

Understanding Child Labour

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[This article was first published in 1980. In the present version old figures have been replaced by recent ones. The reasons for persistence and increase in the extent of the problem appear to be: a) a greater awareness of the problem and therefore better access to data and b) the political economy of capitalism in India has not changed significantly and hence, the problem persists in spite of government and non-government efforts.]

UNDERSTANDING CHILD labour is wrought with several impediments: working children have no voice; they are employed in the unorganised sector of the economy—which rarely have trade unions; society is sensitised to the existence of child labour only in the event of an atrocity—when it becomes worthy of news! Again, since it occurs in the informal sector, child labour remains invisible.

The invisibility itself occurs in many ways:

One is the physical invisibility. They work in family units of production, so one doesn't see them. If they work as wage labourers—where often, the 'factory' is situated in dingy slums or in basements of buildings—they are rendered invisible from the eye of the public and the law.

The other aspect of invisibility is that society does not want to see them. Childhood is so glorified and put in such velvety cushions in the minds of the liberal thinkers that they just want to wish away child labour by abolishing them in the letter of the law.

Finally, while in the writings of Marx, poignant pictures of employment of children are available, latter day Marxists and trade unionists have paid scant attention to the problem.

So, what is left is a certain amount of Government and nongovernment statistical data and some very good accounts of work done by many voluntary organisations—both in exposing the problem and in attempting to solve it. The small attempts at analysing the situation that are made suffer from the common inference of 'Marxist' studies on labour—a) that it is a legacy of the feudal past and as capitalism advances child labour will automatically be abolished, (b) existence of child labour is due to the general exploitative character of capitalism which exploits labour in every possible form.

The main problem with both the above approaches is that it does not give any direction for action. So nothing can be done! This in turn limits theoretical attempts to understand the situation. It merely ends up condemning it—very much in tune with liberal bleeding hearts!

Child labour is essentially a Third World phenomenon with India, Bangladesh and Africa accounting for most of the child labourers in the world. For India, it is impossible to ascertain its real extent because of the areas of employment, the method of collecting official statistics and

its organisation, and the general attitude towards the issue itself. All the same, the picture that emerges is both startling and grim.

Many organisations have been engaging with this issue, however, with varied approaches. Campaign Against Child Labour (CACL) quotes data from different sources in ranges from 20 million to 111 million! Probably, a realistic estimate is to peg child labourers at half the population of out of school children between the ages of 5-14, arriving at a figure of about 80 million! Based on the number of non-school going children and families living in destitution, CACL estimates that there are 70 to 80 million child labourers in India.

Interpolation of census figures by the National Labour Institute indicate that out of 203 million children of 5-14 age group, 116 million are in school, 12.6 million are in full-time employment, and the status of 74 million is unknown. Most, if not all, of the 87 million children not in school work in the house, on family farms, alongside their parents as paid agricultural labourers, as domestic servants, etc.

India has the distinction of using a larger child labour force than any other country and accounts for nearly one third of the world's total.

What is the nature of work that these children do? An overwhelming majority of them are unpaid family workers living in rural areas. Historically it has vestiges of the past, where all members of the group contributed their labour to the survival and sustenance of the group as a whole. In such a situation, the work assigned to children was a central aspect of their socialisation and training. The economic activity was not separate from their other relationships with kin, community and neighbourhood.

However, today, a very small section of rural families are dependent on self-cultivation. Nearly half the rural population is comprised of agricultural labourers. Here work by children is in the nature of supplementing family income as adult wages are insufficient. In case of bonded labourers, their children become part of the bondage and put in work without getting anything more than a meal. In central India's tribal belts one may find them hunting rats (for the cooking pot), collecting minor forest produce, firewood etc. Even among families that own some land, quite often, the work of the child is in lieu of an adult who most likely has gone to the city seeking employment to make up for subsistence. Thus, in most cases, children replace adult labourers and their work is not about socialisation and training, but that of providing essential supplements to family earnings. This, in a situation wherein impoverishment extends to a large section of the populace. Also the humiliating circumstances in which children of agricultural labourers have to contribute to the family income are a far cry from the socialising and training activity of the past.

And yet, these children, who manage to survive the death knell of children's diarrhoea and other forms of infant diseases in the age group of 0-5, live in a far healthier physical environment than the city child workers engaged in manufacture. But all manufacture is not carried on in cities. The match factories of Sivakasi, carpet weaving in Kashmir and bidi making

spread all over the country is largely a rural enterprise. Quite often, these units replicate urban ghettos. Long hours of work in confined and unhygienic places are typical of the situation. The authoritative attitude sometimes resulting in 'atrocities' (branding by hot iron) keeps children in a permanent state of terror.

The more city based workers—brass workers in Moradabad, assistants at garages and machine shops—typically in Howrah [West Bengal]—are somewhat different. Here children are relatively less coerced, but working conditions are tougher, making them ill and old faster. In most cases, in manufacture, the child is typically an assistant or an apprentice. Sometimes the physical attributes—deft fingers in carpet weaving, small size for navigating through 90 centimetres wide trenches in the mines in Assam, make child labour 'indispensable' i.e. indispensable at the level of technology and profits desired by employers.

