CHAPTER 9
Summary, Findings and Implications

9.1 Summary

Around 30 to 40 per cent of the children in India, in the school going age group of 5-14, are not in school—this is even after 50 years of independence. They are also not enumerated as workers by the official data generating agencies such as the Population Census and the National Sample Survey Organisation. These children are referred to, in this thesis, as ‘neither attending school nor working’ (NASNW). It is our contention that while their ‘school-less-ness’ is visible, their work is ‘invisible’. To confirm this theory, it is essential to identify the activities of such children. In this context, it is also important to note that the proportion of NASNW children is much higher in the rural areas than in the urban areas. Accordingly, identifying the activities of NASNW rural children has emerged as the primary objective of the thesis.

The reviews of the literature on child labour, and the efforts of the government and the NGOs to end it, have indicated that the knowledge and the attempt are both rather inadequate. The efforts to end child labour appear to be premised on two popular perceptions regarding the phenomenon: (i) that it is largely a phenomenon associated with certain industries located in specific towns, and (ii) that in the rural areas, it largely occurs within the context of the supervision of parents, and hence is not exploitative. This view of the matter suggests that there is a need for providing a systematic account of the magnitude of the problem, and its dispersal across space and social groups over time. In this context, it has been felt that the definitions of a worker employed by the official data generating agencies are ‘restrictive’.

The review of the literature on child labour has also indicated that it is often viewed as a survival strategy by poor households, and is thus a response to income poverty. Consequently, researchers have explored the relationship between the incidence of income poverty and the incidence of child labour. However, Sen (1985) indicates that poverty should be measured not just in the space of resources, particularly income, but in the space of ‘functionings’ as well. The capability to function does not appear to depend on just the level of income of a person but also to depend crucially on the access to
infrastructure. This suggests that it would be fruitful to view child labour as a function not only of income but also of 'generalized capability failure'.

Thus, very broadly speaking, the major objectives of the thesis have emerged as the

- identification and analysis of the activities of rural children 'not attending school non-workers',
- provision of a systematic account of the magnitude of child labour and its dispersal across space and across social groups; and
- identification of the importance of the relationships between income poverty and the incidence of child labour, and 'generalized' deprivation and the incidence of child labour.

Given these objectives, the results are discussed below.

9.2 A Brief Discussion of the Results

In order to identify the activities of NASNW rural children, a primary survey was conducted in two villages in the district of Vellore in Northern Tamil Nadu. It has been identified from the survey that boys and girls engage in 25 and 22 different activities, respectively. These activities have been grouped into five categories:

(i) Productive Activities, (ii) Subsistence Activities, (iii) Socialization Activities, (iv) Personal Care Activities, and (v) Idleness and Leisure Activities. The first category includes only those activities that are considered to be work by the official data generating agencies. Accordingly, in the first instance, only time spent on productive activities has been employed to categorize NASNW children as workers. To be precise, a child, reported in the household census as NASNW has been reclassified as a worker if and only if that child has spent more than 10 per cent of her/his total time in productive activities. Such reclassification has shown that all male and a little more than 61 per cent of all female NASNW children qualify to be included in the count of workers. This suggests that there is probably considerable under-reporting of children's work by parents, who are often the respondents in any survey. For this reason, it appears that a more accurate picture of child labour could be obtained if the 'restrictive' WPR estimated from the secondary sources of data at all levels were revised upwards.
In the next instance, apart from productive activities, subsistence activities too have been considered to constitute work. These activities, which include post harvest processing for own consumption, taking care of the elderly and sick, fetching water, and making cowdung-cake are largely assigned to females. It will do severe injustice to the truth of the work-status of girls if these activities are not considered as work. The results show that all female children spend more than 20 per cent of their time either in productive or subsistence activities and hence qualify for inclusion in the count of workers. We conclude from the above that NASNW children are indeed ‘invisible’ workers.

The WPRs for these villages have thus been revised, based on the results derived from the reclassification of NASNW children. The revised ‘realistic’ WPR – turned out to be the same as the ‘liberal’ WPR estimated from the household census schedule. These results suggest a case for accepting the ‘liberal’ count of workers as the ‘realistic’ estimate of child workers at various levels: the district, the State and for the country. While it is possible that the ‘liberal’ count overestimates the true count of workers, it is perhaps better to lean in the direction of this count for two reasons: (i) the ‘restrictive’ count is probably a greater underestimate of the work participation of children, especially female children, then the liberal count is an overestimate, and (ii) if the aim of abolishing child labour also extends to providing formal education to these children, as it should, then the number of children to be accommodated in the formal education stream is given by the ‘liberal’ count and not by the ‘restrictive’ count.

