

CHILD LABOR IN INDIA: PRESENT STATUS

The phenomenon of child labor was prevalent all over the world in the pre-industrial revolution period. However, the problem was not so visible as it is today. During the post-industrial revolution period, the problem of child labor became a growing phenomenon, particularly in a developing country like India(1). The rapid growth of the manufacturing sectors mainly in urban areas in the form of small and medium scale units, compared to a slower growth of traditional agricultural activities in rural areas, has encouraged rural to urban migration of people. Against this backdrop of such changing demographic pattern, existence of feudal practices in our system and exploitation of poverty have made the problem of child labor in India a frightening problem today.

Concepts of Child Labor

There are different concepts in the literature such as 'Child Work' and 'Child Labor' which are used synonymously and this creates confusion in the analysis of the problem of child labor. Still, all work is not bad for children, because some light work properly structured and phased is not child labor(2). Thus child labor is the work which involves some degree of exploitation, *i.e.*, physical, mental, economic and

social, and therefore impairs the health and development of children. This concept refers to exploitation in terms of low wages and other facilities over and above economic exploitation.

Table I shows that although the child labor decreased by 25.7% in 1971, the declining trend was not maintained in 1981. During the period 1961-81, child labor was an average 5.66% of the total child population and 6.22% of the total labor force. However, it should be noted that the figures as shown in *Table I* do not include children engaged in marginal occupation such as shining shoes, cleaning vehicles, invisible domestic activities and other illegal occupations.

Constitutional and Legislative Provisions

Abolition of child labor is not possible in most of the developing countries in the near future; therefore, improvement in condition of work should be seriously considered. In our Constitution,

TABLE I- *Index of Population, labor Force, Child Population and Child Labor. (Base 1961 = 100)*

Year	Total population	Total labor force	Total child population	Total child labor
1961	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
1971	124.90	95.66	127.90	74.30
1981	151.60	117.94	146.10	77.20

(Source : Compiled from Census of India Reports of 1961,1971 and 1981).

Article 23 and 24 under the 'Fundamental Rights' and Article 45 under the 'Director Principles of State Policy' are relevant for the rights of working children. Apart from these constitutional rights/provisions, the Government of India has passed a number of Acts including the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act in 1986.

This Act recognizes the December 1979 Gurupadaswamy Committee Report's basic distinction between 'Child Labor' and 'Exploitation of Child Labor' as two different problems and provides that no child under the age of 14 shall be permitted to be engaged in hazardous occupations or to be made to undertake heavy work. The National Anti-poverty Policies, the National Education Policy, National Policy on Health for An and on Nutrition are together expected to help in realizing the objectives of the National Policy on Child Labor, 1987. The above review clearly reveals that many new and improved legislative measures and action plans have been incorporated in the latest Child Labor Act.

Therefore, the question still remains-Will the Child Labor Act 1986, help in improving the existing material, physical and mental conditions of working children and abolishing child labor in hazardous sectors of employment?

Nature of Problem of Child Labor

In India, the nature of the working children is very complex. Most of the urban working children are in unorganized manufacturing sectors and also in marginal occupations on the street and these areas are truly termed as 'unexplored areas'. In fact, many

aspects of the problem of working children in India have not yet been explored and are, therefore, not known. However, while analyzing the nature of the problem of urban child labor ten types of childhood activities could be kept in mind and they are--(i) domestic work, (ii) non-domestic work, (iii) non-monetary work, (iv) bonded labor, (v) wage labor, (vi) marginal economic activities, (vii) schooling, (viii) idleness and unemployment, (ix) recreation and leisure, (x) productive activities(3). Schooling or inadequate access to schooling, particularly in urban slums, coupled with irrelevant curricula in different States of India compel poor parents to make their children enter urban informal labor markets, often along with self-employment.

The problem of child-wage labor in the unorganized urban industrial sector and in the service sector is serious in India. The wage labor can be analyzed in terms of the following criteria: (a) Family or individual basis; (b) Part time or piece-rate; (c) Regular or casual; (d) Work compatible with schooling; and (e) Legal or illegal work.

