

Child Labor in India:A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

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ABSTRACT

The subsistence and perpetuation of child labor is a blot on the conscience of modern-day civilized society. Though children are born free and equal, they often face an uncertain future and the possibility of becoming prey to the exploitative set up of society. Regrettably, they are denied opportunities and are ultimately subjected to enter the workforce. The predicament of child labor is a warning sign of pervasive diseases, due to an exploitative structure, lopsided development, and the inequities of resources ownership, with its correlation between large-scale unemployment and miserable poverty in many countries. India has a huge number of working children. The majority of these children are subjected to the worst forms of exploitation and abuse. Notwithstanding the constitutional provisions to safeguard against child abuse, unabashed neglect persists. Children are forced to work under atrocious conditions and in hazardous sectors, where the major segment of child labor occurs. In this paper, an attempt has been made to draw the attention of the policy makers to the best approach to solve the child-labor problem. The paper is based on the author's few years of field experience in several parts of southern India.

Keywords: child labor, multidisciplinary approach

บทคัดย่อ

แรงงานเด็กที่ปรากฏอยู่และจะคงอยู่ต่อไปในอนาคตเป็นจุดดำทางมโนธรรมของสังคมอารยะสมัยใหม่ในปัจจุบัน แม้ว่าเด็กจะเกิดมาอย่างมีอิสระภาพและเท่าเทียมกัน แต่เด็กมักจะต้องเผชิญกับความไม่แน่นอนของอนาคตและโอกาสที่จะกลายเป็นกลุ่มผู้ถูกเอาเปรียบของสังคม เป็นที่น่าเสียดายที่โอกาสของเด็กถูกปฏิเสธและจำเป็นต้องเข้าสู่ตลาดแรงงานในที่สุด สภาพที่ปรากฏชัดของแรงงานเด็กเป็นสัญญาณเตือนของเชื้อโรคร้ายที่เกิดขึ้นจากโครงสร้างของการเอาเปรียบ การพัฒนาที่ไม่สมดุลและความไม่เท่าเทียมกันของความเป็นเจ้าของ

ทรัพยากรซึ่งสภาพเช่นนี้มีสหสัมพันธ์กับการว่างงานที่ครอบคลุมในวงกว้างและความยากจนที่เกิดขึ้นในหลาย ๆ ประเทศ ประเทศอินเดียมีเด็กที่อยู่ในตลาดแรงงานเป็นจำนวนมหาศาล เด็กเหล่านี้ส่วนใหญ่ยังคงอยู่ในสภาพของการถูกกดขี่และทารุณกรรม แม้ว่าจะมีข้อบัญญัติตามรัฐธรรมนูญที่ให้ความคุ้มครองการทารุณกรรมเด็ก แต่การเพิกเฉยอย่างไม่สะทกสะท้านต่อข้อบัญญัติเช่นนั้นก็ยังคงปรากฏให้เห็นจากข้อมูลของการใช้แรงงานเด็กส่วนใหญ่ เด็กต้องถูกบังคับให้ทำงานในสภาพที่เลวร้ายและในประเภทของงานที่มีอันตรายมาก บทความนี้เป็นความพยายามที่จะนำเสนอผู้กำหนดนโยบายให้หันมาให้ความสนใจต่อแนวทางที่ดีที่สุดในการแก้ปัญหาแรงงานเด็ก เนื้อหา

ของบทความนี้เป็นการประมวลประสบการณ์ภาคสนามของผู้เขียนในหลาย ๆ พื้นที่ของประเทศไทย
คำสำคัญ: แรงงานเด็ก แนวทางแก้ปัญหาแบบพหุวิทยาการ

INTRODUCTION

Child labor is rooted in the traditions and attitudes of the regions where it is practiced, as a remnant of the past, a kind of resistance to change. In many societies, the fact that children are working in the most hazardous sectors is not considered a problem, because such societies consider this kind of work to be highly essential in a child's normal socialization. In addition, it is most unfortunate that many of the elite in the community and amongst policy makers, who belong to the upper class, have an attitude and belief that children from poor families should prepare for their future from an early age. In ancient societies, the differences in the daily occupation between adults and children were gradual: children were socialized by learning the skills, customs and tricks, so that by the time they passed through the rite of passage, they had become fully accomplished adults. The transition into a modern industrial society changed all this for at least two reasons: the initiation of formal education turned childhood into a distinct phase of life; and work done by children changed its character from family employment to the sale of labor power, usually under grossly exploitative terms (Lieten, 2005).

