Child labour is a universal phenomenon which has been existing since ancient times. Children were taken as additional hands for domestic, agricultural or industrial work. They sought gainful occupations for reasons such as acquiring technical knowledge, becoming skilled workers, earning more money at an early stage to relieve poverty and non-implementation of compulsory primary education.

Today child labour is a serious problem in India. Every third labourer in India is a child. About three-fourths of the children are employed for low wages for their daily bread. Instead of enjoying love and security from their parents, they live under exploitation. Both parents as well as the employers of child workers have failed to realise various problems faced by these working children. Several thousands of children are put to work from dawn to dusk. They are deprived of their rights to study, play and enjoy childhood. Therefore, by and large, they have lost their childhood. Thus, the acts of sending the children for outside work and putting them to domestic work are equally considered as violation of Human Rights. Child labour has assumed monstrous proportions in India and other developing countries since the economic needs of these countries force the children to work. It is estimated by the International Labour Organisation
that a third of Asia's 38 million working children belong to India. The State of Tamil Nadu in India accounts for the maximum number of children engaged in the labour force followed by Assam.

The child workers in India are mainly employed in the unorganised and informal sectors, including cottage industries and tertiary service sectors. They are not the products of neither industrialism nor capitalism but the hapless victims of the persistence of the traditional role of the children as workers. They start working at the age of 5 or 6. It is to be noted that the work participation rate of children is higher in the rural areas than in the urban areas. However, it is reported that more girls than boys are engaged in various types of work. That is, perhaps, the reason while more rural girls than rural boys are out of schools. About 60 per cent of all rural girls and mostly half of all rural girls between the age of 5 and 9 years, 58 per cent of rural girls and 34 per cent of rural boys between the age of 10 and 14 years were not in schools. Even worst 51 per cent of rural girls and 26 per cent of rural boys between the age of 12 and 14 years had never been to school. This figures are consistent with a rural literacy rate of 53 per cent of girls and 73 per cent of boys. On the whole, India's overall record in educating its children can be summed up by an average statement that about one-half of all rural girls and one-fourth of all rural boys are not in schools. There are compelled to do remunerative as well as non-remunerative work.
In Tamil Nadu, the children are engaged in various jobs: agriculture, match and fireworks, beediworks, handloom, hosiery, rag picking, auto workshops, petrol pumps, hotels, restaurants, canteens, tea stalls, brick kilns, households and the like. A majority of them are engaged in organised sectors like matchworks, fireworks, beediworks and hosiery industry. In these sectors, about 20 - 26 per cent of children are employed.

The beedi industry occupies an important place in terms of its capacity to offer potential employment opportunities to a large number of people. It is mainly a cottage and home based industry. It is the job of several thousands of households in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal. A great majority of the girls and women are engaged in this work. They get raw material from the contractors and making beedis at home. The completed beedis are then handed over to their contractors. In Tamil Nadu, the child labourers engaged in the beediworks are more in, Tirunelveli, Tiruchirapalli and Vellore Districts than in the other districts. The plight of girls engaged in the work is rather miserable. At present, the female children are imparted the skill of beedi making with the purpose of earning for the livelihood of their family and their own marriage. Besides, the acquisition of such a skill is considered an eligibility norm for prospective brides in Tirunelveli District. But, for the boys the beediworks remains a matter of choice in many families. In most cases, the girl children are compelled to take up the work.
The present study is based on the child workers who are predominantly home based in the age group of 5 - 14 years, in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. This study explains their socio-demographic profile such as sex, age, religion, education, the size of the family, income, rural - urban background and years of experience. It also deals with exploitation, legal aspects and health problems of the child workers. For the study, a sample of 500 child workers were drawn from the Melapalayam town (125), Keelapavoor block (100), Pappakudi block (85), Kadayam block (75), Alangulam block (65) and Tenkasi block (50) on the basis of judgment sampling method. The total sample of 500 consist of, 360 (72 per cent) rural child workers and 140 (28 per cent) urban child workers. The rural child workers comprise 14 boys and 346 girls and urban child workers consist of 16 boys and 124 girls. These workers were selected from 81 areas in five blocks and the town, Melapalayam. The data were collected from the child workers and their parents by administering an interview-schedule. In addition to this, observation and case study methods were also used to collect data. In addition to the primary data, secondary data were collected from concerned Ministries of Central and State governments, Labour Institute, UNICEF office, ILO office, university libraries and Navajeevan Trust, a voluntary service organisation working for the abolition of child labour in Tirunelveli District.
The study discloses that 94 per cent of girls are employed in the beediworks. The proportion of the working girls is fifteen times as much as that of the working boys. Among the rural as well as urban child workers, about 90 per cent girls do this work. Most of the parents do not compel their boys to do this work even if they are unwilling to go to school. They want their boys to secure better jobs with a higher income than the beediworks. In case their sons are not able to secure jobs, they want them to remain unemployed rather than do the beediworks. But, they compel their girls to take up this work as part-time or full-time job in order to supplement their family income and also save money for their marriage. A large majority of the girls at the age of 14 and above 14 years shoulder the responsibility of collecting raw material, making beedis and giving the completed beedis to the contractors. While doing so, in certain situations, some girls are subject to blandishment.

