

Choose your Own Adventure

You are a 13-year-old teenage girl named Ramaiya and you live in the far north of India. Your village, Jammupur, is far removed from the nearest overcrowded city of Delhi. Your father and mother work for a dairy farmer and provide for you and your younger brother on an income of \$0.63 US cents per day. You are currently in your fourth year of education and are learning to read and write, speak English and work with numbers. You love to learn.

Village life is fun. You have lots of friends and a large extended family. Your family is poor but not as poor as those families whose kids work. Because of a long lasting drought in the region, your family cow has begun to lose weight. Eventually your mother is no longer able to sell enough of the cow's milk to pay for your education. As a result, your parents force you to quit school.

In time, you begin to notice changes in the village. The want for food is great. As the drought continues, you notice that there seem to be more funerals in the village. Jammupur no longer seems like a happy place to live. All of the adults seem worried.

Your mother and father seem to be fighting more and more. You know it's because of the drought and because your little brother is very sick. A village doctor informs your parents that unless your brother is taken to a hospital in Delhi city he will die. You learn that your father has decided not to take your brother to the hospital. He has been saving all of his life for your dowry and wedding day. If he takes your brother to the hospital he will need to bribe the hospital staff and doctors in order to guarantee they treat him. The medicines your brother will need will surely deplete your father's savings.

You tell your mother that you will not marry. She scolds you. She reminds you of your future husband Joebin, a village boy, who was chosen for you years ago by your father. Your mother fears what your father will do when he hears you speak of postponing your wedding. He has saved his whole life for you and your sisters.

With your brother dying and desperately needing proper medical care you must decide: *(A) To marry Joebin while working to save for your brother's medical expenses or (B) To postpone your wedding and allow your father to use your dowry money to tend to your brother.*

(A)

At the age of 13, you are the wife of Joebin. As is typical in India, you will be in charge of all the chores around the house. You will also be charged with the task of finding a job outside the house to help earn enough for food for the family. Many women work in the fields while some work in so called "factories". Rumor has it that the factories pay well. *Choose: (C). to work in the fields helping to tend crops for a neighbor or (D). to work in a local factory.*

(B)

Your parents are furious with you for deciding not to marry. You have disgraced the family name in their view. They beat you for embarrassing them before the village and inform you that you will be sold as a servant to a neighboring land-owner. *Choose: (E) to work as a servant for a year on a local farmer's land minding crops or (F)to run away to the city*

(C)

While working in your neighbor's fields, you end up meeting other women. These women connect you with a women's support group sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. You learn that this women's group is very practical. The group exists to assist women by teaching them financial skills. The group establishes a "bank" from which loans are taken out by women to begin their own businesses. You use your sewing skills to make crafts for the home to be sold at the village market. With help from the women's group, utilizing your sewing skills will allow you to send your children to school to better themselves.

(D)

You have chosen to work in a factory. You will now sew soccer balls for 12 hours a day and receive about \$0.8 U.S. cents per day. You and your husband Joebin will continue in this cycle of poverty, raising 4 children of your own, with hardly any money to support a family. You struggle the rest of your life to make ends meet.

(E)

Life is hard as an indentured servant. You rarely see your family and friends and you work hard in the sun from morning 'til sunset. With the exception of holidays you work every day. With little money and little food, you end up dying at a young age due to malnutrition.

(F)

You arrive in Delhi and must sleep on the street. Never have you felt so alone. There seem to be hundreds of teens just like you sleeping on the streets but no one attempts to reach out to you. You are desperately hungry and you know you must *choose: (G) to beg for money in order to eat or (H) to find other means of making money.*

(G)

You beg for money to barely make enough to eat each day. At first you are embarrassed to beg. But with so many others doing the same to survive your embarrassment subsides. You look for tourists and foreigners since they seem to be the most generous. You go to bed most nights hungry and you dream of your family and village. Both seem far away. Sometimes you forget why you ever came to the city in the first place. You begin to think you are doomed to remain in this condition. *Choose: (I) to try a different "job" sweeping a street corner each morning or (J) to continue begging in the hopes of saving enough to go home.*

(H)

You make a friend your age who introduces you to selling your blood on the black market for money. A portion of your money must go to the local teen street gang. Every other day you portion out your own blood on the market. At first the money seems good and you eat well for a while. But you notice you constantly seem tired and lack the energy to spend any time with your friend. You know the fatigue is from your new found "job", but the money beats begging. *Choose: (K) to look for other work or (L) to continue selling your blood on the black market.*

