹ Timothy Ryan. "Iqbal Masih's Life – a Call to Human Rights Vigilance." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 03-05-1995.

III) The Legacy of Iqbal Masih

While the previous section described the economic and social conditions of Pakistan which enabled Iqbal Masih's enslavement, this chapter shall show how he combatted social injustices with the help of institutions for combating child labour, both local, such as the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) and international, such as UNICEF and the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, while evaluating the effectiveness of "social labelling" campaigns. It will also discuss the ramifications of Iqbal Masih's actions, including after his untimely demise.

III.1) Iqbal Masih and the role of NGOs in combating child labour in Pakistan

Iqbal, however, was not dead yet. Despite appearances, his spirit had not been broken. After a year had passed the overseers occasionally forgot to put his chains on when he sat down to work, being eager to get to their tea in the fresh air.¹⁵²

One morning a dove flew in through the open door and began fluttering around the ceiling. The children, momentarily distracted, looked up at the welcome diversion.¹⁵³ Some even exclaimed and laughed in excitement. The noise brought the overseers in from the outside. The bird seemed determined to try to force its way through a small shuttered window, where only a chink of light was visible through a crack in the wood. It took the men several attempts with sticks to prise it open so the bird could escape.¹⁵⁴

The bird alighted on the sill, waiting momentarily, before launching itself back to freedom. Iqbal noticed the men did not bother to fasten the shutters shut as tightly as before. Although Iqbal had thought of running away from home, his mother was terrified of the repercussions the carpet

¹⁵² Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 60.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 62.

master would bring down on the family, so she kept his door locked at night.¹⁵⁵

When he was certain he was the only one left awake, Iqbal crept to the shuttered window and escaped.¹⁵⁶ Once free, he roamed around for days posing as a worker, clearing away rubbish, pushing anything edible that anyone left into his mouth, not attracting attention, moving in the shadows,¹⁵⁷ always walking, eager to put as many more miles between himself and his past.

After a night sleeping in a ditch beneath a clump of bushes, Iqbal awoke one morning to voices much too close to him for comfort. People were erecting a canopy and preparing a platform.¹⁵⁸ Children were streaming in. A man with a thick grey moustache drooping luxuriously around the sides of his mouth climbed onto the platform, held up his hands for silence and gave a speech. His name was Ehsan Khan, the founder of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front. He was telling the people that bonded labour is illegal in Pakistan that the government had passed a law.¹⁵⁹ This was a Freedom Day celebration by the BLLF he had walked into.

While listening to Ehsan, Iqbal realised for the first time that he was himself a bonded labourer.¹⁶⁰ He approached Ehsan who invited him to mount the stage and tell the crowd about his life. Helping hands lifted him up beside Ehsan Khan. The crowd fell silent as Iqbal told about his ordeal. After listening Ehsan explained to him how he was under no obligation to return and that the government had cancelled all the debts.¹⁶¹

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In the past, there have been several attempts to reintegrate children that have been working in the past as child labourers. The Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal, a safety net for people such as these, has

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵⁸ "Iqbal's Brief Biography." *Solidaridad*. <https://iqbalmasih.solidaridad.net/iqbals-brief-biography>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

programmes that compromise a two-pronged strategy: poverty alleviation of child labourers and addressing the needs of quality education of the child labourers who are attempting to reintegrate into the formal education system.¹⁶²

The Education Voucher Scheme (EVS) is one of the Punjab Education Foundation's flagship projects that attempts to bring quality education to children of weak educational prospects in marginalized and less affluent areas in urban slums and shanty towns of the Punjab.¹⁶³

It has been the prerogative of economic historians to study the effects laws that attempt to manage child labour and enforce compulsory education have had on the actual eradication of the problem of child labour. When the dynamics of Pakistani laws such as the Employment of Children Act are analysed in comparison to social change and compulsory schooling laws in the United States in the 19th and early 20th century, for example, results indicate that "the increase in the level of schooling during the period studied was not caused by the enforcement of laws" and that "legislation was not the major factor contributing to the dramatic reduction in the magnitude of child labour witnessed during the period."¹⁶⁴ This demonstrates that, like Pakistan, decreases in child labour are not necessarily driven by legislation. Legislation does raise awareness and set parameters of what is and is not acceptable and punishable, but decrease in child labour is usually more attributable to a change in society's attitude towards the work of children and their rights, as well as the slow improvement of technology which makes unskilled labour redundant.

Other research, however, suggests attitudes toward education does have a change and such laws are important. A child attending full-time school is less likely to fall prey to child labour, because there will be little time after school for working opportunities. Similarly, the ILO¹⁶⁵ also supports this argument that full-time school attendance is largely incompatible with the worst forms

¹⁶² Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 37.