It is observed that in most of the families engaged in the beediworks, indebtedness is a pressing problem which demands child labour and perpetuates it. The situation forces the parents who are under the pressure of indebtedness, to put their children to work compulsorily to supplement their family income for two main reasons. The first reason is to pay interest regularly and the second reason being the sustenance of livelihood of the family members. It is found out that a great majority of rural (80.28 per cent) and urban (77.86 per cent) children do the work
mainly due to their parents' pressure to generate more income for these reasons. Besides, acquiring the skill in this work is considered an eligibility criterion for girls to get married without problems.

It is found that there is no significant difference between the average age of rural (11.4 years) and urban (11.14 years) children. Normally at this age they start doing the work. This shows that the children are not given the opportunity to get education even up to primary level. The notion among the parents that earning is better than learning, very much contributes to this state of affairs. Besides, the children find that the school are uninteresting. Many of the schools are housed in dilapidating buildings and managed by one or two teachers. They also find that, in such circumstances, the schools will not be of much useful for the pursuit of knowledge. This may perhaps be an important reason that they fall back on their family occupation, their *Swadharma*. Their parents consider that this practice, rather than education, has after all the sanctity of tradition.

The study reveals that a great majority of Hindu child workers are engaged in the beediworks in the areas surveyed except the Melapalayam town. Of the total rural child workers, 90 per cent of them are Hindus, 6.67 per cent of them are Christians and 3.33 per cent of them are Muslims. Out of the total urban child workers, 16.43 per cent of them are Hindus, 0.72 per cent of them
are Christians and 82.86 per cent of them are Muslims. In most of the households, women and their girls are the main bread winners irrespective of their caste and religion. In Christian families, only limited children do this work because, the parents encourage them to pursue studies besides they get financial support from Fellow Christians.

The analysis of data discloses that the proportion of illiterate child workers in the urban areas (16.43 per cent) is more than the proportion of their rural counterparts (11.94 per cent). More urban than rural parents put their children to work after completing primary education. More girls than boys have studied upto primary level. But, at middle and high school levels, more boys than girls had education. On the other hand, a majority of the girls (65.74 per cent) pursue their studies upto primary level. Inspite of the availability of educational facilities in the Melapalayam town, the children are not able to study upto middle school level because beedi making is main source of their family income.

The main reason for dropping out of school is that the children are not given chance to pursue their studies. Since they start working to acquire the skill in this work at the age of 7 years, they are assigned to make the required number of beedis everyday. However, a majority of the children like to continue the studies. Some children are not interested in studies because, the
primary schools are unable to attract the children. This mainly owes to the lack of infrastructural facilities in the schools and irresponsibility of the teachers. Children are not motivated and encouraged by their teachers. Instead, they are treated unkindly. Therefore, there arises a need for facilitating the primary schools in order to promote the quality of education.

Dropouts and illiterate children have to be motivated and encouraged to pursue their studies with an interest. Modern teaching aids like television, over-head projector or colour stills can be used for encouraging the students. A life oriented education is to be implemented instead of the conventional type of education. Young and motivated teachers should be appointed to cater to the educational needs of the children. Thus, the major task of the government is to provide the schools with infrastructural facilities in order to draw the attention of children. Moreover, the government should implement compulsory primary education through a stringent law so that it will put an end to child labour. Besides the efforts on the part of the government, the political parties, trade unions, socio-religious movements and voluntary service organisations should come forward to pressurise the administrators to pay more attention on this issue. It is very much possible to eradicate this problem if politicians and government bureaucrats decide to fight against it with sustained efforts.
The study reports that there is no significant difference between rural and urban child workers with regard to their household size. The average size of the households in rural areas is 6.14 and it is 6.23 in the urban area.

