CHAPTER- 12

CHILD LABOUR

Today when much importance appears to be given to the prospects of various child development and welfare programmes, the magnitude of the problem of child labour has not, however, been lessened. It remains an alarming socio-economic problem throughout the world, especially in the developing countries like India.

The term child labour, a convenient expression for "the labour of children" has a well recognized though vague meaning. It refers both to an economic practice and to the attendant social evil. In general usage, the term child labour is used as a synonym for employed child or working child. Thus by child labour, we simply mean any work done by a child for economic gain. Homer Folks, the Chairman of the United States National Child Labour Committee defined child-labour as, "..... any work by children that interferes with their full physical development, their opportunities for a desirable minimum of education or their needed recreation". V.V. Giri interpreted the term child-labour in two ways; viz., (i) as an economic practice and (ii) as a social evil. In the economic context the term signifies employment of children in gainful occupations with a view to adding to the labour income of the family. Again, in assessing the nature and extent of the social evil, it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of the jobs on which children are engaged, the danger to which they are exposed and the opportunities of development which they have been denied.

Practically the term child-labour includes within its purview, all children working in industries and non-industrial occupations which are injurious to their physical, mental, moral as well as social development.

In India, there is hardly any statutory provisions which defines the term child labour in precise terms. Even those various legislative provisions which prescribe the minimum age for the admission to employment in different vocations do not fix uniform age for reasons of variations in the nature of operations in which children are employed.

**Nature and Magnitude of the problem:**

Child-workers are a common sight everywhere in the developing countries in the farm, in the market places, in street corners, restaurants all kinds of shops and other business establishments. They are also found in places less visible to the public eye like the sweet shops tucked into backstreets or alleys. Though the major section of the child workers are being engaged in agricultural works in the rural areas yet the magnitude is no less problematic in urban areas also. These city child workers are easily observable in market places carrying man-size loads, as shoe-shine boys in street corners, newspaper or magazine hawkers, cigarette vendors, helpers in repair shops and numerous boys working in hotels, restaurants, canteens, wayside shops, factories, workshops etc. and a large number of them being employed in household services. The children are also taken with their parents in construction work for loading, unloading and breaking of stones etc. In the organized sector, child workers have to do light work in
comparison to adult workers, though these works are not suitable or desirable at all for children.

In spite of the different legislative and legal provisions, these child-workers work for long hours, are exposed to sanitation and safety hazards and often face violence or even sexual abuse. Very often the children, especially in industrial sectors, work in conditions designed for adults. They have to work in contact with toxic substances or work in the open air without protection from the weather. They often have to lift excessive weights, sustain exaggerated work rhythms and work in uncomfortable positions and postures. As a result, the physical development of (mental also) these child workers is stunted.

The report IV(1) of the 57th Session of International Labour Conference, Geneva, 1972, found that 90 per cent or more of the child-working population was engaged in the employment market in the developing region of the world.¹

In India, according to Census of India, 1971, 10.7 million (i.e. 4.7 per cent of total child population and 5.9 per cent of total labour force) children were engaged in employment. Out of the total child workers, 0.7 million (7 per cent) were working in urban areas and the remaining 10 million (93 per cent) were employed in rural areas. Now in India, according to the 1981 Census, children constitute about two-fifth of the total population.

¹ Kulashreshtha, J.C., op.cit., p. 3.
Table 12.1: Estimates of number of child workers (5-14 years) in India by N.S.S.O. (1977-78) and Census, 1981.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All areas</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Total Workers</td>
<td>2,00,199</td>
<td>1,83,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.6)</td>
<td>(13.1)</td>
<td>(5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Main/Major time Workers</td>
<td>1,66,303</td>
<td>1,51,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.7)</td>
<td>(10.9)</td>
<td>(4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Marginal/Subsidiary Workers</td>
<td>33,996</td>
<td>31,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.0)</td>
<td>(2.2)</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Total Population of children (5-14 years)</td>
<td>17,19,498</td>
<td>13,96,157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(i) Figures within parenthesis indicate the respective work participation rates.

