

Essay on Child Labour – A Bane

“India is the largest child labour force market in the world. The problem of child labour in India is of colossal proportions. The notion that children are being exploited and forced into labour, while not receiving education crucial to development, concerns many people. India is the largest example plagued by the problem of child labour”.

Current figures for the number of children engaged in child labour in India are not available. This difficulty is attributed to the fact that the Indian Government “has been negligent in its refusal to collect and analyze current and relevant data regarding the brutal incidence of child labour. As of 1996, official figures continue to be based on 1981 census figures”. The 1981 Indian census reports that there were 13.6 million child labourers in India. Indian government extrapolations of 1981 data place the current number of child labourers at between seventeen and twenty million (Human Rights Watch 1996). This extrapolation seems highly unlikely as “The Official National Sample Survey of 1983 reports 17.4 million child labourers, while a study sponsored by the Labour Ministry, concluded that the child-labour force was 44 million”. UNICEF “cites figures ranging from seventy-five to ninety million child labourers under the age of fourteen” . A universal difficulty in obtaining accurate data maybe that individuals fail to report child labour participation during surveys for fear of persecution.

The figure for the number of child labourers varies a lot, they are all significantly high when considering that the Child Economic Activity rate for 1980-1991 was 13.5% for males and 10.3% for females. In comparison, other developing countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia, have lower activity rates: 5.2% for males and 4.7% for females in Sri Lanka, and 8.9% for males and 6.6% for females in

Malaysia. Historical census data shows an overall child work participation rate of % in 1961 and % in 1971. This data is misleading because the definitions of child labour are different in the two censuses, thus a comparison cannot be completely valid. The data shows that in a span of twenty years (1961-1981), the proportion of children has not changed significantly.

Child labour supports the source of income of the poor. A study conducted by the ILO Bureau of Statistics found that "Children's work was considered essential in maintaining the economic level of households, either in the form of work for wages, or help in household enterprises or of household chores in order to free adult household members for economic activity elsewhere". In some cases, the study found that a child's income accounted for between 34 and 37 per cent of the total household income. This study concludes that a child labourer's income is important to the livelihood of a poor family.

The fact that child labourers are being exploited for the same type of work, studies show they are paid less than their adult counterparts. Although 39.5% of employers said that child workers earn wages equal to adults, if the percentage of employers admitting that wages are lower for children are added up, a figure of 35.9% is found. The percentage of the population of India living in poverty is quite high. Poverty has an obvious relationship with child labour, and studies have revealed a positive correlation as such. Poor families need money to survive, and children are a source of additional income.

The twin factors (1) poverty and (2) the lack of a social security network form the basis of even the worst type of bonded child labour. For the poor, there are few sources of bank loans, governmental loans or other credit sources, and even if sources are available, few of

them living in poverty qualify or they hesitate to go for any loans for fear of bribe may be demanded or fear of penalty if unable to pay the loan. Here enters the local moneylender; for an average of two thousand rupees, parents exchange their child's labour to local moneylenders (Human Rights Watch 1996). Since the earnings of bonded child labourers are less than the interest on the loans, these bonded children are forced to work, while interest on their loans accumulates. A bonded child can only be released after his/her parents make a lump sum payment, which is extremely difficult for the poor.

Though poverty is one of the basic cause of child labour, it is not the only factor but inadequate schools facility or even the expense of schooling leaves them with little else to do but work. The attitudes of parents also contribute to child labour; some parents feel that children should work in order to develop skills useful in the job market, instead of wasting time in formal education.

Since independence, India has committed itself to be against child labour. Article 24 of the Indian Constitution clearly states that "No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or employed in any hazardous employment". Article 39 (e) directs State policy such "that the health and strength of workers ... and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength". These two Articles show that India has always had the goal of taking care of its children and ensuring the safety of workers. The Bonded Labour System Act of 1976 fulfils the Indian Constitution's directive of ending forced labour. The Act "frees all bonded labourers, cancels any outstanding debts against them, prohibits the creation of new bondage agreements, aid orders the economic rehabilitation of freed bonded labourers by the state". In regard to child labour, the Indian government enacted the

Child Labour Act in 1986. The purpose of this act is to “prohibit the employment of children who have not completed their 14th year in specified hazardous occupations and processes”. This fact shows that the government of India can make laws against any inhuman activities but cannot implement because many political leaders running the Government themselves own the factories where children are exploited is a fact.

A recent advance in government policy occurred in August of 1994 when the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao announced his proposal of elimination of Child Labour Programme. This program pledges to end child labour for two million children in hazardous industries as defined in the Child Labour Act of 1986, by the year 2000. The program revolves around an incentive for children to quit their work and enter non-formal schooling: a one hundred rupee payment as well as one meal a day for attending school. Where the funds for this programme will come from was unknown. The government needs eight and a half-billion dollars for the programme over five years, and yet “about 4 per cent of the five-year estimated cost was allocated for child labour elimination programmes in 1995-1996”.

The problem of illiteracy is also one of the reasons for the problem of child labour. It has been observed that “the overall condition of the education system can be a powerful influence on the supply of child labour”. Dropout rates measured by the Department of Education show that 35% of males and 39% of females dropout. The concept of compulsory education, where all school-aged children are required to attend school, combats the force of poverty that pulls children out of school. Policies relating to compulsory education not only force children to attend school but also contribute appropriate funds to the primary education system, instead of higher education.

The problem of child labour still remains even though all of these

policies are existent. Enforcement is the key aspect that is lacking in the government's efforts. No enforcement data for child labour laws are available: "A glaring sign of neglect of their duties by officials charged with enforcing child labour laws is the failure to collect, maintain and disseminate accurate statistics regarding enforcement efforts". Although the lack of data does not mean enforcement is non-existent, the number of child labourers and their work participation rates show that enforcement is existent but ineffective.

The problem of Child labour has social, economical and political faces. It cannot be eliminated by focusing on one determinant, for example, education, or by brute enforcement of child labour laws. The government of India must ensure that the needs of the poor are filled before eliminating child labour. If poverty is eradicated, the need for child labour will automatically diminish. No matter how hard India tries, child labour always will exist until the political and bureaucratic are honestly working in this direction. The development of India as a nation is being hampered by child labour. Children are growing up illiterate because they have been working and not attending school. A cycle of poverty is formed and the need for child labour is reborn after every generation. India needs to address the problem by tackling the underlying causes of child labour through governmental policies and with the coordination and cooperation of the NGO's and the enforcement of these policies honestly in true spirit. Without wiping out the causes permanently, we cannot eradicate the typical problem of child labour, the halfhearted measures are not sufficient. If we could eradicate poverty. Child labour will automatically say goodbye India.