The work efficiency of child workers can be measured in terms of their output per day. The work efficiency of the urban children is relatively more than the work efficiency of the rural children. However, the boys are more efficient than girls in this regard. Girl children are compelled to produce at least 1,000 beedis per day. If they are not able to touch the limit, they are punished mercilessly. If they complete the target, they are provided with non-vegetarian food at least once a week. In addition to this, they are also provided with pocket money to spend on their own. If there is a shortage in making beedis, they borrow required beedis from professional lenders. For that, they have to pay interest, which is called Vatti Beedis. This practice is widely prevalent in the areas studied. The average monthly income of rural child workers is Rs. 286.11, but the average monthly income of urban child workers is Rs. 312.86, and the average monthly income of boys and girls is Rs. 246.72 and Rs. 316.27 respectively.

The analysis reveals that the child workers are of three categories. They are: unskilled workers, i.e., they earn a monthly income up to Rs. 200; semi-skilled workers who earn an income of
Child workers make beedis at their homes or their neighbours' home. More urban girls than their rural counterparts work in their neighbourhood. Both in rural and urban areas, a great majority of the boys (86.67 per cent) work at their homes. Normally they work for 10 - 12 hours per day to complete the prescribed number of beedis. The completion of target depends on their experience in the work. It is found out that the children's average years of service in the work is 4.23 in rural areas and 4.38 years in the urban area. The proportion of the urban children's length of experience in this work is more than among their rural counterparts. Especially, the girls are more experienced in the work than the boys. The reason is that the girls start making beedis earlier than the boys.

By and large, the mothers are engaged in the work with their children, for hours together. But, a great majority of the fathers do not do so, but attend to agricultural operations and other works. Since most of the jobs they do are seasonal in nature, they remain unemployed for at least half the period in a year. Therefore, they want their children to share the responsibility of earning and maintaining their family. This is, one way or other, an exploitation of children for economic reasons. In addition to this work, above 90 percent of the children assist their parents in household chores irrespective of sex and background. It is thus evident that the parents extract
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work from their children not only to make beedis but also to assist in household work.

An overwhelming majority (90 per cent) of rural as well as urban children do not like to make beedis because this work prevents them from pursuing their studies. Over one-fourth of the rural and urban children do not like the work because it is painful. A majority of the children are very much interested in studies rather than making beedis. But, they are helpless not only in this regard but also in losing all the pleasures of childhood.

Moreover, the child workers especially, girls are subject to harassment by their parents and the contractors. When the girls are not able to complete the prescribed number of beedis per day, they are scolded, sometimes beaten by their parents. As a result of this, they have started borrowing Vatti Beedis from the other beedi labourers in their neighbouring areas or shops which regularly supply beedis to the needy persons with an interest. In addition to this, the girls as directed by their parents, have to handover the finished beedis to the contractors and collect the raw material. While doing so, they are expected to please the contractors against their will; otherwise, the contractors would be rather severe in dealing with them. Sometimes, they supply poor quality raw material and discard several beedis as defective. So, about 90 per cent of the working
children are not willing to continue this work. However, they prefer to do some other work to earn money for the sustenance of their family. For instance, 40 per cent of the girls are willing to become teachers, 26.67 per cent of boys are willing to go for self employment and a similar proportion of boys (26.67 per cent) are willing to acquire technical skill. Both in rural and urban areas, about three-fourths of the children are not willing to continue the beediworks. About 90 per cent of the children are punished by their parents for not completing the target. In rural and urban areas, a majority of the children are scolded and beaten for the above reason. Sometimes, they are denied food until they complete their target and not even allowed to play. The contractors also scold the children for not submitting the beedis on time and for not maintaining the quality in making beedis. Girls rather than boys are subject to humiliation, harassment and punishment.

