



## Survivor Stories

### The Sound of Freedom | Sakdouri Village Story

It's called the "brick belt" of India, a notorious region where debt bondage slavery is rampant and devastating. Enslaved villagers are threatened, degraded, shamed and sometimes beaten to death. It sounds like an impossible challenge for human rights activists. But it isn't. The villagers of Sakdouri are proof.

#### Slavery's Cruel Grip

Eighteen families from Sakdouri were trapped in bonded labor slavery at a local brick kiln, forced to work in brutal conditions, terrorized by violence.

"Someone promised us jobs at the brick kiln and said the owner was a good person," says Durga, a Sakdouri slavery survivor. "They said he would pay us well, but we didn't even get water to drink. He didn't pay us or even give us fuel to cook our food. When we asked the owner, he threatened and beat us."

"The brick kiln owner and his supervisor threatened to throw me in the brick kiln furnace," says Shagir, a Sakdouri slavery survivor.

In debt bondage, slaves are chained to an illegal financial obligation that they are forced to repay through endless labor. An entire family—men, women and children—is forced to work for the person who holds the debt. Those in slavery cannot walk away, even if they could pay off the loan more quickly by working elsewhere. Debt bondage has been outlawed in India, but impoverished villagers do not know their rights—and many have no choice but to borrow funds when a family emergency arises.

#### A Daring Break for Freedom

Brave Sakdouri slaves ultimately managed to make contact with residents of a previously freed village, who in turn notified a Free the Slaves front-line partner organization. That triggered action to set the wheels of justice in motion. Supriya Awasthi, South Asia director for Free the Slaves, remembers the rescue.



"It was a dead silence. They were scared to come out. I told them: there will be no fear. You'll be safe; we are here. And we will be sure that you'll get justice--that you'll be freed." Supriya helped survivors out of the brick kiln and onto waiting trucks. It was one of our largest rescues ever: 27 adults and 24 children.

The rescue sparked a broader effort to help Sakdouri residents organize to become a slavery-resistant community. This is the heart of the Free the Slaves strategy, which has freed more than 10,000 people from slavery worldwide. We identify the risks that make particular people and communities vulnerable, then help people to overcome those risks and retake control of their lives. The goal is to not only liberate people from slavery, but to change the social, cultural, political and economic conditions that allowed them to become enslaved. That way, once people break free, they stay free – and nobody is enslaved in their place.

"We were told if we organize, we would have more rights," Shagir says. So former slaves and villagers formed a watchdog organizing committee that helps secure the rights of the village and its members, advocating with the local government for a paved road to the village and teaching residents how to recognize, identify and prevent bonded labor slavery.

"We have been conducting meetings village to village with 10 to 20 people," Shagir says. "We have been freeing other people from slavery. Now we are not slaves. We are making our own choices and earning our livelihood."

### **Singing a Song of Freedom**

The Sakdouri people are no longer helpless and suffering. The community receives medical care from a local health center. Village life is now marked by pride and confidence. Thirty brick houses have replaced outdated, dilapidated dwellings, with more construction planned.

"When we came home, we felt we were liberated," Durga says. "Now we earn our own decent living."

"Now we are not facing any problems," Shagir says. "Now we are free."



Today the former slaves of Sakdouri sing a song of freedom:

*We will stand up for our rights.  
By organizing, we keep our rights.  
We will walk the path of truth.  
We will not fear sticks, guns or slave owners.  
By hard work we will achieve our destiny.  
Now is the time to show our power.*

See their story, Kukdaha villagers recount their journey, in their own words: [What Freedom Looks Like](#).