According to N.S.O. estimates, the work participation rate of child workers, in the age-group of 8-14 years was 11.6 while the rate was calculated at 7.6 according to the 1981 census. The same rate for urban areas of India was estimated at 2.6 in the 1981 census. Of the total child-workers, 32.17 per cent was employed as main/major time workers and the remaining were marginal/subsidiary workers (Table 12.1). Of the total child workers in urban areas of India, 39.16 per cent (the highest) was employed in household and other industries, 20.04 per cent was employed as cultivators and agricultural labours and 15.03 per cent was employed in trade and commercial activities.

The data collected by the National Sample Survey pointed out that the participation of children in the age-group of 10-14 years was high. In the urban area, of the children in the age-group of 10-14 years, 11.7 per cent male children and 6.8 per cent female children were engaged in the labour force.

Table 12.2 : Labour force participation rate according to age-group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Labour Force Participation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1. Work participation rate indicates percentage of workers to total population.

2. Source: Govt. of India, Ministry of Welfare, Child in India, A Statistical Profile, op.cit., p. 449.
The Sixth Five Year Plan documents estimated that the child labour force in India in 1985 was 172.2 lakhs while the child labour force projection for 1995 was 175.2 lakhs. Child workers in 1985 in urban areas of India was estimated at 18.3 lakhs while it is projected for 1995 at 20.7 lakhs.

Causes of child labour:

Child labour is the product of poverty and unequal development. The causes of child labour can be discussed under two broad heads, viz., economic and social.

Economic:

Most of the child labourers come from the most deprived section of society. Poverty of the family forces the parents to induce their children to earn something. Very often these children drop out of school because of economic hardship in the family. Sometimes due to illness and other contingencies, the family might need extra money and then even the children are not spared; so these young children from low income groups have to seek employment.

Unemployment or underemployment of adults is a universal factor of child labour throughout the world. K.D. Lumpkin and D.W. Douglas in "child workers in America" have found that two-fifth of the child workers seek their work as because their adult wage earners in their families are unemployed and nearly two-third children are at work as because their adult workers

have no employment or have some part-time jobs and one-third children work
due to the serious cuts in the pay of their adults.¹

Big families with comparatively low income is a major cause of poverty
of the people in the developing countries. As a result, parents cannot take
proper care of the children. Instead they induce their children to earn
whatever amount they can.

There may be an element of bondage involved — it is not uncommon
for the parents or the guardian of a child to take an advance from the em­
ployer. The amount is adjusted against the child worker's earnings which means
he or she cannot quit until the entire money is repaid.

A pilot survey conducted in Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore found that
about three-fourth of the children were at work to supplement to their family
income. 23 per cent of them were doing labour because of the death of their
father or guardian.² In the city area, a large number of migrants are seen
in slum areas and pavements. Because of their poor economic condition, most
of the children get themselves absorbed in the city labour force. Smti M.
Khandkar, in "Report on the situation of children and youth in Greater
Bombay" (1970) found that the migrant children in Greater Bombay consisted
of 81 per cent of the total child labour force.³

¹ Kulshrestha, J.C., op.cit., p. 14
² Kulshreshtha, J.C., op.cit., p. 13
In this way, uncounted millions of children across the country are missing out on the carefree joys of children as hunger, deprivation or the indebtedness of their parent force them into adult occupations.

Social Factors:

Low standard of living and social life is important factor in the causation of child labour. The practice of child labour deprives the children of all the educational opportunities in most of the cases. It also affects their health and they have no bright prospect for their future life.

The prevalence of illiteracy among most of the parents of child workers in developing countries is an important aspect of the social factor. The illiterate and ignorant persons do not much bother about the future of their children. They happen to be satisfied or content with what they gain from the earnings of their children or wards.

