**Remembering Iqbal Masih**

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In 2019, the UN General Assembly declared August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief to honour the victims and survivors of heinous acts who often remain forgotten. While indeed, only in the last few weeks, we have witnessed several cases of atrocities based on religion or belief, such as the attack on a Hindu temple in Bhong, the abduction of a 15-year-old Hindu girl in Tharparkar, and the attack on an Imambargah in Karachi, on the third anniversary of this day, let us pay tribute to Iqbal Masih.

Born just outside of Lahore in 1983, Iqbal belonged to a Christian family of low socioeconomic standing. At the age of four, Iqbal was forced to start working at a carpet weaving factory to pay off his family’s debt. Iqbal and the other bonded children were required to work for at least 14 hours a day, six days a week in a small hot room as the windows could not be opened to protect the wool. If the children talked back to the guards, ran away, or were sick, they were punished with severe beatings, being chained to their loom, extended periods of isolation in a dark closet, and being hung upside down.

[US claims blast in Kabul was strike at Daesh/ISIS-K terror group](https://nation.com.pk/30-Aug-2021/us-claims-blast-in-kabul-was-strike-at-daesh-isis-k-terror-group)

Six years went by and Iqbal was still working at the carpet factory as the interest on his family’s loan kept increasing every day. Iqbal had realised by then that his debt would not be paid off anytime soon. One day, Iqbal heard about a meeting of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) which was working to help children like Iqbal who had been sold into bonded labour. After work, Iqbal snuck away to attend the meeting and learned that the Pakistani government had outlawed all forms of forced labour in 1992 and cancelled all outstanding loans to these employers. This news that he has a chance at freedom brought hope into his life and he rushed to the police station to report his employer. But the police brought him back to the factory to collect a finder’s fee for returning escaped children. However, Iqbal managed to escape again and this time he ran to a BLLF school in Lahore. Finally able to access education, Iqbal promised himself that he would become a lawyer so that he could help others like him. At the school, Iqbal participated in multiple demonstrations against bonded child labour and also helped free over three thousand children from factories just like the one he worked at.

[KP govt to provide low cost housing facilities to citizens: CM Mahmood](https://nation.com.pk/29-Aug-2021/kp-govt-to-provide-low-cost-housing-facilities-to-citizens-cm-mahmood)

However, Iqbal’s growing popularity meant that he received numerous death threats from the carpet mafia. He was fatally shot while visiting his family for Easter on April 16, 1995.

In Pakistan, any form of bonded or forced labour is illegal under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 and the Employment of Children Act 1991 prohibits the employment of anyone under the age of sixteen. However, according to a report by Al-Jazeera, almost 70 percent of bonded labourers in Pakistan are children. These children often inherit their parents’ debts and become bonded themselves. Additionally, because they are forced to work all day, they don’t have access to education, repeating the cycle of violence. Moreover, a 2016 study by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination notes that the practice of bonded labour disproportionately affects Dalit Hindus in Pakistan and debt-forgiving is often used as a tool to forcefully convert them to Islam.

It is important to remember that while many of us celebrated Pakistan’s Independence Day with zeal and passion earlier this week, our enthusiasm should not end there. While non-discriminatory laws do exist, they are often not effective, and while various civil society organisations are working to prevent acts of violence, it is every individual’s responsibility to strive for equality every day.