

NEPAL

“I would like to become a teacher and go back home to teach girls and boys in my village.”

“It was two years ago when the armed conflict was still going on that, along with five other friends, I sneaked out of our village in Dhankuta District, in eastern Nepal’s hills. It was early in the morning when we left the village and headed down for the plains,” says Tilak Magar.

At that time, Tilak was a seventh-grade student in Chumbang’s local school. The Maoists had been recruiting young people like him into their militia throughout the conflict, but their recruitment activities were increasing. When rumours started that they would abduct more students, panic spread in the village and families decided either to leave the village or to send their older children away to the plains.

Tilak and his friends, including two girls, headed for Dharan, the big town at the foothills of the mountain region. For a fortnight they stayed with an acquaintance. Then Tilak started washing dishes at a local eatery. It was there that his current employer, Mr. Rishi Raj Joshi, offered him to work as a household help in his home in Biratnagar.

“Since then I have been living in his house,” says Tilak. “I do all the housework, cleaning, washing, gardening as well as taking care of the animals. In the beginning I was very lonely. I remembered my family and friends and did not feel like talking with anyone.”

“One day some boys and girls approached my employer,” remembers Tilak. “They asked him to allow me to join a club. He readily agreed and that is how I became a member of the Sayapatri (Marigold) Working Children’s Club.” This Club is run by children like Tilak and guided by adults from the Forum for Human Rights and Environment (FOHREN), an organization supported by UNICEF.

“It took me some time to mix and talk with my friends, but soon I started looking forward to joining the Club’s meetings and getting involved in its activities,” says Tilak. All the boys and girls in the Club promote the rights of Biratnagar’s working children. Club members are always on the lookout for child domestic labourers deprived of education and decent living conditions. “They conducted a special campaign to fund children impacted by the conflict, which was how they also located me! In Biratnagar’s clubs there are many other boys and girls that also fled their homes due to the conflict,” says Tilak.

In the first year of joining the Sayapatri Club, Tilak became a member of the executive committee and in the general assembly this May he was elected chairperson of the Club by an overwhelming majority. He is also a member of the municipal network of working children’s clubs.

“As chair of the Club I have formed several working groups. I lead the Education Working Group. This year alone the Club was successful in enrolling 15 working children into regular schools. We think this a big achievement!” says Tilak proudly. “We are constantly alert and move around town networking with members from other clubs trying to seek ways to improve the condition of working children who have been forced to abandon a normal life due to conflict.”

Although he continues to work in his employer’s home, he has joined a local school. He is currently a seventh-grade student in Saraswati Higher Secondary School. “My employer is kind,” admits Tilak, “he encourages me to progress in my academic career and urges me to visit the library in my free time.”

“I often think of the friends who fled the village along with me two years ago. I meet one of them regularly, as we are in the same club. While three of them are in other big towns and cities, one girl has returned home. For myself, I will continue to live in Biratnagar, because I want to complete my schooling. Ultimately, I would like to become a teacher and go back home to teach girls and boys in my village, in the hills of Dhankuta.”