In urban slum and squatters, there is no congenial atmosphere for formal education. So neither the parents nor the children are too much bothered about this aspect of life. Those who attend school they drop out after a few years and are usually expected to seek employment. In his study of squatter settlements in Metropolitan Delhi, Majumdar found that 75 per cent of the parents expressed a desire for their children to help them in domestic work; or earning more income for the household. Around 12 to 14 years of age, the pressure to give up school, was strong so that the children could start earning a living at an early age. In
these poor families, there was also the problem of spending money or further education, which was hardly possible in view of their meagre resources.  

A study made by students of Madras school of Social Work in Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore indicated that children coming in labour market were from low literacy groups in society. About 44 per cent of parents were illiterate and another 33 per cent parents of children were low literacy group upto standard of class V only. Therefore, large majority of guardians were desirous of having money in place of intelligence.

According to 1981 Census, of the 9.3 lakh child main workers in urban areas of India, 3.3 lakh were literate while 6.5 lakh were illiterate. Again of the 61 thousand marginal workers in the age group of 0-14 years, 21 thousand were literate and the remaining 40 thousand were illiterate.

A seminar on "Employment of Children" held in November, 1975 also observed that, "child labour is prevalent extensively in the lower socio-economic groups ..... because of the lack of appreciation on their part of the role that education plays in improving life and living conditions of the people."  

1. Majumdar, T.K., op. cit., p. 170  
2. Kulshreshtha, J.C., op. cit., p. 18  
3. Govt. of India, Ministry of Welfare, op. cit., p. 456  
4. Kulshreshtha, J.C., op. cit., p. 18
In India, the process of protective labour legislation is slow which could not even cover the agriculture and small scale industries. Moreover, the inspecting machinery provided by the state government is inadequate for check up of child labour. Some other Acts are also inadequate and ineffective. So these are also significant reasons of child labour.

A major sector of child labour in developing countries like India is begging. Children from very poor families often take resort to begging as a profession when they cannot get any other employment opportunities. Moreover there are some scaring incidents also in big cities where gangsters and syndicates of some cruel, inhuman beings trade in human babies and children. However, the question may be raised whether begging can be considered as a form of work at all.

Thus we find that child labour is correlated with economic miseries of the low income group people. Child labour is to be justified on that ground only as they have to supplement the family income of the destitute section of people. That is why the Indian Government and social scientists do not speak of complete abolition of child labour at this time.

Moreover though there are several legislative provisions on certain aspects of child labour yet the developing countries face some difficulties in the process of enforcement and administration due to lack of public fund and other technical difficulties. Even if they can cover the industrial sectors they can hardly cover the non-industrial sectors (i.e., unorganized sectors) such as agriculture, domestic services, street-trading, handicraft
and small scale industries etc.

Another interesting fact is that though the abolition of child labour is desirable for the welfare and development of the children as well as the society yet the demand of child labour is not much low in comparison to the supply of child labour. It is mostly because, child labour is cheap labour and it is quite suitable and profitable for small concerns and large corporations also.

Case Study of Greater Guwahati:

In the year 1971, the child population of Guwahati constituted 29.53 per cent of the total population (i.e., in absolute number, the child population was 36,556) in the age-group of 0-14 years. While workers (all ages) constituted 34.92 per cent of the total population in Guwahati in 1971, child workers (0-14 age-group) constituted 2.92 per cent of the total population. Moreover 21.22 per cent of the total population was found to be workers in the age-group of 15-19 years. Child workers (male) constituted 3.94 per cent of the total male population and female child workers constituted 1.79 per cent of the total female population. Of the total working population of the city, in 1971, child workers in the age group of 0-14 years accounted for 3 per cent. Of the total male workers 2.25 per cent was in the age-group of 0-14 years while 16.43 per cent of the total female workers of the city was in the age-group of 0-14 years. Workers in the age-group of 15-19 years

1. Census of India, Series 3, Part VI-B, op.cit., p. 46 (Statement 5.7)
2. __________, Ibid., p. 21 (Statement 4.4).
constituted 6 per cent of the total working population.\(^1\)

While children of higher income groups, other than the lowest income group of the city use to study in schools or colleges etc. in the age-group of 4-19 years, a section of the slum and pavement children are found to be engaged in economic activities, besides the major section of them, especially the girls being engaged in domestic works yielding no economic gain from their works.