Finally, there are the large number of hotel boys, domestic help, petty vendors etc. engaged in back breaking work for long hours for what amounts to just subsistence wage. The distinguishing characteristic is that, here, they do not learn any productive skills but are just menial workers working for extremely low wages.

Extensive legislation exists in the country for child welfare and for abolishing child labour. Still the prevalence of child labour is widespread and is increasing. In what areas do employers find it profitable to employ child labour and disobey laws? And why do children agree to work?

Child labour typically exists in the unorganised sector. It is necessary to understand that the unorganised sector is not a carry-over of the past nor is it a transitory phenomenon. Neither the agrarian situation, nor the family units of production in weaving or brassware work are 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal'. Capital takes over existing modes of production, extracts profits by making labourers work harder for longer hours at minimum wages—wages that are not sufficient to support a family. It thus forces women and children into the workforce in a manner that was not known earlier. While industrial employment in India is typically male, it does not give the worker a family wage. Hence his links with his village persist in a variety of ways. He quite often leaves his family behind, and the rural end of the household does not survive on his remittance alone. As a consequence, at the rural end, his family and children are pressed to work for survival.

On the other hand development in agriculture—the growth of a rich peasant class has led to increased marginalisation as well as a growing proletariat within the rural population. However, this section is not being absorbed in the industrial sector, but manifests in cities in slums and in the informal sector. Capitalism in its Third World avatar has not produced linear economic growth and dissolution of all feudal forms of servitude. What seems to have happened is that a very small sector of the economy is under the organised sector. The rest of the economy is transformed into the informal sector, in a manner which means increasing poverty and misery for the population.

The percentage of people living below poverty level has risen from some 30% in early 1950s to more than 50% today, bearing testimony to this phenomenon. Many investigators believe this figure to be above 70 % for rural areas.

So, when capital finds such cheap labour available abundantly, why would it invest more in new technology? It sees children as a docile work force working at cheap rates without union problems, producing same or greater profits. And there are more from where they come!

There is a small organised formal sector, where child labour is abolished. However the 'formalisation' of an industry, i.e. new technology, regular employment, provident funds, union, and abolishing of child labour, is a complex process. It does not merely occur because capital discovers a new technology and finds it more profitable and then finds that paying family wages is more profitable in the long run as it creates trained manpower. Such a theory of capital and of the state (in its role as legislator) is one sided.

It is the struggle of workers for their right to form a union, an eight hour working day, democratic rights, family wages etc. that significantly contributes to the formalisation of a sector of industry. In that sector, child labour too gets abolished. The history of formalisation of textile industry in India bears witness to this process.

But, under conditions of monopoly and imperialism such a process is slow and takes place marginally in areas of technology that are passed on to Third World countries which have become obsolete or obsolescent. However, the exploitation of the Third World globally and the processes set in within the Third World countries generate mass impoverishment. Greater numbers of people come under the sway of capital at lower level of wages. This mass poverty in turn has a pulling down effect on the wage structure of even the organised sector. Large sections of them do not get family wage either. It is these complex factors that force almost the entire Indian working class, differentiated and varied as it is, to send its women, children and the aged to work under dehumanising conditions.

This tenuous existence of the Indian poor is not without its strength. The rural-urban links and the economic support that children and women give to the adult male population not only allows surviving with some human dignity but also provides crucial support in their struggles. Striking workers derive strength from their rural links of subsistence agriculture maintained by women and children. Famine stricken rural poor often finds crucial support in their city kith and kin. The Kolkata slums have provided protection to radical activists from attacks by the state police. Working children have played a crucial role in the Chinese revolution. More recently, in the struggle against white regime in South Africa, children have been in the forefront. And people are familiar with stone-throwing children of Palestine, thanks to media coverage.

If such pressing economic compulsion exists for child labour then why are laws abolishing or limiting child labour passed at all? Is it simply a hoax to fool the poor and assuage the feeling of sentimental educated women legislators? Such a view would be simplistic and assume the State to be simply a handmaiden of capital.

As has been noted in the case of formalisation of the textile industry, the democratic struggle of the workers too plays a significant role in making the State act. In the case of child labour, however, it is more complex. The abolishing of child labour in law gives sanctity to the concept of patriarchal family and marriage. It is important to retain and strengthen the ideology of the patriarchal family because it is at the root of property and the State even though the family may be breaking under capitalism. It is the patriarchal family which ultimately is responsible for women and children becoming docile. It should be remembered that a large number of these child workers are girl children who are most inhumanly exploited. They grow into disciplined and exploited adult workers of capital. Parents of these children themselves believe in the ideology of the patriarchal family - acting as an ally to the abuse of children and women by capital. The struggle against capital is a sham unless it is an inclusive struggle against the authoritarian patriarchal family system. For then, it will not only release creative energies of more than half the existing labouring people in the struggle, but will also be the most crucial element in creating a just and egalitarian society tomorrow. □□□