Entertainment in terms of listening to radio, watching cinema, television, visiting fairs, festivals and friends is very much restricted in the case of working children because of their work pressure. Nevertheless, more boys than girls have entertainment. The working children forego their childhood activities and shoulder more family responsibilities. They do not have access to education, play and other entertainment. Their health is affected due to the nature of work. They have stunted growth. The parents make use of their children to produce more
and in order to earn more. If they complete the target of a in advance, they are forced to make additional beedis rather taking rest or relaxing. They are born as beedi workers, grow beedi workers and die as beedi workers. They sacrifice childhood for the sake of their families. They work all day in order to complete the target. In the past, the parents shouldered their family responsibilities with little assistance from their children. But, at present, the children shoulder the major responsibilities with little support from their parents, especially fathers.

Especially, in rural areas, the parents get pass-books in the name of their children by giving false age. So, three-fourths of the rural children collect raw material directly from the contractors. But, in the Melapalayam town, a majority of the pass-books are in their parents' name. Therefore, about 57 per cent of the parents collect raw material directly from the contractors. Over 90 per cent of the rural and urban respondents state that they get underweighed and poor quality raw material from the contractors. Sometimes, moistured tobacco dust is supplied. And the weight decreases considerably after it is dried. Similarly, short, rough and damaged leaves are supplied. Some contractors demand 100 beedis as Commission Beedis or Bodu Vandal (Native usage) for every 1,000 beedis. This is also a major reason for the shortage of raw material. The beedi
workers are subject to this sort of exploitation by contractors.

However, the shortage of raw material is adjusted by purchasing them from the local market. In purchasing raw material every time, the beedi workers of the rural and urban areas incur an average extra expenditure of Rs.9.6 and Rs.9.5 respectively. But Rs.8.9 and Rs.9.7 are the average expenditure incurred by boys and girls respectively. The girls spend little more than what the boys spend towards the shortage of raw material. Rural child workers spend Rs.10 - 14 more towards the purchase of extra raw material than the urban workers.

Nearly three-fourths of the children are aware of various government schemes like minimum wages, scholarship, housing, non-formal education, community development, health care and 'Integrated Child Development Programme'. Some of them are also benefited by these schemes.

Over 90 per cent of the parents are found ignorant of the fact that employing children in beediworks is an offence because a majority of them are illiterates. Almost all the beedi workers in the rural areas do not know the laws relating to child labour. But, in urban areas, few parents know it.
The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act passed in 1986. It is totally against the Indian Constitution which states in Article 24 that, "no child below the age of 14 shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment". This Act has to be enforced in such a way as to eliminate child labour altogether. The free and compulsory education for all children until they reach the age of 14 was written into the Constitution not as a right or duty but as a "directive principle". Now it is up to the government to make it as a right in order to tackle the problem. In addition to this, an Act on Compulsory Primary Education has to be introduced in a stringent way to eradicate the problem. The Tamil Nadu Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1994 passed by the State Assembly will come into force after getting approval from the President of India.

More employment opportunities and income generating avenues for adults and parents are to be provided. The families where there is child labour shared to be made accessible to all development programmes and anti-poverty schemes. There should be adequate budgetary allocation for compulsory education by the State and Central governments for the abolition of child labour. It should be monitored by a committee comprising government officials, school teachers, Panchayat authorities, village representatives and voluntary organisations.
According to Section 26 of the Beedi and Cigar Workers Act 1966, the beedi company should give leave wages on the basis of work done. But, contractors pay only 50 - 90 percent of wages. But, they get acknowledgement from them for the whole amount. Some other companies do not pay leave wages, but get the acknowledgement from the workers. If the principal employer deals with the workers directly, the provident fund accounts would normally be maintained. But, when it is done by the contractors, only some of them maintain the accounts. Some other contractors would deduct the amount promptly but it would not be deposited in the workers' accounts.

The long hours of work would affect the health of the beedi workers. They are affected by diseases like tuberculosis, chronic bronchitis, nutritional anaemia, back pain, head-ache and eye irritation. It has its adverse effect on the physical development and general health condition of the children. The work pressure makes them weak and stunts their growth. Their physical growth is not directly proportionate to their age. Since the children have the problem of malnutrition, they are highly susceptible to respiratory infections. Three-fourths of the children are affected by respiratory infections because they get exposed to the tobacco dust and tendu leaves for most of the time in a day. Children are suffering from back pain and head-ache because they sit and work for hours together in a particular posture. More members are accommodated in small houses which are
poorly ventilated and unhygienically maintained. Ultimately leads to serious health problems.

