

Magnitude and Profile of Child Labour in the 1990s - Evidence from the NSS Data

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Child labour, which consists of children below 14 years of age, is defined by the International Labour Organisation as 'the type of work performed by children that deprives them of their childhood and their dignity, which hampers their access to education and acquisition of skills and which is performed under conditions harmful to their health and their development'. The characteristics of child labour include: (a) work by very young children; (b) long hours of work on a regular full time basis; (c) hazardous working conditions (physically or mentally); (d) insufficient or no access, or attendance and progress in school; (e) abusive treatment by employer; and (f) work in slave arrangements (bonded labour)". Child work refers to any work by children (under 14 years of age), paid or unpaid, that restricts their physical and mental development, their opportunities for a desirable level of education and recreation.

The definition of child labour is broadly based on: (a) some normative basis of minimum age for employment; (b) a presumption of access to education implying that any child out of school should be counted as an existing or potential child worker and (c) a notion of rights implying thereby that children deprived of their fundamental childhood rights because of the nature of their work constitute child workers.

Child labour in India is engaged in a variety of activities and is prone to exploitation in myriad ways, some of which are:

1. **Domestic labour:** Children as domestic servants are poorly paid and are prone to sexual and physical abuse. Children are shut away from the eyes of the world. The isolated nature of domestic work makes it difficult to make an accurate assessment of domestic child labour.
2. **Forced /bonded labour:** This in effect is a form of slavery and is quasi institutional. Children are pledged by their parents to factory owners or their agents in exchange for small loans. The agricultural sector, carpet manufacturers, brick kiln owners, bidi makers, and the silk and slate industries are reported to engage bonded child labour despite the 'Pledging of Children Labour Act' (1933)
3. **Commercial/sexual exploitation:** Young girls as well as boys

(though not in such large numbers) are exploited for commercial sexual activities.

4. **Industrial and agricultural labour:** Children are employed both in agricultural activity and in industrial enterprises as wage labour often involving hazardous work conditions. Wages paid to children both in agriculture and industry are lower than the wages paid to adult workers.
5. **Street work:** Children are found to be working on the streets of cities and towns hawking at bus and train stations, as helping hands in shopping centres, collecting recyclable garbage and are active in other tasks of similar nature. These children live in slums and squatter settlements where poverty and precarious family situations are common, with no schools or playgrounds.
6. **Work for the family:** Most poor families expect their children to help in the household, whether preparing food, fetching water and groceries, herding animals, caring for siblings or performing more arduous work in the fields.

An accurate and wide-ranging definition of child labour should encompass all the elements that keep children away from the activities that would lead them to normal and healthy growth. School education forms an important aspect of a child's growth and is accepted as a normal activity for a child. However, these children often do not have easy access to schools for a variety of reasons and are instead used as workers in the unorganised sector and farm labour, in hazardous industries and mines and as soldiers. At times, young girls working in towns, are drawn into prostitution rackets, become victims of trafficking and drug peddling – in order to earn a living for their families. In India, a number of studies give detailed accounts of the nature of employment of children in the lock industry in Aligarh, handicrafts in Jammu and Kashmir, diamond processing units in Surat, tea industry in Darjeeling, bangle industry in Ferozabad, match industry in Sivakasi, sports goods industry in Punjab and small and unorganised enterprises spread in various parts of the country. A few studies have also been conducted on children in rural areas who work as paid labour and as part of family labour as well as those engaged in various productive activities that are not normally taken into account while enumerating wage labour.

A study of the dimension, magnitude and characteristics of child labour needs to be conducted in the larger context of the strategy and changing nature of economic and social development of a nation⁵. In the Indian context, the policies of structural adjustment, liberalization and globalisation have resulted in jobless growth during the Nineties.⁶ Since 1995-96, the growth in agriculture has been very slow and industrial growth too has slowed down. It is the service sector and the unorganized manufacturing sector that

have grown relatively rapidly. However, they have not been able to offset the decline in employment levels in the farm sector and the organized industrial sector.⁷ There has also been pressure on the government, particularly during the Nineties, to cut expenditure on public sector enterprises, the social sector and welfare measures.⁸ While the reduction in the expenditure on public enterprises has led to a decline in employment, the cuts in the expenditure on the public and social sector and on welfare measures has led to a tremendous rise in the cost of living and a deterioration in the quality of life for the rural and urban poor. The poor have to spend more on education and health along with paying higher costs for food grains and other necessities. The crisis for the urban and rural poor is further compounded as businesses keep wages low in order to be internationally competitive in an increasingly globalised production and trading system⁹. The poor have to redefine their survival strategies where each member of the household – which includes children – has to contribute either through direct participation in the labour market or through helping in the house as a caretaker. Children - working in fields or grazing cattle, winnowing paddy - are not only an extra hand for their families but also relieve the adult labour to seek employment away from the villages.¹⁰ Migrating to towns and cities becomes an important component of this survival strategy where children are employed in carpet factories, brick kilns, lock and toy making units, the sports goods industry and other enterprises in the unorganized sector¹¹. The ever increasing numbers of old and young migrant workers living in the slums and shantytowns in cities constitute the low wage, low skill labour for the small and medium enterprises.