Indian society has been undergoing a stage of transition from the pre-capitalist to the capitalist mode of production. The culture of metropolis; a high incidence of rural-urban migration; technological improvements in modes of agricultural production; growth of small scale and cottage industries, ancillary to large and heavy industries; and the mushrooming and haphazard growth of the unorganized sectors are some of the major developmental (supply and demand) factors, which have directly and indirectly boosted the demand for child labor.

Children under the age of 15 years constitute a substantial portion of any country, sometimes even exceeding forty percent. Child labor constitutes the most deprived section of the community, who are forced to earn a pittance or to contribute to family work by sacrificing personnel development at a prime age for want of opportunity. There is no doubt that the iniquitous and exploitative nature of the economy and socio-economic milieu lead to the harsh reality of child labor. In addition, it has been noted that the socio-economic milieu determines to a significant extent the working and living conditions of child workers. Social scientists have argued that socio economic parameters, such as a survival strategy, place of origin, caste and religion, class structure, family size and occupation, and the existence of a clear nexus between the parents' occupational profiles and child labor are some of the basic anthropological factors embedded in this chronic melody (Mohsin, 2003).

The existence of child labor is a slur on a modern welfare state, which seeks to promote the all-round development of its citizens. Children are the future hope of the nation. They are like buds, which need to be properly nurtured and well taken care of, so that they bloom fully and grow into able human beings. On the contrary, instead of being sent to schools and properly educated, they are made to work, which amounts to squeezing the bud before it blooms (Sharma, 2004). It not only thwarts the development of children, but of the society as well, since only able children can shape the future of society. Thus, child labor has become a chronic problem harbored deep in the Indian social fabric. The problem has changed its venue from public platforms; it has reached the inner circle of the legislative, executive and judicial chambers. Children will be a part of the economic activity in every society. In ancient times, socialization was the main intention behind children working, as it helped in their overall development. The involvement of children in such work from an early age was most important in preparing for their adult needs. Moreover,

the work was free of any harmfulness. However, after industrialization, the meaning of child work changed to child labor. Children gradually started to labor for others in various forms. Slowly, the world community started to talk about the conditions of working children. Some protests took place here and there around the globe and the first international effort to fight against child labor began with the establishment of the International Labour Organisation (Becker, 1997).

The interpretation of poverty assigns casual priority to the psychological or cultural traits exhibited by poor people. In essence, people become poor and remain poor because of some defect in their individual personalities or their group culture - an argument sometimes described by its critics as 'blaming the victim'. These people would fail in the game of life because they lacked the intelligence and ambition needed to succeed in the competitive social world. In some instances, these inferior traits were biologically inherited and beyond social solution. In other cases, they could be eradicated and replaced with more wholesome and productive traits through a rigorous re-socialization program (Aggarwal, 2003).

'Natural superiority theories', as these arguments are called, have been scientifically discredited by later research, which has failed to verify either the natural superiority or the natural inferiority of any particular racial or ethnic group relative to any other specific group. Nonetheless, the belief that the poor are lazier, more sinful or more stupid than others are still persists. As we know, some contemporary social scientists explain the continuing poverty of the urban underclass in terms of this group's possession of a set of unique beliefs and values. This so-called 'culture of poverty' fosters a fatalistic, present-oriented worldview that traps the poor in a state of permanent poverty. Like the earlier natural superiority approach, this perspective places the ultimate blame for poverty squarely on the shoulders of the poor. Poverty is the major reason for the existence of the child-labor problem in India.