¹⁶³ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 7.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁵ ILO, *Forced Labour and Human Trafficking*.

of child labour.¹⁶⁶ Microfinance has been and still is a potent instrument for self-empowerment by enabling the poor, especially women, to become economic agents of change, as a result by empowering the families, particularly women microfinance can become an effective tool to reduce child labour.¹⁶⁷

Most people, from the lowly shopkeeper to the high-flying government minister believe child labour is a tradition in Pakistan, and that the economy is dependent on it. They believe patience is key and that eventually the economy will develop as it has in other countries and people will no longer need to hire children to do the work of adults. Even ministers who believe it is wrong to make children work in factories will have them working in their homes as servants and will think nothing of it.¹⁶⁸ They won't give it a second thought and when their double standards are pointed out to them, they will say there is no comparison, that they are kind employers and that the children are happy to be working in nice conditions. Every day they go out in the streets and are surrounded by children who are working every waking hour, serving tea, begging, working in shops, in restaurants, but they don't notice them, any more than they would notice leaves on a tree. For them, it is just "the way things are."¹⁶⁹ A change can come about only if there is a paradigm shift in thinking about children in all strata of society, as what happened during the formation of the Factory Acts in Britain centuries prior. For legislation to be effective, a change in attitude is both essential and necessary.

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Ehsan took Iqbal to Muridke to meet his mother. He explained to Inayat Bibi that he was taking her son with him to Lahore. Having a son who could read and write would greatly benefit the family, he said.¹⁷⁰ He handed her a pamphlet and told her if the carpet master came, she should

¹⁶⁶ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 47.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷⁰ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 95.

show him that. He explained that the work Iqbal had done for him repaid the loan a thousand times over already. She teared up and hugged Iqbal and Ehsan produced some money and gave it to her in order to persuade her to let her son go.¹⁷¹

Ehsan took Iqbal to Freedom Campus, a school located at Regal Chowk for former bonded slave children. The BLLF freed the children from their backbreaking routine and Iqbal was taken to Lahore by the Front to educate him and treat his dwarfism.¹⁷² Ehsan explained to Iqbal the importance of an education. “If you can read and write and do some simple sums no one can trick you into signing a contract that makes you a slave again. The world is full of money-lenders and slave drivers who are always ready to take advantage of the uneducated. Once you have an education you will be able to help your family and neighbours to understand more about their rights in the world.”¹⁷³

Accompanied by a BLLF lawyer, Ehsan visited the factory where Iqbal had been kept, thus assuaging the boy’s guilt of having escaped while the rest still laboured in poverty and darkness. Iqbal guided them to the factory.¹⁷⁴ The owner was away and the overseers were intimidated by their visitors; while the lawyer was holding up sheaves of paper, Ehsan strode towards the factory and emerged with the children.¹⁷⁵ When they saw him the other children’s puzzlement seemed to deepen even further. “My friend has set you free,” Iqbal recounted saying. He felt a load lifting from his conscience. They were going to be free, and it was all because of his own brave act. His heart soared.¹⁷⁶ The first raid Iqbal was a part of was the easiest. More difficult ones were to follow. For Iqbal, this first raid was a triumph. When he was released, he had owed the master a little over 12,000 rupees. In a later interview, Iqbal had said that now the roles between him and his former

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷² “Iqbal Masih’s Heart-Rending Tragedy” Pangaea, 03-05-1995. http://pangaea.org/street_children/asia/lahore.htm.

¹⁷³ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 112.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 119.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 121.

master had reversed. “I am no longer afraid of him. Now he is afraid of me.”¹⁷⁷

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Through Pakistan’s history there have been several non-government organizations that are involved in the fight against child labour in Pakistan. In the late 1990s, seventy-five percent of the world’s footballs were being produced in Pakistan. This was possible only because of rampant child labour in the industry with thousands of children from the ages of five to fourteen were employed as “stitchers” for more than ten to eleven hours a day.¹⁷⁸ The Atlanta Agreement was signed on February 14, 1997 in Atlanta Georgia by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), UNICEF, Save the Children, and the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The agreement that was signed was called the Partner’s Agreement to Eliminate Child Labour in the Soccer Industry in Pakistan.¹⁷⁹

The role of NGOs also needs to be explored further. James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer have argued that argued that “NGO funding has led to a proliferation of competing groups, which set communities and groups against each other, undermining the existing social movements. Rather than compensating for the social damage inflicted by free market policies and conditions of debt bondage, the NGO-channelled foreign aid complements the international financial institutions’ neo-liberal agenda.”¹⁸⁰

Save the Children has been doing some extensive work in attempting to eradicate and shine light on the practice of using children to produce sports goods. A joint effort is reached between the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry which represents international partner brands.¹⁸¹

SPARC or the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child is a non-governmental

¹⁷⁷ “Pakistan betaalt na moord op 12-jarige strijder tegen kinderarbeid.” *Trouw*, 21-04-1995.

¹⁷⁸ ILRF. *Child Labour*. <https://laborrights.org/issues/child-labor>.

¹⁷⁹ ILO, UNICEF & SCCI, *Partner’s Agreement to Eliminate Child Labour*.

¹⁸⁰ Petras and Veltmeyer, “Age of Reverse Aid.”