The primary survey also indicates the need for conducting such surveys, specifically designed to capture the activities of children. It was observed that the activities of the children surveyed were so diverse that a child often engages in more than one substantial work activity in a day—say for example, working in the rice mill for an hour, taking care of the cattle for two hours, and collecting firewood for one hour. But at the end of the day the money income that the child brings home may be very meagre and so, in all probability, the respondent (who often happens to be the head of the household) reports the child as being either too young (to work!) or idle. It is apparent, then, that a detailed survey of the kind that has been done in the two villages needs to be conducted in different agro-climatic zones, so that the true count of child workers is arrived at. Indeed, if we resorted to the liberal count of child workers at the all-India level, the
numbers would be in the region of hundred million. This is a huge figure but also one which is very close to the figure reported by the ILO.

The analysis of the dispersal of child workers shows that they are thoroughly well dispersed across space. However, it is important to note that Uttar Pradesh alone accounted for almost one-fourth of the total child workers (23.42 million out of a total of 100.98 million) in the country in 1991. In six other states – Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan – the numbers of child workers were in excess of five million. While the aggregate headcounts are important pointers to the actual magnitude of the problem, estimates, which are normalized for population size, are informative with respect to the ‘likelihood’ of encountering this phenomenon. For this reason, the headcount ratio, i.e. the WPR, has also been employed to study the variability in the magnitude of the incidence of child labour.

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in turn, lead the states with respect to the magnitude of child labour, according to the ‘liberal’ WPR and the aggregate headcount respectively. The ‘liberal’ WPR shows that, more than 65 per cent of the children in Bihar were workers in 1991. The other states where the probability of encountering a child worker was more than one-half were Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Often the WPR and the aggregate headcount do not provide conflicting pictures: the list of most child-labour-intensive states remains the same, irrespective of the measure employed to judge the magnitude of the problem. It is also interesting to note that of the seven states where the incidence was severe in 1991, four are the BIMARU states.

An analysis of the temporal variation shows that the decline in the incidence was observed to be relatively low in the BIMARU states compared to that observed at the national level. Apart from the BIMARU states, West Bengal has been observed to have performed very poorly—assessed in terms of the reduction in the incidence of child labour. On the other hand, Tamil Nadu in the south has performed well in terms of reducing the incidence of child labour. Indeed, all those states where the incidence was observed to be low in the initial year managed to reduce the incidence faster than the BIMARU states. This probably points to increasing regional inequality in the dimension of child labour over time. In this connection, an attempt has been made to explore the
probable causes that lead to a reduction in the incidence of child labour. To this end, the performance of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in alleviating income poverty and reducing deprivation in the spheres of access to education, health, electricity (a source of lighting), tap as a source of drinking water, and healthcare was assessed in relation to the extent of reduction in the incidence of child labour witnessed in these states. The analysis shows that (i) the state domestic product at current prices in 1981 was observed to be higher at Rs.1611 for West Bengal than at Rs.1498 for Tamil Nadu, (ii) West Bengal has been relatively more successful in reducing the incidence of income poverty, while Tamil Nadu scores high in reducing generalised deprivation. These results suggest that the incidence of capability failure is not related to the level of income resources available. It may also be noted here that while the incidence of child labour has declined by more 30 per cent in Tamil Nadu, the decline in West Bengal has been only of the order of 3.45 per cent between 1981 and 1991. This suggests that the public provisioning of infrastructure helps to improve well being, in this case the escape by children from the menace of labour.

The distribution of the burden of child labour across various groups – grouped on the basis of the nature of residence, gender and caste – has been analysed in the thesis. To identify the extent of relative disadvantage suffered by children of various groups the ‘index of excess burden’ has been employed. The analysis shows that (i) rural children are more disadvantaged than urban children, (ii) girls are more disadvantaged than boys, and (iii) SC/ST children are more disadvantaged than ‘Others’ children. The comprehensive assessment of the relative disadvantage suffered by children shows that rural SC/ST girls experience multiple disadvantages arising from the nature of residence, gender and caste. As a result, SC/ST girls constitute the most deprived section of India’s child population. Any policy that aims to reduce child labour should first address the problem of SC/ST girls.

The distribution of child workers by industries of origin, both in the rural and urban areas, has also been analysed in the thesis. The analysis shows that in every state more than 70 per cent of child workers are found in the rural areas, and around 80 per cent of these are employed in agriculture. It has also been observed that little more than 50 per cent of those employed in agriculture, work for a wage (as agricultural labourers). These results contradict the popular perceptions regarding child labour. In this
connection, it is important to study the problems of child labourers employed in the agricultural sector, particularly the health hazards faced by such children where a large quantity of pesticides and chemical fertilizers are used. The residue left in the soil could pose a great threat to farm workers, particularly children.

The analysis of the change in the distribution of child workers across industries between 1971 and 1991 indicates that the number of child workers in Manufacturing Other than in Household Industries has increased in this period, in both rural and urban areas. It is important to note here that almost all child labour laws are related mostly to the employment of children in industries. The decline in the number of child workers, both boys and girls, has been most pronounced in Industry 3, constituted by Livestock, Forestry, Fishing and Plantation. In agriculture, however, while the number of boys employed has declined, that of girls has increased. These changes, as argued elsewhere, probably show that the nature of change in the economy rather than legislative intervention affects the growth and distribution of child workers in different industries. This implies that child labour could be eradicated only by ameliorating the basic conditions that lead to the employment of children and not just by legislative intervention.

