



Child Labour in Rural India – Some Myths and Realities

KEYWORDS

Childlabour-Elimination-Problems-Solutions

Dr. P. SOUNDARARAJAN

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of Economics, UrumuDhanalakshmi College, Tiruchirappalli – 620 019, Tamil Nadu.

ABSTRACT *Notwithstanding the promulgation of several policies followed by their ratification by International Organizations in addressing the incidence of child labour, surprisingly, the highest incidence of child labour is found in Indian Society. On this backdrop this study tries to critically*

evaluate the question of cultural roots of child labour and labour relations in Indian tradition which have been rooted in rigid structural forms and which are now negotiating with new equations in the wake of the market economy. Deviating from numerous studies probing into this

issue of poverty and economic relations, this paper probes into their inherent contradictions of cultural tradition embedded with the new global scenario which opens the possibility of alternative paradigmatic thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

The recent discourse on working children is an indication that this issue has become a central concern for developmental agencies and welfare states in search of overall development. The problem of child labour is not only a disgrace to developing nations but is also an issue of the future generations. Historically, it is difficult to trace the difference between labour and child labour since children have been learning various skills by observing and participating in occupational activities from their childhood in traditional simple societies (Shandilya and Khan, 2003: 03). Linking it with social norms, children were supposed to develop their personality and future role of adult within their family. This was considered a socialization process (Bose, 2003: 221). Since most of the traditional occupations have been family-based, children neither had difficult working conditions nor long working hours. Instead they were guided and motivated by their parents to learn skills. There was no question of child exploitation and any categorization of labour based on age differences was not at an issue in traditional and simple societies (Singh, 1990:03). However, subsequently, serious socio-economic problems coupled with complex forms of division of labour produced by a market oriented society led to deterioration in the conditions of children participating in the labour market, particularly in developing societies.

Several instances of child labour have been found in 19 century Europe. For industrialising societies it was then considered insignificant falling under the purview of changing socio-political structure of society. This led to an epistemological conception of childhood as a separate category from adulthood which has gained acceptance everywhere. Henceforth the concept of universal primary education was accepted as a societal necessity thereby sending children to school rather than forcing them into wage labour (Bellamy, 2000 and Ingrid, 2004: 48). It is also indicative of the problems of most societies on the path of modernization that the very nature of this process itself creates new problems regarding child labour. The Marxists have criticised the functional role of schooling in their discourse where schooling is seen as primarily concerned with the production and conditioning of labour power and is

to be addressed in the complex matrix of childhood days, schooling and adult labour. One

can presume that today's victims of child labour would be the potential unskilled labourer in the market of tomorrow. In other words, under project modernization, this perpetual bank of unskilled, unorganized labour, from a particular social group as against the skilled and professional manpower, is conditioned by the labour market, which leads to a vicious cycle of recurring exploitation of the poor populace. In spite of instances of ratification by international institutions like the United Nations on the Rights of the Child, the issue becomes a source of worry in developing societies and in the discourse of developmental paradigms. According to the latest report estimated by ILO, there are 250 million working children in the world today (Stegeman, op. cit: 45). As far as the Indian condition is concerned, estimates of the number of working children varies with data collected by different agencies. Albeit, the number of child workers found in rural areas under the age of 15 amounted to over 89 percent in 1991. An empirical study shows that child migration from rural areas was rampant and most of these children belonged to landless families (Sharma and Viswa Mittar, 1990: 118-124 and Sharma, 2001). It clearly shows that the incidence of child labour has occurred more in rural areas. Another important factor drawn from several studies is the linkage between child labour and poverty (Kabeer, Nambissan and Subramanian, 2003, Tripathy, 1989, Murty, 1990, and Sharma and Vishwa, 1990). Paradoxically, though the poverty level in India has come down slowly over the years through the effort of poverty eradication programmes by the state and civil society, incidence of child labour has remained high in India. It totally disproves the very basis of attributing child labour to poverty. Historical experience in India does not support the argument of child labour being linked with poverty (Antony and Gayathri, 2002: 5186). Further, state level analysis shows that states with low incidence of child labour are not necessarily the rich states (Mahendra and Ravi: 2002). But it does not mean that poverty is irrelevant in this domain. At a time where the entire discourse of social science is focused on the search for multiple paradigmatic thought so as to explore the social conditions of