¹⁸¹ Husselbee, “NGOs as Development Partners to the Corporates.”

organization based in Islamabad that has been doing research on the issue of child labour in Pakistan. The research has included publication of articles and books on child labour, juvenile justice and child rights. An annual report titled “The State of Pakistan’s Children”, and a large number of brochures come out each year that urge successive governments to upgrade laws on child labour and set a legal age limit for employment in Pakistan; their efforts so far seem to have been in vain.¹⁸² SPARC was founded in 1992. The idea for creating Pakistan’s leading child rights organization came to fruition following a discussion between Anees Jillani and the then UNICEF Program Officer in Islamabad.¹⁸³ Besides UNICEF, the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) also supported SPARC. In 1996, a year after Iqbal was killed, SPARC organized in Pakistan a Global March against child labour, being able to galvanize a significant part of the rural and urban areas in the country against the issue of child labour. In 2003, SPARC received the United Nations Recognition Award in recognition of its work in highlighting the plight of children and promoting the rights of children in Pakistan.¹⁸⁴ SPARC has planned and conducted strategic interventions for children who are in contact or conflict with law, bonded labour, living in streets, and disaster hit areas.

UNICEF is another non-government organization that is involved and working on the issue of child labour in Pakistan. UNICEF supported the NCCWD, drafting of the Child Protection Law and the Child Protection Policy, and initiated the establishment of the Children Protection Monitoring and Data Collecting System¹⁸⁵ (UNICEF n.d.). ROZAN and Shaheen Welfare Trust are some other organizations that have worked to protect children and their rights in Pakistan.

Iqbal found he had little time to spend with the other children outside of class. There was so much to learn from being around Ehsan and the other adults at the BLLF. He loved being given jobs

¹⁸² Denice, “Towards the Eradication of Child Labor.”

¹⁸³ SPARC “About Us.” <http://sparcpk.org/AboutUs.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ UNICEF. “Child Protection.” <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>.

because they provided him with excuses to find out more about Lahore, about the organisation and about the people he had suddenly found himself living amongst.¹⁸⁶

Iqbal began to ask Ehsan how he became interested in freeing slaves and established BLLF. Ehsan had a seventeen-year-old student and knew nothing about the way people were enslaved in Pakistan. Like most well-to-do people, he had learned about slaves in America and thought that when they were freed that was the end of slavery in the world. He had seen children at work but never gave it another thought. Whilst training to be a journalist an encounter with an old man trying to cross a road changed that.¹⁸⁷

Ehsan had stopped to help him who told him a tragic story. The old man had been a worker at one of the brick kilns all his life. All his family, including his two daughters, worked there too. When he discovered his daughters were being raped regularly by the owner, the family decided to rebel and escape. They reached Lahore but the daughters were recaptured and taken back.¹⁸⁸

Ehsan went back to his university and rounded up as many friends he could who went to the police station in the area of the brick kiln with placards and surrounded it, shouting slogans, singing songs, demanding they did something about rescuing these two girls. The girls were eventually rescued. The whole endeavour made Ehsan realise just how widespread the problem was. So, he began campaigning.¹⁸⁹

After helping Ehsan on multiple raids, Iqbal becomes a celebrity and begins to receive fan mail from children in the Freedom Campus and elsewhere. Many of the children in the schools had heard about Iqbal from their teachers, who would tell them stories of his daring raids on factories and his bravery in the face of owners with guns and clubs. They would sometimes embellish their stories by giving Iqbal almost superhuman powers. If he was aware these children looked on him as a living hero, he did not show it. The urgency of his words as he spoke about the future of Pakistan

¹⁸⁶ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 123.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁸⁹ “El Nobel de la Paz, 2014, Kailash Satyarthi, en A Coruña.” *La Opinión A Coruña*. 07-05-2015.

gave the impression that his whole being was taken up with mastering the problems of child labour and education.¹⁹⁰

Wherever Ehsan went, he always wore the same traditional Pakistani clothes that he wore in Lahore: the long billowing white shirt and loose trousers called *shalwar kamiz*. Other men might have adapted their wardrobe to a more westernized style, but he was never happy with compromises. In the summer of 1995, he was in Vienna for a human rights conference manning the BLLF stall, joined by hundreds of other such organisations. There he met Doug Cahn from Reebok Human Rights Foundation, who had flown in from the United States for the conference.¹⁹¹

The foundation Doug represented provided Reebok Human Rights Awards to young people who had made substantial contributions to human rights in non-violent ways. In Iqbal he saw a worthy applicant. Ehsan was sceptical. He knew the sports goods industry had traditionally been one of the biggest employers of bonded labour in the third world. Painfully aware of that, Doug explained why Reebok were so anxious to distance themselves from such practices and wanted to help repair the damage that companies such as theirs had done in the past. They had a football factory in Pakistan and insisted that no children were employed there, and that none of the work was sent out to other factories where children were employed.¹⁹² Ehsan spent a few months mulling over Doug's proposal in his head. Iqbal would get to travel to America and the story of tens of thousands of children working in Pakistan as bonded labourers would reach a huge number of new people. Pakistan was such a distant concept for most westerners, but Reebok was a powerful company and would be able to get the message to a lot of people.¹⁹³

In response to consumers' demands for ethical labour standards, human rights awards and "social labelling" was promoted. The aim of the latter program was "to enable consumers to choose

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Susan Kuklin. *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998, 138.

