

CHILD LABOR IN INDIA: SOME HISTORICAL ASPECTS

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Historically, child labor has been accepted throughout the world, and until the nineteenth century, children participated in domestic and non-domestic work without any social stigma being attached. Elias Mendelievich has observed that

to a greater or lesser extent, children in every type of human society have always taken part, and still do take part, in those economic activities which are necessary if the group to which they belong is to survive. However, the notion that child labour is a social problem, a phenomenon hindering the harmonious physical and mental development of the child, is a relatively recent development.¹

Every nation, therefore, has, or has had, some form of child labor. The definition of "child labor" is vague, and difficult to determine. Nadeem Moshin defined it as "the employment of children in gainful occupations with a view to adding to the labour income of the family."² A working child is one who is between the ages of 5 and 15, and who may be paid or unpaid for the work performed. This work may be within or outside the family.³ One organization, The Concerned for Working Children, defined the child laborer as "a person who has not completed his/her fifteenth year of age and is working with or without wages/income on a part-time or full-time basis."⁴

Some aspects of the socio-economic conditions help perpetuate the practice of child labor.⁵ Many children work to supplement family income or to learn a family trade or craft. Others are self-employed; still others work as wage-earners under specific employers. Child labor is characterized by low wages, uncertainty of employment, shifting employers and jobs, lack of trade unions and casualism.⁶ Wages are normally fixed on the basis of workload, nature of work, capacity of the employer to pay, strength of the bargaining power of the employee and house of work. Child labor and wages are impacted by traditions, ethical considerations, levels of income productivity, production and government policy.⁷ Many societies view child labor, not as a form of exploitation, but as a part of the socialization process.

India is such a society. Child labor in India has been described as "a human problem of enormous magnitude."⁸ Gopalan and Kulandaiswamy noted that a basic factor for the growth of child labor is the overall increase in population. Although it is difficult to ascertain the real extent of child labor in India, there are between 10 and 44 million child laborers working in industry and agriculture.

Leela Dube cautioned in "The Economic Roles of Children in India: Methodological Issues," that much of the current research on child labor in India is laden with inappropriate Western assumptions.⁹ To get a better understanding of the practice, one must focus on the Indian "social reality" and the child-work relationship as reflected in Hindu tradition and Ancient Indian literature. Only then are we able to understand the attitudes and views concerning child labor in the family and the economy of Indian society.¹⁰

Early Indian epics tell us that in Ancient Indian society, it was the king's duty to educate every boy and girl, and that it was the parents' obligation to send their children to school.¹¹ This education was imparted equally to all children, of royal or common descent.¹² The Guru, or learned sage, oversaw this educational process which was based on discipline and work. Rigorous codes were established as guides for the control of the "hermitage" or *ashrama* as the school was known. Children resided in the hermitage during the educational process, were expected to participate in the daily chores, to help with any economic pursuits, and to keep up with the rigors of the educational training. The schools did not charge fees; the children earned their way by contributing labor to the operation and maintenance of the school.¹³

Legend tells us that none was exempt from labor.¹⁴ Rama (a human incarnation of Vishnu) and his brothers spent time in a hermitage or *ashrama*, willingly participated in the chores, and accepted the discipline. Krishna, a later incarnation of Vishnu, though of royal parentage, left his home and stayed in a hermitage for security. He accepted the work of a cow herder, and discharged his responsibilities with dispatch.¹⁵ Mendelievich noted that

the notion of child labour is rooted in the traditions and attitudes of the regions where it is practiced, as a remnant of the past, a form of resistance to change.¹⁶

Dube states the same idea about Indian child workers:

Nowhere does one find any mention of the desirability of, or insistence on, restricting childhood only to play and education, separating it from productive work. Among agriculturists, who then as now formed the largest part of the country's population, the children had specific tasks.¹⁷

Children in Ancient India were assigned to tasks that were "time-consuming but not arduous."¹⁸ Mendelievich found that children grew to maturity without physical and mental abuse and virtually without being exploited, and were at the same time prepared for adulthood.¹⁹ They watched

crops and scared birds and monkeys away. Often older children cared for younger siblings, thus freeing parents to do other things. Artisans and skilled craftsmen trained their children who in turn contributed substantially to the family income. Rural artisans seldom worked alone. The family unit was a work unit, and occupations were often hereditary. These crafts, such as carpet weaving, paper maché, and cotton and silk weaving, were taught to children at an early age. These children learned the family craft through observation, imitation, and participation.²⁰