human practices with a holistic perspective, it is imperative to explore unidentified areas for a better understanding of social problems. Departing from the above cited analyses, this study tries to capture the problem of child labour at two levels. At the first is the question of the cultural roots of child and labour relations in the Indian tradition which is conditioned by rigid structural forms, and at the second it locates the complex situation of child labour in a market economy. Both these factors have the potential to destroy the paraphernalia of social policies and legal measures promulgated towards eliminating child labour.

LABOUR AND CHILD LABOUR

Labour, as an abstract category, is defined as an act performed by an individual for wage and is directly engaged in the production of surplus value (Sadd-Failho, 2002: 10). Sociology as a discipline, distinct from the above mode of thought, looks at labour from the point of work – a human activity that transforms nature and is usually undertaken in social situations. Exactly what counts as work is dependent on the specific social circumstances and activities and locates how they are interpreted by those who are involved in it. Emile Durkheim defines work through three principles in the context of the industrial revolution in which society moved from simple to complex structures. For him, work determines the division of labour where social needs are to be satisfied. Secondly, the causes and conditions of work are dependent. And the third principle discusses the classificatory principles presenting abnormal forms. Unless we understand the symbolic culture especially through the mirror of power relations, we cannot locate the present form of work relations in complex social situations. Labour as an occupational category of human activity started with a different equation as opposed to the matrix of market formations subsequently, especially current society which shows that these activities are not simply its survival strategies (Grint, 1991:7), but are for the creation of surplus and its exploitation.

This rational principle leads the conceptualization of child labour. The discourse on child labour is generally located in two social conditions, i.e. child in terms of chronological age and labour in terms of its nature, quantum and income generation capacity (ISI, 1995: 61). At one level, child labour can be perceived as an economic necessity for a poor household for their survival, at another, it deals with the exploitation associated with maximizing profit motives of commercial enterprises at low wage rates (Commission on Labour, 2003: 10076). However, defining one of the crucial dimensions of this concept – child work and child labour, Leiten (2002) argues that the former implies children who are occupied in work paid or unpaid, home or outside, economic or non-economic on the basic premise that the engagement of children in work affects their growth. The latter tends to be instrumental in the market economy. Child labour in the context of economy, according to Leiten, needs more clarity in the discourses of development.

Conceptualizing the issue of child labour is a crucial task among not just academicians, but also by governmental agencies and civil rights groups. As far as the constitutional provision is concerned, universal education under the age of 14 years is meant for all which removes children from all kinds of work (Antony and Gayathri, op. cit.). Some of the studies show that conceptualization of child labour in India has developed ambiguities particularly with regard to various legislations from the Factory Act of 1944 to Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986. On

close scrutiny, we see that all these Acts have referred to different age groups while defining child labour (see, Khan, Shakeel Ahmad, 2003:6-7). Very often, even the academic community seems to be in a dilemma as to what should be the determining age group to define child labour by using sophisticated statistical tools. Sometimes it results in polemical clashes. Thus, Leiten argues that research in the field of child labour, in fact, needs to go beyond mere academic jargon, (Leiten, 2004: 7 & 63-66) in order to find out alternative paradigmatic thoughts for praxis. Altogether this ambiguity on the definition of child labour negatively affected the very choice of policy options and practical solutions for implementation.

During the course of history, there has been a transformation of the social sciences, particularly economics which saw labour being transformed from a simple activity of traditional societies into the complex structure of labour and the subsequent rise of labour power in industrial societies. The utilitarians saw human activity as a commodity, gave up the values of social cohesion for the profiteering of the capitalism. This encompasses all aspects of human society regardless of socio-economic and demographic conditions. Perhaps it may prove true in the case of child labour also. Nevertheless, this issue should not be reduced to merely scratching the surface level but should be delved deep into its roots in social institutions and cultural traditions.