¹⁹² Ibid., 139.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

goods that meet certain standards considered as socially desirable.”¹⁹⁴ They were initially launched in hand-knotted carpets industry but since then different initiatives have been put in place in different sectors.¹⁹⁵

Theoretically, the premium paid by consumers should be large enough to raise adult wages possible thus removing the necessity of using children. This is the mechanism of labelling initiatives. However, the risk is that the producers would capture the premium instead of it reaching the children and their families. Thus, if labelling is to be effective, it should be used in conjunction with other initiatives to help child workers such as a fund to finance education and training programmes. An example of a combination of these two mechanisms is offered by the Rugmark experiment, probably the most credible labelling initiative to combat child labour (see below).¹⁹⁶

Absence of monitoring and their applicability only to export goods also limits social labelling’s uses. Moreover, social labelling can be assimilated to a kind of sanction. And sanctions have contributed to worsening the situation of many children, by displacing them to more hazardous occupations.¹⁹⁷ Labelling initiatives came as a way to preserve a firm’s reputation. These private initiatives can at best be complementary. Better initiatives than codes of conduct and labelling are those that try to help remove children from work by devoting some revenues to their survival and to their education.¹⁹⁸ The sad fact is that multinational corporations (MNCs) only respond to bad publicity by countering with phenomena known as “greenwashing” or newer ad campaigns. Greenwashing is a term used to define the time when MNCs try to rebrand themselves as socially responsible and environmentally conscious.

When the world first came to realize that the soccer ball industry was built on the labour of countless children, as the controversy sparked during the 1990s and international media attention

¹⁹⁴ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 77.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

was trained on Pakistan, sports industry giants like Nike and Adidas were forces to address the issue or at least be seen to be doing so.¹⁹⁹ Despite various certifying agencies like Rugmark's successor GoodWeave International popping up, which testified to a product's child-labour-free status, it is evident that publicity campaigns were carried out only because the primary interest, which is capital, was threatened. It made good economic sense to carry them out. Schools for child labourers sprang up in Pakistan only after pressure from the federal government mounted. The Child Care Foundation, an initiative touted by the Export Promotion Bureau in 1996 at a time when "propaganda against Pakistan on the child labour issue was at its peak... and Pakistan was made a target of international media campaign."²⁰⁰

In same year Iqbal was killed, Rugmark came into being. Rugmark was an international initiative begun by a German aid agency and some Indian non-governmental organisations. Its aim was to eliminate child labour in India, Pakistan, and Nepal. The Rugmark concept included two main objectives in the producing countries: the inspection and certification of the carpet production, and social programmes for former child workers and their families.

Carpets produced without child labour were labelled and only such carpets were sold in consumer countries like the Netherlands, the UK and the US. Since the beginning of the Rugmark initiative, more than two million carpets carrying the label against illegal child labour were produced. There appears to be a decreasing trend in violations to surprise inspections at Rugmark affiliated factories. At the beginning one illegal child worker was found in every five inspections, now the proportion is one in nineteen and decreasing.²⁰¹ Rugmark merged with GoodWeave International, founded by Indian Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi.

When Ehsan went to Iqbal with the news of the Reebok Award, the child was sitting

¹⁹⁹ Toor, "Child Labour in Pakistan," 201.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, pg. 82.

watching cartoons flicker on the TV screen.²⁰² Ehsan decided they would be stopping over at Sweden where many friends and supporters helped raise support for the BLLF. They were organising a conference in Stockholm so Iqbal was prepared to give a speech to a big audience.²⁰³ He told them about the beatings and the long hours, how they were never paid, how the children had no chance of an education and often died young, their backs bent from the years of labour. As his last words sunk in, the whole audience rose to its feet like a tidal wave, their hands above their heads as they applauded, many with tears in their eyes. Iqbal beamed back, raising his arms in the air like a victorious prize-fighter. Someone took a photograph that was soon to find its way in Inayat Bibi's living room.²⁰⁴ "I will be like Abraham Lincoln," Iqbal told them, "freeing Pakistan's slaves like he freed America's."²⁰⁵

In the US, Iqbal toured schools and spoke to children. They stared at the small boy who stood before them in his strange national dress, looking confident and talking in a language they had never heard before, telling them of his life's mission: to free Pakistan's 7.5 million bonded children.²⁰⁶ At Broad Meadows School, Doug Cahn and the Reebok public relations team had organised a campaign to raise awareness of child slavery. The children had written six hundred letters, which they sent off to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, to senior American politicians and to the managers of local carpet stores, urging them not to buy products that had been made by child labourers.²⁰⁷

At a dinner at an Italian restaurant the night before the award ceremony, around forty people gathered to meet Iqbal to talk about the award. The President of Brandeis University was also at the dinner and announced he would be happy to offer Iqbal a scholarship to study at the university once

²⁰² Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 196.