Indian tradition placed the child in a certain perspective relative to the stages of human existence.²¹ Anyone less than sixteen was a child, although girls reached maturity at age twelve.²² According to evidence Dube found in early Indian literature and ethico-legal codes, a child between the ages of 6 and 16 was to be disciplined and treated like a slave. Children should learn skills at an early age because then they are better able to make the physical and mental adjustments, to twist and bend, to coordinate their balance and sense of timing, and to attune their sense organs to acquire certain skills.²³ This was in all areas—music, crafts, and agriculture.

Once it is assumed by the parents that children are to live and function more or less in the same society as their own, it stands to reason that the tasks they have to perform should be learned at a proper age.²⁴ As child labor became more intertwined with the activities and functions of the adults, the constraints, limitations, and deprivations which were associated with a particular group were generalized to the life of the group's children.²⁵ Children sometimes less than eight years old toiled as slaves and personal servants at the mercy of their masters. These children were assigned the "low and dishonorable" work.²⁶ During the fourth century B. C., Kautilya prohibited the purchase and sale of slave children below eight years.²⁷ This Indian statesman and young Machiavellian adviser to the Mauryan leader Chandragupta, perceived this kind of labor as degrading. Megasthenes, ambassador of Syria during this period, was favorably impressed by the fact that no slavery existed in India.²⁸ "This is a great thing in India," said the Greek historian Arrian, "that all inhabitants are free, not a single Indian being a slave."²⁹

The literature has suggested, however, that this "great thing" was temporary. By the time of the European Middle Ages, Hindu and Muslims showed affluence by the use of children as personal servants and slaves. During the nineteenth century, thugs--organized bands of hereditary murderers--used boys as scouts until they were initiated into the trade of ritual murder at the early age of thirteen.³⁰

India in the medieval period was predominantly rural and characterized by small marginal farms. There was increasing pressure on land which caused fragmentation of holdings. As families grew, they had to look beyond

cultivation for subsistence. Gupta acknowledged that during this period, "a class of landless labourers came into existence, often bonded to the large landowners. These labourers used their children to help in their economic activities."³¹ Rural indebtedness has traditionally been one of the major factors of bonded child labor in India. A little over 70 percent of all child workers were put to work by their parents.³² These children were bonded in a master-laborer relationship in agriculture and industry. The principal feature of this relationship was the pledging of children against a loan or some other agreement between the child and the employer whereby the child would work, usually throughout his life, in exchange for money or food.³³ Bonded child labor reflected, then as now, the helplessness and hopelessness of indebted parents in India.

During the seventeenth century, the growth of the economy demanded the employment of large numbers of artisans.³⁴ The Dutch silk factory in Bengal, for example, employed 700-800 weavers. The characteristic unit of production, however, was small. Child labor was cheap and readily available, but the family worked as a unit, the parents doing the main work and the children helping with the lighter chores. As the family unit persisted, there was little indication that the disciplined organization of an industrial society was about to emerge.

Between 1860 and 1870, European industry grew tremendously in India. A definite correlation existed between the growth of the tea, coffee, indigo, and jute industries and the demand for cheap labor, i.e., child labor. Factory production began taking the place of handicrafts. By the 1850s, the cotton and jute industries and coal mining were so organized, but by the 1880s the number of people in industry was still small.³⁵ Since there were few state regulations, child labor was prevalent.³⁶

Wage labor is perhaps one of the "most dramatic forms of exploitation of working children." With the development of industry there were radical shifts in the nature of work and the relationships and conditions within the work environment. Differences between domestic labor and wage labor intensified. Traditionally, farm work continued in a household mode, while factory work took place within an employer-employee relationship. Children in factories were more vulnerable than adults, but on farms they benefitted from parental protection.

When production made small-land agricultural holdings no longer economically feasible, small landholders left their land. The children filled the demand for labor because they were cheap, readily available, and usually uncomplaining and easy to handle.