A recent report by the World Bank (2005) has revealed that there are more than nine million of working children in India, which is the largest in terms of any country in the world. Of this number 1.5 million bonded working children (UNICEF, 2003). There can be no doubt that the elimination of child labor is a big challenge for the country. The Federal Government keeps framing a number of policies and programs to eliminate or at least just control the problem. A progressive and integrated approach has been adopted by the Government in order to resolve this intense socioeconomic problem; a multidimensional action plan to create awareness among all sections of the society is essential. With the heralding of the new millennium and of the burning challenges that have appeared globally, the problem of child labor stands as one of the most acute. From this study, it is evident that social and cultural factors, poverty, adult unemployment, the large size of families, and legal failure are the major reasons for the existence of the problem of child labor as far as the Indian context is concerned.

The existence of poverty in different forms is a major and the most vital reason behind this problem. A number of cultural and social factors also are embedded around poverty. The cultural analysis of poverty is most urgently needed. Experts feel that widespread poverty may lead to large-sized families in most third-world countries (UNDP, 2001). Of course, cultural beliefs play a major role in the increase in family size. While these twin problems continue to exist, it will not be possible to effectively tackle the problem of child labor. Since India is a big country, having different cultural and traditional factors in all segments of society, with 103 core of people, it is impossible to eradicate or control poverty. Nor is it as easy as we thought. Consequently, *"it is hardly of any use to talk about abolition of child labour which is not only unrealistic but is also likely to do more harm than good to the millions of poverty stricken people in the country who are forced by their awfully poor economic condition to seek the help of their children to come out and work for their*

existence” (Mittal, 2001). Perhaps, along with other efforts, the most vital and most urgent need is for a wind of *cultural change* to blow through society and through men and their community. For it is only if the community adopts radical change and a brand-new outlook on child labor that the ultimate objective, probably the elimination of child labor up to certain extent, can be possible.

A balanced approach

As far as India is concerned, the problem of child labor is a complex of both social and economic factors, which, today, requires analysis from a different angle. Much research work has been done and is still being done on this topic. However, intensive social and cultural factors which are embedded in: household fertility behavior, the cultural concept of risk, household decision making, the labor market and advanced technology should be explored as soon as possible. Conventional research provides a useful framework for integrating these variables and analyzing the child-labor problem.

The cultural and traditional background, economic strength and demographic characteristics have a large effect on the supply of child labor in the case of Bangalore city, where the current research work was conducted. It is evident that the level of parental education and the employment status of family members also affects the supply of child labor. As the number of family members increases, invariably it increases the dependency ratio, both factors that increase the likelihood that a child will need to generate income to maintain the household. Even so, it depends on the age, physical stamina, mental maturity and gender of the child. In this situation, each household will allocate its children's time to whatever activities are perceived to have the highest private return, until the marginal return is equalized across all uses of a child's time. As Grootart and Paterson observe: *“the crucial question is whether, at that point, equity is achieved with the marginal social return. When the private return of child labour exceeds the social return, there is*

arguably too much child labour and interventions are called for. It can occur in the labour market itself, in the market for education, or elsewhere”. (Grootart and Paterson, 1999).

This is the most fertile time to go beyond the poverty argument and move towards why the education market more or less failed in India. The dynamics of household behavior in spending on education depends on a variety of factors relating to the household. It is not true to hold the view that households in economically advanced states spend more on education, though they may have a greater ability to spend than in many underdeveloped nations. In other words, we can interpret that the ability to spend and the actual level of spending do not go together. In addition, it has been revealed that public spending on education positively influences the household decision to spend money on education.

Since the Government has been spending millions of dollars on higher education, the primary education market has gradually approached the stage of failure. Along with poverty, it has been proved that failure of the education market plays a major role in perpetuating this problem in Indian society. Reasons for the significant failure of the Indian education market include: a low quality of education, poor learning achievements by the children, excessive cost, a lack of educated role models in the community, absence of forward and backward linkages to strengthen primary education, failure of the market for educators, less investment by both state and households on education, and a low level of success in the universalization of primary education. Unless the Government decides to enforce a ban on child labor or proposes a new law containing provisions to punish parents who send their children to work, there will undoubtedly be a further worsening of children's already limited opportunities. Just imposing a ban on child labor is not quite logical and it would be a meaningless move by the state, which may adversely affect the basic welfare economics of the family. For, on the one hand, the child continues to work, while on the other

hand, the child may not want to go to school. This kind of forceful imposition on the child-labor issue is likely to fail, because it would threaten the survival of entire households in the community (Dhagamwar, 2006).