²⁰³ "Child Labour Critic is Slain in Pakistan." *New York Times*, 19-04-1995.

²⁰⁴ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 207.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁰⁶ "Who Was Iqbal Masih?" *The Mirror Image*, 12-2009.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

he turned eighteen, if he qualified. When the offer was translated to Iqbal he walked over to the president and hugged him.²⁰⁸

The award ceremony the next morning was held in the auditorium of Northwestern University hosted by Blair Underwood.²⁰⁹ In his speech Blair Underwood compared how Iqbal's message resembled that of Moses in the Bible. "In a call that has echoed through the centuries and the millennia, a man named Moses thundered, "Let my people go!" Like Moses, Iqbal "brought the message of freedom to some 3,000 children."²¹⁰

The speech Iqbal gave is an example of the values originating in the West being reiterated to the West to "awaken" them from apathy into action. In the following statement, Iqbal's appeal to President Clinton to put sanctions on Pakistan was an attempt to get the international community to back up legislations and treaties that outlawed child labour with the threat of force.

"For us slave children, Ehsan Khan has done the same work Abraham Lincoln did for the slaves of America. Today you are free and I am free too!" is an example of internalized western values.²¹¹ This is followed by an exhortation to the American people to give up their child slavery inducing ways. "The owner of the business where I worked told us that it is America who asks us to enslave the children. American people like the cheap carpets, the rugs, and the towels that we make, so they want bonded labor to go on. Children ... need this instrument, the pen, like the American children have. I still remember those days I saw Pakistani-made rugs in American stores, and I was very sad knowing that they were made by bonded labor children. I felt very sorry about it. I request President Clinton to put sanctions on those countries which use child labor. Do not extend help to those countries still using children as bonded laborers. Allow the children to have the pen".²¹²

This in my estimation not only created hostilities towards Iqbal and the BLLF, but ultimately led to his death.

Ehsan urged the Reebok committee to keep Iqbal's prize money in the US and invest it for him. That way he hoped no one could accuse him of stealing the boy's money.²¹³ He had made a

²⁰⁸ Kathy Gannon. "At Age 12, A Prominent Activist Is Gunned Down." *AP News*, 18-04-1995.

²⁰⁹ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 213

²¹⁰ Broad, *Global Backlash*, 199.

²¹¹ Broad, *Global Backlash*, 199.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 214.

great many enemies in his country who would do or say anything to discredit him.²¹⁴ Ehsan had become more protective of Iqbal and warned him from straying too far from Freedom Campus alone. There were a lot of people angry with them. The boy would puff out his chest and declare he was not afraid. “They keep writing their letters but they do not do anything else,” he would say in reference to the hate mail he received regularly: “Leave our children alone or you will die.”²¹⁵ The BLLF office had also come under attack numerous times. The corpse of a dog, hanging from the ceiling fan, the walls daubed with its blood, and the words “death”, “traitors”, and “Indian spies” would be written among other angry smears.²¹⁶ Ehsan had also been told about a speech made by the President of the Islamabad Carpet Exporters’ Association, in which he had claimed the industry was being victimized by enemy agents spreading lies about bonded labour and damaging business internationally. He knew that the man was talking about the BLLF and that many people would be listening to such a speech, people with a lot of vested interests in the industry. Nevertheless, Iqbal having returned to Pakistan, threw himself at his studies with a renewed vigour now that he had the chance of going to college in the United States.²¹⁷

As Easter of 1995 approached Iqbal arranged to visit home alone so that he could spend longer time with his family without them feeling inhibited by Ehsan’s presence.²¹⁸ When the bus deposited him at the end of the road he started the long walk to the village. As he went, he collected a crowd of people who recognized him as Inayat’s long-lost son. Word had spread that someone interesting was returning to Muridke.²¹⁹ Arriving at the gate to the courtyard of the house, his mother appeared with her arms outstretched and tears flowing down her cheeks. “My son has

²¹⁴ Maria del nevo. “Let Them Hang Me.” *New Internationalist*, 5-1-1996.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 182.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 220-221.

²¹⁸ “Iqbal Masih’s Heart Rending Tragedy.”