Eventually public attention focused on the "evils of child labor." Protective legislation for child workers came in 1881 as the Indian Factories

Act. It prohibited the employment of children under seven years in factories, and limited working hours to nine a day. Children could work in only one factory, and had four compulsory holidays each month. Conditions changed little. The Act applied only to factories with 100 or more employees and lacked enforcement mechanisms. Agriculture and unorganized sectors of industry were exempt. Although amended in 1940 and 1947, only in 1948 did the Act raise the minimum age for factory employment to fourteen.³⁷ In rural India, child labor laws were irrelevant. Laws designed to protect child laborers simply pushed children into the unorganized sector, where conditions were worse.

Child labor in India is for some a "harsh reality" that is both cheap and profitable. Although the common explanation for child labor is poverty, the major cause is the employers' interest in the system. Burra viewed child labor as a "lose-lose situation," and says:

child labour is not only detrimental to the overall development of the child, but has grave consequences for society as a whole both for adults who are deprived of a job and for children who, instead of going to school to upgrade their skills, are put to work at a very young age.³⁸

The phenomenon of child labor in the Indian context defies complete explanation. Its identification as a human problem is a relatively recent and Western notion. The perception of child labor, domestic and non-domestic, as an integral part of the traditionally constituted Indian society, continued unchallenged until late in the nineteenth century. Despite legislative efforts to stop it, child labor succumbed to no law. In India traditions die hard. Like the caste system, sati (widow-burning), child marriage, and the dowry system, child labor is well integrated into the complex web of Hindu traditions and sanctioned even by the gods. The caste system, though illegal now, in the past played a vital role in perpetuating the evils of child labor, as the caste rules bound the children of all castes to their assigned duties at an early age. Agrarian and industrial demand for cheap labor found children easy to exploit. Ironically the laws in India designed to protect child laborers tended to push children from organized sectors to unorganized sectors of the economy where the laws were unenforceable. So as long as there is a steady increase in population and persistent poverty, child labor in India will remain a human problem.

NOTES

¹Elias Mendelievich, *Children at Work* (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1979), 1.

²Nadeen Moshin, "Poverty: Breeding Ground for Child Labour," *Mainstream*, 28 (June 7, 1980): 27-29.

³Neera Burra, "Child Labour in India: Poverty, Exploitation and Vested Interest," *Social Action*, 36 (July-September, 1986): 241-63.

⁴*Ibid.*, 246.

⁵Ghatak Maitreya, "Child Labour in India," *Human Futures*, 4 (1981): 151-60.

⁶G. Krishna Murthy and J. Jyothi Rani, "Wages of Child Labour," *Yojana*, 26 (October 1-15, 1983): 12-14.

⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

⁸Muthiswami Gopalan and V. Kulandaiswamy, "Child Labour," *Social Welfare*, 22 (November, 1976): 1-3.

⁹Leela Dube, "The Economic Roles of Children in India: Methodological Issues," in Gerry Rodgers and Guy Standing, *Child Work, Poverty, and Underdevelopment* (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 1981), 179-213.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 183.

¹¹Manju Gupta and Klaus Voll, *Young Hands at Work: Child Labour in India* (Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1987), 10.

¹²Dube, "The Economic Roles of Children in India," 184.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Mendelievich, *Children at Work*, 4.

¹⁷Dube, "The Economic roles of children in India," 185.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹Mendelievich, *Children at Work*, 3.

²⁰Dube, "The Economic Roles of Children in India," 183-85.

²¹Dube, "The Economic Roles of Children in India," 183-85.

²²*Ibid.*, 186.

²³*Ibid.*, 188.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 189.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 185.

²⁶Moshin, "Poverty: Breeding Ground for Child Labour," 27-29.

²⁷Gupta and Voll, *Young Hands at Work*, 1.

²⁸Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 1: 441.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰J. L. Sleeman, *Thugs or a Million Murders* (London: Sampson Law, Marston and Company, 1933), 19.

³¹*Ibid.*, 249.

³²Burra, "Child Labour in India," 241-63.

³³Ibid., 249.

³⁴P. Acharya, *Child Labour* (1982), 18-21.

³⁵Gupta and Voll, *Young Hands at Work*, 2.

³⁶Ibid., 2.

³⁷Moshin, "Poverty: Breeding Ground for Child Labour," 29.

³⁸Burra, "Child Labour in India," 241.