CHILD LABOUR: AN OVERVIEW

As we know that the categorization of child labour was not a subject matter in traditional societies, since labour and child have been considered as an integral part of social and economic relations. The whole paradigm has been totally changed. The differentiation became visible during the British period when child labour was used and exploited in plantation works. This abuse was brought to official notice first in the 1870s (Bose, op. cit: 221). The Labour Investigation Committee of 1946 revealed actual instances of child labour. Before the introduction of Mines Act, 1956, children were employed in industrial units and in cottage industries like beedi and glass making units. In the 1971 census report, it was estimated that 10% of children were working while in 1981 this had grown up to 13%. It later declined marginally to

11.28% after 10 years. It was assumed that the attitude of the employers using children changed due to the mounting pressure from civil society and awareness building-up through mass media during the last couple of decades.

Although the drive for universal education seems to be one of the candid attempts to capture all children under the age of 14 in school, the condition has not changed drastically. According to the 1983 survey, 90 percent of child workers were found in rural India, out of which 44.45 % were in agricultural labour and 35.49% were cultivators (Bose, op. cit: 220). The rate of involvement of child labour varies from one state to another. Indeed, highest rate was observed in Andhra Pradesh which accounted for over 11.7% of the total labour in India (Singh, op. cit: 61- 63). In fact some of the micro studies show that initiatives taken to empower women folk in order to curtail child labour practices failed (Velayutham, op. cit: 5205-5214). Similarly though interventions through social labeling in particular work places rid it of child labour practices, those very children shifted and started to work in other undisturbed areas (Alakh, 2002: 5196-5204). These empirical evidences show that these working children are far from the fold of legal frame work and all kinds of interventions have been

ineffective. Lack of restructuring of existing policies according to the changing socioeconomic conditions seems to be one of the reasons.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CHILD LABOUR

It is difficult to understand the structural features of the Indian social system without understanding the complex caste system. The caste system is culturally rooted and functionally visible in all social relations, and has penetrated into different realms of social life. Louise Dumont locates the caste system within social life as being a fundamental feature of the religious principles which actualizes itself within this domain. Nicholas B. Dirks finds it as royal honour combined with the notions of restrictions, command and order as key discursive components which are embodied in, and product of, the nature and order of hierarchical relations (Dirks, 1990: 61). In this way, it tries to reintroduce an internal power structure, hegemony and history of culturally constructed structures of thoughts, in addition to elements of land ownership of elite groups with certain privileges being manifested in the form of power relations (op. cit: 67).

These socially constructed hierarchies at different layers and institutional practices based on the caste system in India created visible social boundaries that facilitated exclusion of a section of people from all kinds of social and cultural privileges available and were excommunicated from the mainstream society. In order to understand the entire reproduction of inequality practices, Bourdieu suggests that one should not restrict attention to cultural practices alone, instead look at the standards of social institutions and their relations with individual actors (Biddle, 2001:78). In other words, the caste system perpetuates the social rules of the game which reproduces inequality in another form: bonded labour at one end and property ownership at the other. It has also been observed that, significant sections of Indian society are still following the practice of bonded labour, even though it is forbidden by our constitution. Bondage labour is defined as those who apparently have freedom to live, but are denied the freedom to choose the means to live even at the level of basic existence (ISI, op. cit, 22). Incidences like the carpet industry in the Mirzapur-Bhadohi belt of Uttar Pradesh and the beedi industry in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are particularly prone to bonded labour. Many of these children who belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are pledged by their parents either to the factory owner or the middle man in exchange of a loan. In the agricultural sector also, several instances of bonded child labour have been found. After working under a master for several years, when a bonded labourer becomes older he is forced to replace himself with his young son/s by the land lords (Commission on Labour, op. cit. 1013 and Burra, 2003:78). In another gruesome incident in a match stick industry in Tamil Nadu, a woman had pledged the child in her womb to the factory in return for maternity loans obtained on the ground that once the child was born, either girl or boy, would work for the factory (Neera, op. cit. 80). These instances prove that the existence and practice of the bondage system is not only prevalent in the agricultural sector, but is also widespread in informal industrial units. The victims are very often people from the marginalized sections of society. Such is the way this reproduction of inequality is reproduced in all forms of child labour.