²¹⁹ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 224.

returned,” she wailed dramatically.²²⁰

That Easter morning, as the shot echo died down, Liaquat and Faryad rose, blood splattered all over their clothes. It was a few seconds before either of the boys realised Iqbal had not stood up with them. He was lying still and silent, his body twisted awkwardly. His white shirt had turned crimson and the stain was spreading.²²¹

By late morning Ehsan, whilst in Islamabad, was being accused of having had killed the boy for publicity.²²² Iqbal’s body was taken to the same police station where he had the encounter with the commander years before. People began to crowd into the commander’s office to recount the boy’s death. The story Iqbal’s cousin is said to have reported to the police is that the three boys were cycling and out came upon a local farm worker, Muhammad Ashraf, alias Hero, pleasuring himself with a donkey in the field. Iqbal had made fun of the man and angry at being interrupted and mocked, Ashraf killed Iqbal.²²³

According to the post-mortem report, Iqbal received 72 pellets, which were enough to kill him. The commander took down the statement of Faryad Masih as eyewitness, and booked Ashraf Hero for murder and bestiality. Zaki Hussain, the landowner for whom Ashraf worked admitted Ashraf had stolen his licensed gun and used it to kill Iqbal. Hero’s brother said Ashraf was a heroin addict for the past two years, which the land owner Zaki Hussain supplied him.²²⁴ When Ehsan arrived, he ignored the gaggle congregating behind him as he knelt beside the body of his little friend and bent forward to kiss his forehead, causing a cloud of flies to rise angrily into the air.²²⁵

Ehsan did not believe the story of the donkey. However, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front provided no evidence for blaming the slaying of the child on the “carpet mafia.” The same

²²⁰ Ibid., 226.

²²¹ Crofts, 229.

²²² Ibid., 233.

²²³ “Pakistan Betaalt Na Moord Op 12-jarige.”

²²⁴ “Iqbal Masih’s Heart-Rending Tragedy.”

²²⁵ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 236.

was said by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the country's most respected human rights group.²²⁶ However, the future Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi, who headed the Indian branch of the BLLF, suspected the Pakistani police's involvement in Iqbal's murder because of their silence. He supported Ehsan's position and said that "they [Pakistani officials] have insulted the 80 million child slaves in Asia today."²²⁷ Satyarthi promised to go to Geneva to present Iqbal's case before the United Nations Human Rights Commission. "The carpet industry was very annoyed with Iqbal. They had been threatening to kill him for weeks," he said. "He was the first child to expose the inhuman plight of carpet children."²²⁸

During Iqbal's funeral, the whole village filed past to look at the boy who had made Muridke famous. They had their very own hero to celebrate and mourn. Children who had once worked in the brick kilns whom Iqbal had led to freedom, came with bricks imprinted with their hand prints, and laid them around his grave in a makeshift monument. But within days all the bricks would be stolen.²²⁹

Iqbal's murder caused reverberations in embassies and government buildings all over the world, making people think and talk about the system that could allow such a thing to happen. By the time the tale had reached the very highest political echelons on Pakistan the story invented within the police compound had been given one more twist. The Prime Minister, when questioned about the murder on television, suggested that Iqbal had been shot by an irate farmer when he, Iqbal, had been caught copulating with the farmer's donkey! The image fitted with another myth that was being circulated that Iqbal had not been a boy at all but a midget who Ehsan had been

²²⁶ Kathy Gannon. "Young Activist's Death Hits Pakistani Carpet Sales: Trade: Exports to West have diminished even though producers haven't been linked to death of 12-year-old who fought child labor." *Los Angeles Times*, 31-05-1995.

²²⁷ Romain Franklin. "Assassinat d'un gavroche pakistanais. Iqbal Masih, âgé de 12 ans, militait contre l'esclavage des enfants." *Libération*, 20-04-1995.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 239.

passing off as a child for publicity purposes.²³⁰ In the wake of the international outrage, Prime Minister Bhutto pledged to pay damages to Iqbal's family. She also vowed to tackle child labour, but only limited steps were taken. Powerful industrialists and influencers had her ear who argued that Pakistan, impoverished as it was, relied on the income earned from export of carpets.²³¹

However, the tales of the thousands of children he had led to safety grew more prolifically than slurs of how Ehsan had exploited him and cheated his family of their rightful money. Soon after the funeral, Ehsan made plans to travel to Europe for a human rights conference.²³² While in his hotel room in Stockholm he received a call from a colleague in Lahore who told him he must not come back. "They have said that if you return to Pakistan you will be arrested at the airport for treason. If you come back, you will be hanged within days. This time they mean it."²³³ Ehsan stayed on in Europe overseeing BLLF activities from abroad where he remains in hiding to this day.

III.2) Iqbal Masih's international impact

On the first anniversary of the death of Iqbal Masih, the UK parliament tabled a motion calling the Government of Pakistan to investigate the ongoing persecution of the BLLF and conduct a full impartial investigation into Iqbal's death. They noted that a high court judge's criticism of the police investigation had been ignored and that the unjust charges against Ehsan be withdrawn.²³⁴ Ehsan maintained that Iqbal had been receiving death threats from people in the carpet industry who were angered by the child's comments about bonded labour.²³⁵

In response to his death, the campaign "A School for Iqbal" was created to raise money to build a school for former child labourers. The campaign invited donations of \$12, a symbolic figure

²³⁰ Ibid., 240.

²³¹ "Pakistan Betaalt Na Moord Op 12-jarige."