Consequently, we *have to search for the needle where we lost it*. The most vital task before government should be an immediate restoration of the education market. The Government should revise its National Policy on Education; all its educational programs should be culturally and geographically specific. A uniform type of education system is not good for the whole country. Government should fill the gap regarding learning achievements between Government schools and private schools. Studies have shown that an alarmingly large number of children do not become literate even after four years of schooling. Hence, school effectiveness and actual learning have to be central rather than secondary concerns in universal elementary education (Sharma, 2004). Furthermore, the effectiveness of schools and success in learning depend not only on school inputs, but also on factors outside the school. Thus, the impact of the wider context of schooling has to be understood better. There should be serious thought given to improving the quality of education, especially in Government schools, more than to bringing some radical changes to teachers' education. A greater proportion of Gross Domestic Product should be spent on primary education and social development. The indirect cost of education to the parents should and must be reduced. An Alternative Income Generation Program for parents who send their children to school should be a vital initiative and is crucial in the retention of schoolchildren until the end of the course. Universalization of primary education and compulsory primary education would be suitable topics for a white paper, unless the Government considers filling the income gap of families due to schooling. Many families neither work nor participate in welfare-to-work programs for a variety of reasons, and fewer families are likely to join as the economy slows. Welfare programs need

to develop better strategies for identifying families with serious barriers to employment and healthy functioning, and to explore new ways of helping these families, using an integrated approach. It would be very interesting to know why some poor families would like to send their children to school, while some do not. This is a transition point requiring more anthropologically based research (Ravallion and Wodon, 1999).

The Government should think about new approaches to strengthen the forward and backward linkages, which could give new life to the job market. There should be a lot of scope for vocational education following a certain level of primary education. Once the Government addresses all these issues, the next step should not be a ban on child labor, because Government and Non Government Organizations should act on three aspects. Firstly, they should design special delivery mechanisms for reaching the previously unreached and marginalized sections of society. Secondly, they should design and demonstrate innovative and workable models for providing quality education and thirdly, identify through field experimentation, the basic parameters necessary to ensure an efficient delivery system for formal and non-formal primary education. As experts have observed: "*the functioning of the labour market could be less than efficient and contribute to child labour, in which case labour market interventions are called for, such as the removal of regulations that prevent wage flexibility and artificially enhance segmentations*" (Mohsin, 2003).

Education and the eradication of the child-labor problem are more or less closely linked. However, the problem in India is that poverty reduction programs do not have any strong linkage with education for everyone. Education is a key element in preventing child labor. The route of power, social justice, gender equity, decentralization, better democracy, good administration and prosperity has to be through classrooms and schools. The policy makers' understanding of the child-labor issue and education needs are prerequisites to development

(Becker, 1997).

More anthropological research is necessary to reveal why some poor families spend a considerable amount of money on education and why some financially sound families do not. In addition, it would be very interesting to identify any *missing link* in the search for a solution to this problem of why many households give more priority to the income from a child's work and less weight to the child's schooling than the social optimum. In this situation, the only way forward for government will be an improvement in the living conditions (providing alternative income sources, incentives for children to go to school etc.) of the poor families depending on the wage of their children. A new type of public distribution system should be provided to these people. The Employment Guarantee Program should also encompass the urban poor. Health insurance based on small premiums would be an asset to these families. Thus, today, multiple policy interventions for eliminating child labor, that reduce poverty, make school more attractive, and encourage household industry are even more essential. Moreover, income-increasing incentives need to be combined with schooling incentives, especially for girls, in order to increase household well-being and children's human capital attainment (Singh, 2006).