The attempt to analyse the relationships between the incidence of child labour and (i) the income poverty or deprivation in the space of income resources, and (ii) the ‘generalised’ capability failure, shows that only the correlation coefficients between the ‘index of generalized deprivation’ (IGD) and the ‘liberal’ WPRs are fairly high (exceeding 0.7), and significantly different from zero in both the years 1971 and 1991. This result implies that alleviating the incidence of capability failure could reduce the incidence of child labour.

This completes the brief summary of the results in the thesis. The limitations of the thesis and issues for further research are indicated in the following paragraphs.

9.3 Importance and Limitations of the Study

As noted at the beginning, a large number of children are classified as ‘not attending school non-workers’. Very little is known about their activities. At best, the secondary sources of data classify most of them as ‘dependents or others’, which implies
that they are ‘idle’. This study has helped to dispel this myth by showing that such children spend a major part of their time of a day in productive activities. The study also highlights the importance of enumerating the activities of children as reported by them directly. In this process, it also indicates that the use of a structured questionnaire may not be of much value for this purpose, and it is fruitful to use a diary for each respondent. For analytical purposes, the post-enumeration stratification of activities will help to identify the work of children. The systematic account of the magnitude of child labour and its dispersal has shown that the popular perceptions regarding child labour are probably misconceived. Having considered the importance of the study, the major limitations are indicated below.

The survey on the activities of children has been conducted in two villages located in the district of Vellore, in Northern Tamil Nadu. This state, as indicated earlier, is one of the relatively more developed states in the Indian Union, assessed in terms of the availability of infrastructural facilities. For this reason, the results obtained on the basis of a survey conducted in this state cannot be generalised to other states. Indeed, since it appears that the nature of the agrarian economy of the villages exerts a considerable influence on the extent of the labour market participation of children, the results of the survey may not hold true for even other districts in the state.

The survey period consisted of only 30 days distributed between the months of February and March. Though this period is part of neither a busy season nor a lean agricultural one, it may not fully represent a year. There could be variations in the activity patterns of children between seasons and months in a year, which are probably not captured by the survey.

The index of generalised deprivation employed in this thesis is very crude and needs to be refined. Data on the rural population deprived of access to each facility is required to refine this index. However, it was found to be very difficult to obtain the required data for all the states.

The statistical tool employed to analyse the relationships between the incidence of child labour and (i) the incidence of income poverty, and (ii) the incidence of generalised deprivation is very elementary.
This study has attempted to concentrate on the identification and analysis of the activities of only ‘invisible’ rural child workers, and consequently their urban counterparts are not studied here. However, to obtain the true estimate of the number of child workers in the country, it is important to identify the activities of ‘invisible’ urban child workers too.

9.4 Issues for Future Research

In this study, the focus has been on the identification of the activities of ‘invisible’ rural child workers to a great extent. However, the analysis of the data shows that considerable variability exists in the activity pattern of boys and girls, arising as a result of the patriarchal value system, which assigns the duties of a male and female in society. This result suggests that there could be similar variations in the activity pattern of SC/ST and ‘Others’ children, which are probably dictated by the differences in the extent of access to various resources. It appears then that it is important to identify the differences in the activity patterns of children classified by Caste. Such an exercise, apart from enriching our knowledge on the work of children, will be extremely useful in designing a package of policy measures that aim at eradicating the phenomenon of child labour.

The results of the study indicate that nearly 80 per cent of rural child workers are employed in the agricultural sector. Moreover, the number of female child workers employed as agricultural labourers appears to be on the increase. In this context, it is important to note that there are very few studies on child labour in this sector. Thus, a study on issues pertaining to child labour, particularly female child workers, in the agricultural sector assumes a great deal of importance.

In the course of the survey, it has been identified that the wage and employment systems prevailing for children have been found to vary a great deal in the villages. For example, some children worked in small teashops just for food, and gratis at the time of annual festivals. They did not receive wages on a daily basis. Similarly, children worked along with their parents on the farms of others, and also carried out household duties to repay tiny loans taken by them. In this context, it would be fruitful to study the wage and employment systems of children in the rural areas.
Finally, it must be stated that the objective of this study has been rather modest: the attempt has been to provide a systematic empirical account of the magnitude of the phenomenon of child labour and its dispersal, and to identify the work of ‘neither attending school nor working’ rural children. In the process, it points out (i) that the certain popular perceptions on child labour in India are somewhat misconceived, (ii) that it may be fruitful to view the phenomenon as a symptom of ‘generalised capability failure’ rather than as being induced largely by deprivation in the space of income resources, and (iii) some important issues for further research.