**Occupational pattern, Economic and Family background of the child workers:**

Almost all of the child workers in urban areas are from low economic group of people, income of these families being much lower in comparison to the size of their families.

The fact found in our survey that there were families (even nuclear families) with two to four, five earners in the family indicates the existence of child earners besides some women earners. If our survey of 350 families, we found 523 earners, out of which 8.22 per cent were child earners (Table 2.1 in Chapter 2). Of these child workers 9.30 per cent earned by begging throughout the streets and residential areas of the city. These children begged either because of the death or serious, chronic illness of the earning adult member of the family or because of the physical disability, e.g., blindness, etc., of the adult member of the family.

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In the case of the later cause, children usually begged with the physically handicapped persons, assisting them to walk throughout the streets. There were 30 per cent unskilled construction workers among the child workers. All of them came to work at the construction sites with either of their parents. 23.26 per cent of the child earners in our survey were engaged in the occupational category of traditional trades and skills. Child workers in this occupational category in our survey were employed as shoe shine boy, cobbler, barber, and community service workers like scavenger, garbage handler and street sweeper. The highest number of child workers in our survey was in the category of unskilled manual workers, viz., workers in household services, day labourer, kitchen bearer, services in repair shops, porters, rickshaw pullers etc. There were two child rickshaw pullers of below fifteen years of age. Both of them migrated from rural areas of other districts of Assam due to the deaths of earning members (fathers) in their families.

In our survey of 350 respondents, 30 were child-workers. The main cause of child labour in our survey was economic miseries of the families of the respondents. But to mention specifically, the causes were death of parents or guardians, serious illness of earning members and economic hardship due to low income in the family. Moreover, two of the respondents' families were flood-victims. Since all of these child workers were from lower economic strata of society so the death or illness of parents or guardians forced them to join the work force. Moreover when the income of a family was too low to feed the members even one meal a day then even
We found in our survey that many children, especially doing household services did not know the amount of income they could earn. It was because, their parents or guardians received their monthly incomes from the employers. There were also three cases where their employers paid nothing in cash. They were provided with fooding, clothing and lodging. Their poor parents happened to be content with the fact that their children could at least get two meals a day which they could not manage to provide at home. Some other child workers earned from Rs. 20/- P.M. to Rs. 40/- P.M., while one respondent child worker's (domestic servant) father could get Rs. 100/- for the year. Some other unskilled workers earned from Rs. 60/- P.M. to around Rs. 500/- P.M.

One important family factor that contributes in the causation of child labour is the big size of the family. A child has to earn despite his parents' or guardian's children were from small families. 3 of the beggars came from families of two members while the remaining one had three members in the family, including himself. Among these child earners 7 i.e., 16.28 per cent were the only earners in their families.

Educational Level:

In our intensive study of 30 child workers, we found that 63.33 per cent were illiterates and 33.33 per cent were school-dropouts and one child worker was admitted into school by his employer who was studying in Class III at the time of this interview.
very young member was induced to earn his/her livelihood. It was because of this reason we found even seven year old girl working as housemaid. Another eleven year old boy was working as house-servant to earn his livelihood, because his parents could not look after him and his brothers and sisters. Both of them spent most of their earning then it is mainly because the income of the family is inadequate in comparison to the size of the family. In our survey, out of 43 child earners, 12 children came from families consisting of seven members. While 20.93 per cent came from families with more other eight members, nobody came from single member, family.

Table 12.3: Distribution of child earners according to the size of families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family size</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12.4: Educational level of the child workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Illiterate</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>63.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Studying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Drop-outs:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Primary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Upto Class III)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Middle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Class IV-VIII)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the drop-outs, 4 had to drop out of school after the deaths of their fathers. Others dropped out to contribute to the family income. Of the illiterates, 2 were sent to work at the ages of 6 and 7 years respectively. One of them resented the fact that she could never have the opportunity to go to school. She felt miserable when her employer's children went to school and read books loudly at home.