Children working in unorganized manufacturing units, in transport and trade sectors are the most deprived ones and during the slack season these children are the first ones to be thrown out of their jobs. Thus the social and economic nature of this problem is clear now. Sexual dualism, which is created through the paid domestic activities performed by young girls in urban India, perpetuates and will continue to perpetuate the stereotyped sex roles in our society. Thus the problem of urban child labor is both a symptom and a cause of extreme poverty.

Nature of Work

Till today, no systematic documentation of the types of nature of work performed by children has been produced in India. In general, children are engaged in a number of activities, visible or invisible, formal or informal, paid or unpaid. Besides, children's work varies between rural and urban areas where the work content differs between boys and girls. In rural India, girls are relatively more engaged in invisible activities than boys. *Table II* provides detailed information of activity and sex-wise distribution of child labor.

It is obvious that urbanization has brought with it a qualitative change in the nature of children's work. They

perform diverse tasks ranging from intra to outside the family work. Some-time working may be almost invisible as in the case of prostitution. Urban children also perform other marginal works such as shoe-shining, looking after, washing cars, selling newspapers *etc.*

Working Conditions

The working conditions of urban child labor, particularly street children and those employed in hazardous informal manufacturing units, have minimum basic facilities which exert negative effect on the physical and mental development of children. In case of direct wage employment in the manufacturing units particularly of brassware, match and sticks, diamond and

TABLE II—Activity and Sex-wise Distribution of Child Labor in Rural and Urban Areas

Activity	Rural		Urban		Total	% of Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
1. Cultivation	2.869	1.092	0.043	0.009	4.013	35.93
2. Other agricultural activities	2.694	1.935	0.089	0.055	4.733	42.75
3. Livestock, forestry, fishing, plantation	0.537	0.137	0.026	0.004	0.704	6.30
4. Mining and quarrying	0.014	0.011	0.002	0.001	0.026	0.24
5. Manufacturing, processing and repairs	0.341	0.569	0.288	0.095	0.966	8.64
6. Construction	0.028	0.020	0.024	0.008	0.080	0.72
7. Trade & commerce	0.094	0.014	0.140	0.007	0.245	2.19
8. Transport, storage and communication	0.008	0.001	0.022	0.001	0.032	0.31
9. Other services	0.105	0.058	0.980	0.065	0.326	2.93
All categories	6.681	3.510	0.732	0.246	11.169	100.00

precious stone jewellerys, carpets, locks and other such products, they are exposed to harmful chemicals and dusts. At present these problems have become more aggravated due to overcrowding of working places with lack of basic amenities like basic health care, sanitation facilities, preventive measures against industrial accidents and so on. Children are also forced to work for long hours beyond their capability without any break for recreational activities, games or opportunity for developing their natural potential. In case of 'invisible working children' such as maids-of-all work and child prostitutes, the working condition are more detrimental.

Earning and Super-exploitation

In India, so far, no systematic study of the earnings of working children has been done, because of the complex nature and mode of payments. We know that the bulk of child labor is unpaid in our country specially those engaged in helping the house-hold activities and those supporting their parents and other family members at work site(4). Even in the informal sectors, a large number of working children are unpaid under the excuse that they work as apprentices for training. However, micro-level studies reveal that the working child's income varies between zero to 200-300 rupees per month. The nature of payments also varies such as piece-rate basis, contract and monthly basis(5). Also there exists 'wage discrimination' between male and female child workers though they may be having same level of productivity in particular occupation. Thus it is universally accepted that child labor is cheap. In India, at present, if the issues of effective implementation of the Mini-

mum Wages Act and regulation of children's work are repeatedly exposed through critical research and political pressure—there may be hope for some redressal of working children.

Determinants of Child Labor

To discuss the major determinants of child labor belonging to economically poor population sectors, the following factors have been highlighted :

(a) *General fertility rate*—this refers to the number of children born in a year to women in the age group 15-55 years. The underlying assumption is that high fertility rate might lead to high child labor due to poor economic condition.

(b) *Percentage of agricultural population*—represents the level of industrialization of the country.

