The owner of a garment factory in Bangladesh threatens a 12-year-old worker.
Last fall, Kailash Satyarthi’s team of activists stormed a workshop in New Delhi, the capital of India. Their mission was to rescue dozens of kids being held captive in hot, windowless rooms. Some of the kids were as young as 7 years old. They were being forced to stitch shoes, bags, or clothing until their fingers were raw. They worked up to 17 hours a day, 7 days a week, for little food and no pay.

Within minutes, police had arrested the owners of the workshop. The kids were taken to Satyarthi’s shelter for former child slaves. The kids soon received a hot meal, their first in months. Then they were reunited with their families.

For more than 30 years, Satyarthi (sat-YAR-thee) has worked tirelessly to end modern-day slavery in India. More people are enslaved there than in any other country—14 million, by one estimate. In 1980, he founded Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA). The group’s name is Hindi for Save the Childhood Movement. BBA conducts raids on factories, workshops,
homes, and mines across India to rescue child slaves. So far, BBA has freed more than 80,000 kids.

Last December, Satyarthi received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. He shares the award with Pakistani teen Malala Yousafzai. Malala was shot in the head by the Taliban in 2012 for standing up for the right of girls to go to school.

Like Malala, Satyarthi has opponents who want to stop him. He has been threatened at gunpoint by a slave owner. He was brutally attacked during a raid on a garment factory. He also was beaten nearly to death with bats and iron rods. Two BBA activists have been killed.

But Satyarthi won’t back down. “The single aim of my life is that every child is free to be a child,” he said while accepting the Peace Prize in Norway. “I refuse to accept that the shackles of slavery can ever be stronger than the quest for freedom.”

Slavery is illegal in almost every country. Yet more people are enslaved today than at any other time in history. Nearly 36 million are enslaved worldwide, according to a human rights group called Walk Free Foundation. About 5.5 million of the slaves are children.

“This modern-day slavery occurs in countries throughout the world and in communities across our nation,” said U.S. President Barack Obama in December. “These victims face a cruelty that has no place in a civilized world.”

### History of Slavery

Slavery is as old as civilization itself. In Mesopotamia in 6800 B.C., slaves helped build the world’s first cities. In 2500 B.C., ancient Egyptians enslaved the people they defeated in battle. In the Roman Empire, slaves had to fight to the death as gladiators in the Colosseum.

In North America, more than 12 million Africans and their descendants were forced into slavery from 1619 to 1865. Many had been kidnapped, shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold at public auctions to the highest bidder. Many worked on cotton plantations in the South, where they suffered regular beatings.

In December 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery. At the time, 4 million slaves lived in the United States. That was about 13 percent of the country’s population.

### A Global Problem

Today, nearly 150 years later, slavery continues to exist all over the world. That includes the U.S., where there are about 60,000 slaves by one estimate. Approximately 71 percent of the world’s slaves are in 10 countries, including India, China, and Pakistan. (See the map on pp. 10-11.)

In those countries, slave owners often lure workers from poor communities to faraway factories or farms. The workers are promised that they will be paid. Instead, they end up owing money. Their
employers charge them for meals and fine them if they don’t work fast enough. The workers’ debts increase. This keeps them enslaved to employers they can never pay off.

“Traffickers look for people who are vulnerable,” says Terry FitzPatrick of Free the Slaves.

Sometimes, poverty-stricken parents in India, Pakistan, and other countries are tricked into selling their own kids.

“Children are often sold into slavery because poor parents can’t afford to take care of [them],” he tells JS. “Traffickers often promise these children will get an education and earn money to send back home. But very often that doesn’t happen. It’s a trick and a trap.”

Instead, the children are forced to work day and night in factories, mines, homes, fields, restaurants, and hotels. They aren’t allowed to go to school, see their families, or play outside.

In West Africa, kids are forced to get up at six in the morning to harvest cocoa beans in the scorching heat. In Southeast Asia, they weave rugs in dark rooms with no fresh air, their tiny fingers working feverishly to stitch the complex designs. In Latin America, they work on farms, picking crops until their hands bleed.

“I worked night and day, and if I fell asleep, they would beat me,” said one former child slave Satyarthi recently saved from a carpet factory in India.

Stopping Slave Labor

Modern-day slavery is driven, in part, by an increasing demand for cheap labor. Cheap labor helps companies produce inexpensive goods. Those products—clothes, rugs, and sneakers, for example—are then sold throughout the world, including in the U.S. (See “Made by Slaves,” above.)

continued on p. 10
In recent years, governments, humanitarian groups, and other organizations have increased funding to help end slavery worldwide. Many countries have also strengthened antislavery laws.

In 2012, President Obama declared that the U.S. government would not purchase goods that had been made with slave labor.

“American tax dollars must never, ever be used to support the trafficking of human beings,” he said.

Several companies have also promised to end the use of slave labor in the production of their products. Hershey’s, Mars, and other chocolate manufacturers recently pledged to end child labor in the cocoa industry by 2020. More than 160 retailers—including H&M, Gap, and Nike—have agreed not to use cotton harvested by child slaves in Uzbekistan.

“Undoubtedly, progress has been made in the last couple of decades,” says Satyarthi. “[But] great challenges still remain.”

He says governments need to do more to enforce antislavery laws. They also need to ensure that all children are in school, not working at construction sites or in factories. Individuals can help too, says Satyarthi, by not buying clothes, food, or electronics made by slaves.

“In our lifetime, we can end child labor,” he says.

A New Life

Manan Ansari (left) knows firsthand the contribution that Satyarthi has made toward that goal.

Manan was forced to start working in a mine in India when he was just 6 years old. For two years, he collected mica, a mineral used in electronics and makeup. When Manan was 7, his friend was crushed to death by falling rocks in one of the mine’s tunnels. Then one day, BBA workers raided the mine and saved Manan.

Today, he is an 18-year-old college student in India studying to be a doctor. He says that he’s grateful to Satyarthi for saving his life and for raising awareness about modern-day slavery.

“He means everything to me,” says Manan. “If it was not for him, I may [not be] alive today.”

—Rebecca Zissou

Terry FitzPatrick of Free the Slaves says that “traffickers look for people who are vulnerable.” What factors might make a person vulnerable?
Modern-day slavery in India is rooted in the caste system, which divides people into rigid classes. Some low-caste families have been enslaved for generations.

Modern-day slavery in Pakistan is bonded labor—people forced to work to repay a loan. Over time, the employee’s debt grows, and the loan becomes impossible to repay.

### Questions

1. How many people in China are slaves?
2. Which country in Africa has the highest number of slaves?
3. Which landlocked country has the most slaves?
4. Modern-day slavery in India is rooted in what?
5. The three countries with the most slaves are on which continent?
6. What percent of people in Haiti are enslaved?
7. Which country has about three times as many slaves as Bangladesh?
8. People forced to work to repay a loan are known as what?
9. How many more people are enslaved in Indonesia than in Thailand?
10. Which is greater: the number of slaves in India or the number of slaves in all of the other top 10 countries combined?