(I)

While sweeping your street corner it is discovered that you are an untouchable. You are no longer paid for your work. In desperation you seek assistance from **anyone** who might help you. *Choose: (N) work for a teen gang leader and continue begging or (M) to ask for help at local Hindu temples, churches and mosques.*

(J)

You continue to beg until it is discovered by local gang leaders that you have been working in their area. You are beaten badly and warned either to pay a fee for permission to beg in the area or to leave the area immediately. *Choose: (N) to work for a teen gang leader and continue begging or (O) to leave the area for another part of the city in hopes of finding work.*

(K)

You search throughout the city for work but with no luck. You are starving and desperate. You finally return to the gang leader who essentially sells you to a prostitution ring. You eventually become pregnant and learn that both you and your child are sick (HIV infected). *Choose: (S) to seek help for yourself and child or (P) to learn to live with the illnesses and continue searching for different work*

(L)

You continue to sell your blood on the black market until you become desperately ill. A friend takes you to a government sponsored medical clinic. The clinic is a mess. Filth is everywhere and nurses and doctors are scarce. The only doctor you're able to see is the one your friend bribes with the last of his money. The doctor runs a brief blood test and you learn you have contracted HIV from the use of an unclean needle. *Choose: (M) to seek help from local Hindu temples, churches and mosques or (P) to learn to live with the illnesses and continue searching for different work*

(M)

At a local Hindu temple you are given directions to a Christian church. There you are put in touch with a Catholic social service agency supported by Catholic Relief Services. The social service agency workers assist you in attending a Rehabilitation Center for Girls. Here you meet other teens like yourself and learn skills you will need to make a future for yourself. You take an interest in sewing and crafts. In the future you will

be able to make a living wage through a program where your work is to be sold overseas to people who have a great admiration for your talent. You also are given the opportunity to receive medicines that will help you with your illness.

(P)

You manage to get odd jobs here and there but nothing ever lasting more than 3 weeks. Your disease eventually gets worse and worse. You die on the street alone and your remains are quickly cremated without ceremony by the government. Your baby is given to an orphanage run by the government. You have become another Indian statistic, one of 3.7 million people in India who have suffered and died from HIV/AIDS.

(N)

You begin working for a teen gang leader. He tells you that instead of begging you will now be working for him at a local stone mine serving tea to workers. In essence he sells you into labor in order to pay off his loans. After a year he sells you to another gang leader who puts you to work begging in his neighborhood at a popular tourist attraction.

(O)

While begging in a different part of the city, you are approached by a man who smiles at you and says hello. You learn he is a Catholic priest. He invites you to live with him and other teens at place for homeless youth known as Asha, the Hindi word for hope. *Choose: (Q) to accept his invitation or (R) to go it alone.*

(Q)

You arrive at Asha and find dozens of other teens just like you who once begged for a living. You learn that the man who invited you to Asha is a priest and that this new home was begun in partnership with Catholic Relief Services. Here you learn to sew, make dresses, ceramic crafts, and how to make handmade paper. Best of all, you begin to read again. Surrounded by your new friends you begin to dream of one day returning to your village to share what you've learned. You are told that because you can read there is a chance for you to study to become a teacher.

(R)

are approached by a well-dressed woman who invites you to join her brothel. You join only to find that there is very little money involved. The money you do make is taken from you in order to bribe the police who allow the brothel to do business.

(S)

You seek help from churches, temples and mosques. You discover at a Catholic Church a connection to Catholic Relief Services who put you in touch with a rehabilitation home for children with HIV/AIDS. You are able to regain partial health and your future promises that your child will have medical and educational opportunities through CRS.

Discussion Questions

Thank you for participating in this rather different exercise. Take a moment to think about Ramaiya and hundreds of other teens like her. In pairs, discuss whether hope is really an option for the poor of the world? Or do we merely need to face the fact that things will never **really** change when it comes to the poor? What are the reasons for your opinion?

Remaining in pairs, read the quotes on human dignity from *Fast Quotes* and discuss what each is calling you to consider. Now write your own paragraph reflecting your personal "mission statement" regarding hunger/poverty. Make your "statement" clear and to the point and most of all, understandable and challenging for your generation.

What you and your partner create will be shared with the rest of the group.