(c) *Percentage of homeless population and landless households*—in India, urbanization and poor rural children and migration largely occur amongst the landless and houseless poor people, which indicates the level of child labor.

(d) *General literacy and school enrolment*—these factors influence the social development of population and exert influences on the child labor rate.

(e) *Wage rate*—if the income of the family is high then the need for the child to enter the labor force is reduced.

(f) *Expectation of life at birth*—it is felt that the high child labor rate influences the death rate in the age group of 5-14 years and also determines the health of the children who may die prematurely.

Nutritional Status of Working Children

According to the Planning commis-

sion estimates 40.1% of rural and 28.1% of urban population are below poverty line. National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau findings reveal, that, on an average, 50% of rural people consume daily <2400 calories and children from age 1-5 years are undernourished in calories, iron, Vitamin A and riboflavin(6). However, with the technological advancement and industrial revolution it is possible to introduce health care system all over the world.

It is reported that 51% of total male and 56% of female deaths occur in the age group of 0-14 years and child labor aggravates malnutrition and ill health among child population(7). The health situation of these working children along with their family members in agricultural jobs is slightly better than the urban child worker(4). In urban areas, child labor belongs to the very poor population and most of them are migrants living in slums. These children are illiterate, have no health care awareness, do unskilled jobs for very long hours having no choice but to work for survival and many of the associated diseases can be attributed to the extreme poverty situation. Severe malnutrition, anemia, hard labor, fatigue and inadequate sleep make them more vulnerable to infectious diseases, defective vision due to Vitamin A deficiency and skin diseases due to lack of personal hygiene.

Female Working Children

The problem of child labor is worse for girls than it is for boys. This is due to higher illiteracy and long entrenched social attitude towards women. At present the female child laborers are on the increasing trend and bulk of them are

found in the rural areas(8). The health status of the working girls in agriculture and house-hold jobs is little better than those who are engaged in home-based industries, match and bidi industries. But sexual and physical abuses are common among them. In a study of 1000 female working children aged 5-15 years, sexual abuses was reported to be far greater and physical neglect was observed in 8.5% of females as compared to 5% of males(9). A child prostitute is a special category of rigorous case of child labor. Nearly 20% of the total number of prostitutes in India are children(8). The reasons in our country are many such as: (i) demand of virgin girls, (ii) poor families with many girl children, (iii) parentless poor girls, and (iv) lastly, a craze for film and the tinsel world.

Action-oriented Rehabilitation Programme

In 1980, the Government of India initiated several action-oriented rehabilitation programmes to withdraw children engaged in direct wage-employment, prevent children from entering into urban labor markets and create adequate sanitary, health care and schooling facilities. Several projects have been sanctioned by both the Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Welfare, Government of India. However, the allocation of funds for the rehabilitation programme seemed to be negligible and the programme, so far, implemented by different microlevel Governmental and non-Governmental organizations have proved ineffective in urban India. The following factors are responsible for the ineffectiveness of the rehabilitation programme such as: (a) conceptual ambiguities, (b) administrative loop-holes,

and (c) lack of missionary attitudes of the grass root level implementors and involvement of community members. What is required here is to allocate more funds and motivate people for these programme. The amount of money and the projects sanctioned by Ministry of Labor, Government of India in 1991-1992, can only cover a very negligible fraction of the working children.

Programmes Need for Child Labor

It is a national disgrace that millions of children in India spend the major part of their day-time at work. It is also a reality that in the existing socio-economic conditions, emphasis should not be given to abolish child labor, at least in the short run, but actions should be taken on the following aspects :

- (a) To investigate the various aspects of the phenomenon of child labor.
- (b) Appropriate implementation and effective enforcement of legal measures.
- (c) Need for forming national commitment for designing effective poverty alleviation.
- (d) Primary and basic education needs to be expanded fast.
- (e) Measures for basic sanitary, health care and educational facilities.
- (f) To launch an effective campaign against child labor.

Conclusion

Thus, instead of making sympathetic comments, each individual irrespective

of positional heirachy should take initiative to campaign against the misuse of human resources. We can conclude with the words of Gabriel Mistral, Chile's Nobel Laureate, that, "We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life."

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