²³² Crofts, *The Little Hero*, 241.

²³³ Ibid., 242.

²³⁴ UK Parliament. "First Anniversary of the Death of Iqbal Masih." *Early Day Motions*, 1995-96 session, 16-04-1996.

²³⁵ "Child Labor Critic is Slain in Pakistan."

because Iqbal was sold into slavery for \$12 and 12 years old when he was killed and.²³⁶ Since his visit, Broad Meadows middle school began an involvement in human rights and the school curriculum was modelled around taking action to change injustices. Broad Meadows went on to win the Reebok Award for this project in 1996. The Foundation awarded the school \$12,000 in recognition of the symbolic figure, 12.²³⁷ Upon hearing of Iqbal's death, around two hundred Indian children demonstrated outside the Pakistani Embassy in New Delhi.²³⁸

Imran Malik, who was the vice chairman of the Pakistan Carpet and Manufacturers and Exporters Association at the time estimated a \$10 million worth of loss in orders since Iqbal was killed on April 16, 1995. Importers in Sweden, Australia, Germany, Belgium and Italy cancelled orders and urged Amnesty International, the UN, and ILO to launch an independent judicial inquiry into the murder. Pakistani carpets, once considered a piece of art, were soon looked upon as if drenched in the blood of children.²³⁹ The PCMEA, declared "a propaganda campaign unleashed by our rivals, particularly Indian exporters had inflicted the "worst blow" to the industry. The minds of our consumers have been so much poisoned that a carpet, traditionally a gift, has now become a sign of slavery."²⁴⁰ The Pakistan government also ultimately denied that Iqbal's murder was linked to his crusade against child labour.²⁴¹

Ehsan was accused of "mounting economic warfare and causing a recurring financial loss to Pakistani business interests abroad".²⁴² Treason carries the death penalty in Pakistan but maintained his innocence stating that the "government should be helping us put an end to bonded labour instead

²³⁶ Ron Adams. "The Kids Campaign to Build." *Mirror Image*. <http://mirrorimage.com/iqbal/>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Franklin, "Assassinat d'un gavroche pakistanais."

²³⁹ Gannon, "Young Activist's Death Hits Pakistani Carpet Sales."

²⁴⁰ Sami Zubeiri. "Boy's Murder Hits Pakistani Carpet Sales." *The Independent*, 02-05-1995.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² del Nevo, "Let Them Hang Me."

of accusing us of treason.”²⁴³ During the police raids on BLLF Zafaryab Ahmad, a journalist and researcher was arrested, accused of “exploiting the death of Iqbal Masih to undermine the Pakistani interest abroad.”²⁴⁴ Moving to the US and lecturing at Colby College in Maine, Zafaryab explained how he had been accused of colluding with a Hollywood producer to make a film exposing human rights violations in Pakistan with the assistance of Indian intelligence officers, charges which proven, could have him hang for treason.²⁴⁵ “The problem is that while demand exists in the West, the manufacturers will continue to use children because they want to ensure maximum profits. The West is just as much to blame for this evil practice as the government of Pakistan.”²⁴⁶

The short life of Iqbal Masih was not without its impact. A few years after his death, the Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association (PCMEA) concluded an agreement with ILO to combat child labour in the carpet industry. Drawing upon the experiences from Iqbal Masih’s life and the soccer ball project, their own project entitled “Combating Child Labour in the Carpet Industry in Pakistan” was initiated in 1999. The project objectives were pursued through two interconnected modules, “Prevention and Monitoring” and “Social Protection”. Over a period of nine years, the project contributed significantly towards elimination of child labour from the carpet weaving sector. Over 26,000 carpet weaving children and their siblings were reintegrated back to school.²⁴⁷

Iqbal’s story was covered in major newspapers around the world. Seven thousand miles from Pakistan another 12-year-old boy committed Iqbal’s story to memory, an act that marked the birth of a youth-driven movement against child labour that would span 20 countries. Craig Kielburger was searching through a Toronto newspaper for the comics when a photo of Iqbal caught

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Peadar Cremin. “Fight for Child Workers! ” in *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*. Eds. Bob Bigelow and Bob Peterson. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Press, 2002: 206-207..

²⁴⁷ Mazhar, *Child Labor in Pakistan*, 39.

his eye. He read Iqbal's story and reflected on the profound differences between the two. He spoke to his class about what he had learned, and his crusade against child labour had begun. They called it Free the Children.