NEO-ECONOMIC REGIME AND CHILD LABOUR

It has been observed that during the post-reform period market forces functioning under the principle of profit

maximization, are sustaining the informal sector by using unorganized labour from less developed countries. Export oriented domestic industries with labour intensive and even low quality goods survive only by lowering prices. Thus wages in these industries must be as low as possible. Carpet looming industries in India is a typical example in which these industries double their profit by utilizing child labour. Eliminating child labour, in other words, entails a serious drop in their profit (Ingrid, op. cit. 56). It is observed that informal sectors thrive when work moves outside the factory sector into the household sector in the form of piece work rates (Khasnani, 2001: 16). Many of the instances like 'beedi' workers in rural areas of Tamilnadu, even though they are entitled to get all welfare packages, have shown the failure of labour policies, particularly after the introduction of the neo-economic regime, and the failure of inaccessible legal provisions in the existing contractual labour conditions (Velayutham, 2002: 5213). During the reform period the percent of child labour apparently increased slightly as the census data of 1991 shows. In rural areas 6.06% of the work force was children while in 2001 it was 6.11%. At the same time, paradoxically, employment opportunities fell down at the all India level during 1983-2002 (S.K Baumik, 2003: 907). Apparently casual labourers, who constitute the majority of workers, are apparently pushed into the informal sector. Considering the family system as one of the central pillars of socioeconomic structure in Indian society, it has been nominatively affirmed that working children in household units are safe in the family as a private domain. Identifying the structural potentials of the family system, market forces started to exploit the household by using child labour as a safe modes of operation. Due to the private nature of the

family, the real situation of child labour in the household is largely invisible to the policy makers or civic organizations in general.

Significantly, since household work has not been considered as child labour per se at homesteads, it is not easy to address this issue from the view of child exploitation. While the state has envisaged policy measures for the rapid growth of this vast informal cottage industrial sector, it virtually creates a space in which market forces can easily enter into the domain of the informal sector leading specially to child exploitation. Thus our effort for economic growth is likely to be counterproductive. Thus the legal provisions protecting labour welfare and eliminating child labour would be ineffective in the terrain of unorganized work force, unless we redefine the existing legal provisions.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence of development, child labour is a symbol and symptom of inequality in which hundreds of children are excluded from a normal childhood and denied their fundamental right in a highly stratified society like India. Considering the perpetuation of the practice of bonded labour in the agrarian rural structure in India, such development will adversely affect children who belong to the deprived communities. Industrial units have also started to employ child labour. Thus, the existing rigid social structure of the caste system still percolates into other social problems like child labour. Once market forces succeed in their relentless attempt to enter into and exploit unorganized labour in Indian households with its intentions of perpetuating inequalities and appropriating products which are in a way the wages and the fruits of child labour, it has the potentially to destroy the future chances of the child's progress, though it is equipped with all the paraphernalia

of modernity. Recent studies have explained the architecture of the failure of existing policies and programmes in addressing the incidence of child labour.

REFERENCE

Bellamy, C. (2000), The Roll of the Dice, *Development*, Vol. 43, 155-160 | Bose, A.B. (2003), The State of Children in India: Promises to Keep, Manohar Publishers, | New Delhi. | Burra, Neera (2003), Rights versus Needs: Is it in the Best Interest of the Child, in *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia: Needs Versus Right*, (eds.) Kabeer, | Naila, Nambissan, B. Geetha and Subrahmanian, Ramya, Sage Publications, New | Delhi. | Dirks, B. Nicholas (1990), *The Origin of Caste: Power and Hierarchy in South Asia in | India through Hindu Categories*, (ed.) McKim Marriot, New Delhi, Sage