A great majority of girls (93.33 per cent) and boys (85.53 per cent) are suffering from respiratory diseases such as chronic cough and tuberculosis. They are also affected by worm infestation due to poor hygiene and insanitary conditions prevailing in the residential areas. Due to busy work, they are not able to clean their homes regularly. The problem of nutritional anaemia reduces their weight. Thus, they do not register physical growth in accordance with their age.

The dietary system of the beedi workers reveals that they take full meals only once a day. Usually, they depend on the ordinary rice food and cheap vegetables. In order to encourage the children to complete the prescribed quota per day, the parents provide their children with non-vegetarian food once a week to encourage them to do the work regularly. It clearly indicates that they exploit their children by giving them an incentive in terms of non-vegetarian food. Their food system lacks nutritional value. Therefore, malnutrition is a common problem among the beedi workers.

About three-fourths of the beedi workers prefer private clinics for their treatment rather than visiting the Beedi Workers' Welfare Fund Dispensaries. The reason is that such
dispensaries are overcrowded and located in far off places. Therefore, they should be established within a radius of 3-5 k.m. It should meet the medical requirements of patients. Community health workers should be acquainted with the development needs of the working children. A TB sanatorium should be set up in the concentrated areas of beediworks like Mukkudal and Melapalayam. The children suffering from respiratory diseases should be identified and treated in the initial stage. Medical camps also should be organised and health awareness should be created among the beedi workers with the help of non-governmental organisations and other organisations.

From these findings, it is evident that as child labour is considered a serious problem, it is to be abolished. Furthermore, no civilised nation on the earth can bear with the employment of child labourers in various occupations. It is paradoxical that the country has made remarkable progress in the economic development and prepares itself to enter the 21st century, but still it has the problem of child labour. It is to be noted that the Constitution of India and several other statutes of the government oppose child labour and plead for the abolition of this evil. It is time for both the Central and State governments to work together meticulously to eradicate this evil.
While suggesting viable strategies to eradicate child labour from India, the following measures would be taken into consideration:

(i) Enacting a stringent Act relating to compulsory primary education is an effective measure to put an end to this problem. In addition to this, the primary schools across the country should be provided with infrastructural facilities. The quality of primary education would be improved by appointing young and motivated teachers. This has to go with the implementation of modern methods of teaching to attract the children so that they will be interested in pursuing the studies at least up to middle school. Therefore, the eradication of child labour has to go with compulsory primary education. The local panchayat should be given the responsibility of making cent per cent enrollment in the primary schools. The developing countries such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, South Korea and Taiwan have made education compulsory. A few other countries like Algeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand have aggressively implemented policies relating to universalise the primary education and make a high retention rate. India can also follow a similar type of strategy to eradicate child labour.

(ii) Creating awareness among beedi workers and people about the plight of children engaged in beedi making, is also an important measure to counter the problem of child labour. In this
regard, the voluntary service organisations, the National Service Schemes of various colleges and universities and of social and religious organisations should come forward to sensitis the people to combat this social menace. This can be done by street plays, film shows, campaigns and rallies. A series of awareness campaigns that would also bring about positive changes among the people, should be organised by the government as well as non-governmental organisations. To put it in a nutshell, it should be a joint venture so that this problem would be tackled as a whole.

(iii) Income generation and creating more employment opportunities for the families engaged in beedi making are also suitable measures to counter the problem. In order to generate income, the families employing children in beediworks, should be given loans with subsidies under Integrated Rural Development Programmes or Self Employment Schemes to start a business or a dairy farm by buying milch cows. It is, indeed, a profitable business that would boost up their family income. In the absence of employment in their own areas, the heads of household should prepare to seek employment in neighbouring areas and even in far off places to sustain the livelihood of their family. The parents should be prepared to sacrifice their life for the betterment of their children. If they do so, their children would be successful in securing better jobs. Consequently, the forthcoming generations would get rid of this baneful practice.
It is to be noted that these measures, if implemented effectively, would yield the desired results. To achieve this, the entire nation should pay concerted efforts to tide over the problem not wholly, but at least in a phased manner. No civilized nation on earth can bear with the plight of millions of children toiling themselves not only for their survival but also to sustain the livelihood of their family. It is paradoxical to note that India which has made remarkable progress in science and technology, but, has allowed this problem to take monstrous shapes. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to fight against child labour with a determination to root out this social evil.

LET LITTLE FLOWERS BLOSSOM