On one occasion, Free the Children members learned that Kailash Satyarthi, an Indian leader in the fight against child labour, had been imprisoned for his actions on behalf of child workers. They collected 3,000 signatures and wrote a letter to the prime minister of India asking for Satyarthi's release. The petition and the letter were sent to India in a shoebox. The Kielburger home eventually became the world headquarters for Free the Children (FTC), a non-profit organization that works to abolish child labour practices worldwide.²⁴⁸

In his own Nobel Peace Prize 2014 acceptance speech, Kailash Satyarthi paid homage to the little hero from dusty Muridke. "My dear children of the world... I give the biggest credit of this honour to [among others] Iqbal Masih from Pakistan who made the supreme sacrifice for protecting the freedom and dignity of children. I humbly accept this award on behalf of all such martyrs."²⁴⁹

What else accounts for the fascination with Iqbal Masih? Iqbal figures as one who 'fights' against child labour and 'inspires' others to join his 'crusade' after he 'frees' himself. The mythology of Iqbal shows children to be both powerless and powerful at the same time. The mythology of the events in Iqbal's life has the capacity to be both persistent and potent, as shown in Susan Kuklin's book *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*²⁵⁰ and Craig Kielburger's *Free the Children A Young Man's Personal Crusade Against Child Labour*.²⁵¹

Both works contribute to a mythology around Iqbal's life. Words like 'crusade' are used to describe the work of Kielburger and the other activists Iqbal inspired which "points to the Christian

²⁴⁸ Tracy Rysavy. "Free the Children: the Story of Craig Kielburger." *Yes!*, 01-10-1999.

²⁴⁹ Kailash Satyarthi. "Let us March!" Speech, Oslo, Norway, 10-12-2014, Nobel Prize.

²⁵⁰ Kuklin, *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders against Child Slavery*.

²⁵¹ Craig Kielburger and Kevin Major. *Free the Children: A Young Man's Personal Crusade Against Child Labour*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.

overtones of the mythology.”²⁵² The word ‘crusade’ has come to be commonly used in association with movements to eradicate child labour.²⁵³ Since a crusade implies a pilgrimage, a voyage to defend or to recover something sacred, the sacred object of the activist children’s crusade is childhood itself. Implicit in this concept of a ‘crusade’ is the opposition between a civilized West and a barbaric East.²⁵⁴

Iqbal’s death on ‘Easter Sunday’, being sold into slavery like Joseph in Genesis, the fact that Masih in Urdu means Messiah, his belonging to a small oppressed minority in Pakistan, all point to his own figuration as Christ.²⁵⁵ Even the photographs of Iqbal that appear on the cover of Kuklin’s book represent Iqbal as an icon.²⁵⁶ The photograph is ripped horizontally and vertically in the shape of a cross.²⁵⁷

Like Christ, Iqbal provides a model for the Western child and Kielburger can be seen as a convert. Kielburger’s own book begins with a conversion narrative evoking St. Augustine and his *Confessions*. Upon reading about Iqbal in *The Toronto Star*, Kielburger ‘converts’ to the message the ‘Messiah’ brings. Although a Christian narrative may be forced, I leave that to the reader’s own discretion.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to determine the history of child labour in Pakistan, its causes, and the impact the short life of Iqbal Masih had on it. As we set out to explore, we observed a three-tiered influence. The first is the influence of global humanitarian laws that created a narrative for

²⁵² Lisa Hermine Makman. “Child Crusaders: The Literature of Global Childhood.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26:3 (2002): 287-304.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 295.

the abolishment of child slavery. This was begun in post-Industrial Revolution Britain and exported to the rest of the world. Influenced by the work of Robert Peel and Wilberforce in Great Britain, the abolition movement, and especially the role Abraham Lincoln played in ending slavery in the United States was the cultural point of reference for Iqbal Masih and his rescuer Ehsan Khan to model their careers around. On numerous occasions Iqbal had referred to himself (and Ehsan) as doing the work of Abraham Lincoln in freeing the slaves. This shows an internalization of western values and an alignment with the source of those values.

The second influence is the message Iqbal and Ehsan take to the West. Because of the laws that were implemented in the Industrial West against child slavery and bonded slavery in general, the phenomenon was exported to the developing countries. The demand for products such as carpets and soccer balls increased in the West so their production was outsourced to countries like Pakistan which exacerbated the child labour problem. This is the grievance that Iqbal and Ehsan take to western countries like Sweden and the United States and remind them not only of their commitment to end slavery but hold them responsible for the problem as well. It is the incessant demand in the US for carpets that creates the problem and Iqbal reminds his Swedish and American audience that children deserve pens in their hands, not carpet-making tools. By becoming an icon of activism against slavery in the developing world, Iqbal was able, in his own small way, to revive the discourse of modern-day slavery in the developed world who took a fresh look at how their policies were keeping millions of faceless children in bondage. Iqbal's appeal to President Clinton to impose sanctions and use other forceful means to make Pakistan comply with international labour laws, ended up creating enemies at home whose vested interests were threatened.

The third influence is the death of Iqbal had on the reawakened commitment in the West, and to a limited degree in Pakistan and India, to fight against child labour. This reawakened consciousness as observed in the actions of the Broad Meadows schoolchildren to build a school for Iqbal, or the drastic drop in sales of carpets made in Pakistan, influenced activism against child labour in Pakistan. Ultimately, at the centre of the struggle to end child slavery in Pakistan is the

story of a boy whose heart yearned to be set free.

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