Promoting meaningful education

A good education consists of many things, which include transparency, ethics, dynamism and self-reliance. Some people think that compulsory education does not resolve problems connected with children. However, success cannot be achieved without concrete political commitment and the active participation of the Government, society and NGOs. Therefore, the popular slogans of compulsory education will not materialize unless it addresses the situation that causes children to be deprived of the right to education. Besides, we should not forget that both formal and non-formal education, including either vocational education or functional education, have an important role in the elimination of child

labor. If we really are committed to bringing the enlightenment of education to every child, then education should be free, compulsory, employment generating and with incentives for poor children (Dhagamwar, 2006).

Social mobilization for social justice

Despite so many problems for working children, this used to be a non-issue in India. However, because of the continuous efforts of the child rights and human rights movements, the issue has been placed on India's political and social agenda. Nonetheless, the movement for the elimination of child labor has to date not been very effective, due to the lack of adequate and active participation of people from different occupations. For this, we need to build up and invest our efforts in social mobilization. In this context, the human rights movement, trade unions, social activist organizations, and consumer's movements can play a very important role in social mobilization through an advocacy program and campaign.

The majority of Indian people are not aware of their civil rights. This is not only linked to their social ignorance, but is also associated with the level of commitment and effectiveness of various social organizations and communities working in the field of human rights, social justice, freedom and development. The issue of discrimination and unequal socio-economic relations between different classes, castes and communities should be properly addressed. Various social activists' groups should organize an advocacy campaign, an awareness-building program and investigative works for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child. As the social watchdog, the social activists groups also can observe, review, and monitor the implementation part of the rights of the child practiced in respective nations (Shandilya, 2003).

Economic alternatives for every day survival

The introduction of a village-centered development program and the prevention of rural

migration of children and families to urban areas might be vital. Trafficking in children in urban centers is a growing problem in India today. Hence, children should be provided with necessary economic alternatives for the subsistence of the family. Therefore, with the help of local government and community co-operation, some risk-free part time jobs for grownups could be introduced also, where needed. Village people depend on farming and livestock. Therefore, a progressive land reform process and a sustainable rural development program will ultimately enhance the earning capacity of the parents and thereby reduce the rural child-labor problem in many third world countries (Hadded and Aldemore, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Child labor, a socio economic problem, requires multi prolonged strategies, which should be adopted on a long-term basis. As much as possible, all policies and programs should be culturally and geographically specific. Programs should be needs-based. Understanding the problem from the point of view of poor people is half the problem. Social intervention based on an innovative, well-balanced welfare economics-based program, backed by legislation is most likely to succeed in eliminating child labor in India. Moreover, all programs should be on a continuous basis with the sole participation of concerned local people. The research has provided some suggestions, based on the detailed field study of different aspects of the problem. All these suggestions have an operational base. The new findings and results may be useful to policy makers, economic planners, administrators, researchers, demographers, and the social and women activists in NGO's, who are all fighting against this social evil.

Finally, it is a well-researched truth that there exists a vicious cycle of poverty and child labor, as well as one of illiteracy and child labor. Recent actions by the government are meaningless unless there is some concrete work on poverty. The main

problem is that poverty alleviation programs in India do not have a strong linkage with education and the child-labor issue. All Government policies and programs and NGO's efforts are narrowly focused, because there is no analysis to link them within the broad context of the economic environment of families and communities, poverty-related policies, the existing development paradigms and the process of globalization. Consequently, a concrete solution to this problem has not been possible until today. A multi-dimensional approach, consisting of the creation of awareness, community participation, alternative and viable social and economic rehabilitation, and enforcement of legal instruments in relation to children, and other similar plans is needed to link child labor with the overall poverty reduction program. The involvement of anthropologists will definitely give a cutting edge to the activities towards the success of the programs. What is needed is the creation of an environment where the community would not tolerate child labor in any form. It is only then that child labor can be eliminated, totally and permanently. If parents or children are to be compensated either with money or in some other way, the cost of the program will increase enormously and it may even tempt others to withdraw their children from school, just to get the compensation package.

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