



## Survivor Stories

### The “Cookie Raid” Teens

In rural India it’s a familiar sad story. Children are taken or tricked; families are left frantic to help but powerless to act. The Cookie Raid boys were lured from their homes in rural India and trapped at a bakery in a faraway city. They were finally rescued thanks to the power of Free the Slaves community organizing.

#### Want A Job?

In many places, especially in rural areas, the population has grown far faster than the economy. Desperate and ambitious youngsters often look for job opportunities outside their home communities. Traffickers know this, and prey on the vulnerable.

“A man came into our village and told us there was good work available, and that we would be paid well,” recalls Ashok Kumar, 15. “But when we went there, all we got were beatings. We were beaten all the time.”

The Cookie Raid boys had been forced to work secretly in a bakery at night, then sleep in sweltering brick barracks on the bakery roof all day. They could not leave the compound, and were commanded to stay out of sight. The teens endured abuse, exhaustion and hunger.

“We were only given food once a day,” says Pramod Kumar, 17. “We didn’t even care for the food because we would be so tired. Sometimes we wouldn’t eat. We would just change our clothes and sleep.”



The boys were in slavery before they even realized their dire situation.

“He made us work for a few months, then six months, then eight months,” Pramod says. “And then suddenly we started realizing that we were trapped.”

The Cookie Raid boys—24 in all—were finally freed in a dramatic raid made possible by grassroots community organizing.

## The Chariot and the Hotline

The Anti-Slavery Chariot, a small van festooned with anti-slavery banners, rolls into isolated Indian villages to spread the word that slavery is illegal and that trafficking can be overcome if people organize to exercise their rights. Activists use street theater, music, singing and community discussions to engage villagers.



“When we go into the villages, they want to learn in an interesting manner,” says Free the Slaves India Country Manager Rajneesh Kumar Yadav, formerly a staffer at our partner organization MSEMVS. Once activists get the residents’ attention, “then they are much more attracted to our work,” Rajneesh says.

Before the Chariot leaves, activists ask: “Is anyone missing? Has anyone been trafficked from this village?” They leave a hotline number for people to call. That’s where the tip about the cookie factory boys came from. There have been more than 900 calls to the hotline for information and help and more than 80 tips received.

The father of one boy trapped at the bakery had been trying independently to free his son. But rescue operations are often unsuccessful until a community is organized to fight trafficking and slavery. Once the Anti-Slavery Chariot came to the village, it prompted a proper rescue effort.

Police officers and a support team from MSEMVS rescued the boys and started building a legal case against the cookie company. Activists also provided counseling and petitioned the government to get them certificates that provide compensation for their ordeal.

## Spreading Awareness Spreads Freedom

The boys are now free to be boys once again. They’ve learned a valuable lesson about the risks of looking for work away from home. As slavery survivors, they are uniquely qualified to educate and protect others.

“Boys in the village ask me if the work and pay were good,” Ashok says. “I tell them: ‘No. The work was not good. We were not paid, and we were beaten.’”

The Anti-Slavery Chariot has reached more than 100,000 people in more than 150 villages. Many of its organizers are slavery survivors themselves, and they want to reach 150,000 more people.



Watch the inspiring rescue in real time: [The Cookie Raid: Community Organizing Frees Teen Slaves from Bakery.](#)