The existence of child workers and child labour is an indicator of poverty and the depressed economic status of a section of the population that supplies child labourers, whose exploitation might at times be justified by citing such factors as tradition and cultural conditioning.¹² Such explanations of child labour while shedding some light on the issue overlook the socio- economic conditions in India that lead to a segmented labour market.¹³ In a situation where occupational divisions are demarcated, children have to contribute economically due to the poverty and unemployment of the adults. The reasons for the persistence of child labour, therefore, have to go beyond cultural factors and the explanations have to be sought in the divisions in society based on caste and class which create segmented labour market rigidities. In this context, studies have shown that where emancipatory movements have taken root, children have moved away from being active in the labour force even if the economic indicators have not shown any significant change¹⁴.

While the poor might consider child labour as one of the components of their survival strategies, the demand for such labour for specific tasks and

enterprises needs to be noted. The persistence of child labour in a period when the unemployment levels for adult workers are increasing appears to be paradoxical. If the adult population is unable to find employment and is available for work, the employment of children for specific types of work and in specific industries occurs due to the demand for such labour and not due to labour shortages. This can be explained by the nature of the labour market which is segmented due to caste, gender and class divisions 'which provide distinct spheres for participation of children in the labour force'.¹⁵ Due to the complex structure of the labour market, children who work in brick kilns, at construction sites and in several artisanal activities belong to specific castes. In urban areas, children work as domestic help or as labour in small and large enterprises of various types, many of them in tune with the caste to which they belong. Many of the menial tasks for which children are employed have always been assigned to the poor in the society, which are categorized as the 'lower castes' (Chandrasekhar 1997, Thorat 1999). The caste/class based segmented labour market in India has led to a situation where occupational groups are demarcated and child workers have to stay within the bounds of caste and class affiliations.¹⁶ The child workers, therefore, do not compete with the overall adult labour force nor are the issues of skills, knowledge or productivity primarily related to the occupations they are employed in.

The combination of caste, class and gender keeps girls entrenched in family occupations. They work on the field and carry out essentially productive tasks like cattle care and cooking for the agricultural workers. Although female labour participation is very low due to the traditional roles of wife and mother assigned to Indian women, which keep them at home, young girls are pushed into employment to supplement the family income despite their wages being far below the average adult male wage. Young girls constantly face sexual and physical abuse. During enumeration by data collecting agencies, these young girls are not considered a part of the labour force but are reported as house workers (even when unmarried). This status is taken as 'natural' for them. The proportion of girls reported as full time students falls drastically as they become older. These girls end up in those low skill, low wage occupations which are permitted/accepted by the family/society. They are also kept away from long-term schooling.

The segmented labour market is sustained particularly on the basis of discriminatory wages for child workers. The child workers both in urban and rural areas are not paid the adult wage, as children are not considered the main breadwinners or as productive as adult workers. Children from the poor and disadvantaged sections are taken as apprentices and trained over a period of time mostly without any payment. Children work in fields, in small and big enterprises in semi urban and urban areas, in brick kilns, construction sites

and in several artisanal activities at extremely low wages. Female child workers are paid the least. At times, wages for children are paid in advance, as loans to the parents and it is the children who have to work in bondage to pay back the loan. Child workers, therefore, are not considered competitors to adult workers but appear to meet the demand for performing specific tasks (due to perpetuation of the belief that child workers have nimble fingers, a docile temperament, pliable posture etc). In fact, the children are rarely employed based on free, bargaining- based exchange. The decisions regarding the work/employment of the child workers are mostly taken on the basis of caste affiliations, friendship and extended kin. Explicit expectations from this employment are the welfare of the child, training, protection and future employment. The pledging of children against debt bondage may at times be rationalized in a similar manner. Hence, the employer does not pay a full wage- a payment precisely calculated for the tasks carried out.¹⁸ The parents of these children also do not see them as capable of earning adult wages hence, the acceptance of low wages for the child workers. This is particularly true of the wages paid to female child workers and also female adult workers which are less than those paid to male child workers and adult male workers. Very often, wages paid to a female adult worker are lower or at the most, equal to those paid to male child worker.

It is often argued that the phenomenon of child labour can be eradicated by the spread of universal elementary education. However, a few studies have discounted a direct relationship between the incidence of child labour and the number of children enrolled or the number of schools in the area. Nonetheless, the drop out rate from school is correlated with the incidence of child labour in these studies. (C.P.Chandrasekhar, 1997) The need to send their children to school would normally depend on the expectations of the parents from the labour market. If these children eventually have to work in occupations where education does not help, the parents might not wait for the returns from their labour.¹⁹ The education of girls is more dependent on interrelated factors like patriarchy, class and caste than on improving their status in the labour force. Studies have shown that a regular income and salaried employment of parents are significant factors for keeping children at school. (Francois Leclercq, 2002) The significance of quality universal education at the elementary level can not be questioned and the necessary facilities should be supplied by active state action.²⁰

A number of studies have pointed out the deleterious effect of the work that child workers perform. Children suffer due to an unhealthy work environment and long hours of work leading to malnourishment, lack of sleep and other disorders. These children carry such ailments into their adult life thus forming a part of the sick and under-productive labour force. For