Parents of all the illiterate and most other child-workers were found to be illiterate. They did not send their children to school either because they were quite unaware and uncaring about this aspect of life or because they could not manage doing so because of economic hardship in the families.
Some case-studies:

(1) Smti Sumitra Das, aged 8 years works as a housemaid. Her monthly income is Rs. 20/- per month — always received by her parents. Her family consists of seven members. Her father is an agricultural labourer and during the off-season, he earns as a day labourer.

Sumitra Das came to her employer's house two years ago. Her employer was in search of a house servant and when Sumitra's father came to know about it from one of his relatives, he brought Sumitra, then a six years old girl with him to the gentleman's house. At first they would not employ her as a house-maid since she was too young to do household works. Moreover she was very weak and looked sick. But at last, at her father's insistence and the employer's own reluctance to find another girl, he employed her in his household. Since then she had undergone medical treatment for a long time as she had been suffering from acute malnutrition and gastro-intestinal disorders.

The economic condition of Sumitra's father was bad enough to send a six year old girl to do household services. Now he has asked Sumitra's employer to keep her in his house for as long as he wishes. Her employer's was kind enough to tell us that they will marry her to a suitable man in right time.

(2) Shri Babul Deka, aged 12 years is a hotel boy who has to clean tables and wash utensils. He comes from a family of seven members. He earns Rs. 100/- per month and sends the entire amount to his parents. He can get his food free of cost at the hotel.
Babul Deka's father is a cultivator who cultivates in his village land in Baihata Chariali. They cannot grow enough crop to last even for four months a year. So being the eldest son, he has to earn something to contribute to his family. He came here with one of his relatives who work in another hotel.

Babul Deka is illiterate and his younger brothers and sisters also have not been admitted into school. They cannot think of getting education when they cannot have even one full meal a day for the most part of the year.

(3) Shri Sukhdeo Nag, aged 11 years is employed in a household to do domestic services. He comes from a family of eight members. His parents work in a tea-estate and his elder brother also earns occasionally by doing casual work in the tea-estate. Still they are not well-off to meet their daily necessities. So Sukhdeo had been sent by his uncaring parents to Guwahati to earn his livelihood.

Sukhdeo told that a major part of their family income is spent on "hadia" (the traditional name for wine in their community) and ganza by his parents and even his elder brother. This naturally aggravates their economic condition. That is why Sukhdeo has to earn his livelihood from the age of eight. He told us that after a few years he would like to return to his home to work in the tea garden.
Sukhdeo Nag never went to school. His parents were never interested in this matter though there is a primary school in the tea-estate.

(4) Shri Kishan Lal, aged around 15 years is a rickshaw-puller. He can earn around Rs. 500/- P.M. His family consists of nine members. His father is a cultivator who works in his field with his eldest son. But the output is not sufficient for even five months. So Kishan Lal migrated with his maternal uncle to Guwahati from his village in Bihar since it became very difficult to earn in his native place. Now he sends a part of his income to his family regularly, every month.

Kishan Lal is illiterate and his brothers and sisters also do not go to school. When asked whether rickshaw-pulling is a very laborious job for a young boy like himself, he smiled and replied that he has to do it for himself and for his family.

(5) Shri Sitaram Mahtoo, aged 13 years, is a waste paper/goods picker, who earns around Rs. 120/- P.M. by depositing these things. His mother earns by doing household services in their locality. Both of them can earn around Rs. 300/- P.M. for a family of 6 members. His father died several years ago.

Sitaram Mahtoo migrated from Bihar a few years ago. But after living 2 years in Guwahati, his father died. So he has to take the responsibility of his family along with his mother.

Sitaram Mahtoo and all his brothers are illiterate. They do not think of going to school. He said that, after a few days, the eldest of his younger brothers will begin working somewhere to supplement the family income.