

Research Article

Child Labour and Education in India: Promises and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Child labour is a global reality. It is both cause and consequence of socio-economic backwardness. In India, child labour is considered a 'curse' for the nation's development. There is a diverse range of factors that perpetuate child labour in India. The highlighted factors of the proliferation of child labour are destitution, illiteracy, unemployment, underemployment, large-family size, low family income, ignorance of the parents towards the importance of education and many others. Notably, child labour is most prevalent in the unorganised sector primarily as domestic workers, restaurant and eateries' workers, automobile repairing workers, construction workers, shop, and canteen workers and as helpers in various occupational fields. Over the years, child labourer has been facing social, economic, physical and psychological problems in India. Some of the serious issues faced by child labour are social abuse, violence, discrimination, stress and vulnerability. The government has been a failure to abolish child labour due to a lack of effective labour laws, government mechanisms and state's agencies. Education is, therefore, one of the primary conditions for children to overcome this problem. Against this background, this article understands the current patterns in child labour in India. Based on the secondary sources, it underlines the educational challenges faced by child labour in India. It also discusses gendered issues before the education of child labour.

Keywords: Child labour, Unorganised sector, Exploitation, Education

INTRODUCTION

Child labour is one of the major obstacles to development in India. Over the decades, the children are forcibly or unwillingly engaged in low wages and petty economic activities.

Due to the economic compulsions of the parents, the children are forced to send to work, which resulted in many severe consequences before a child as well as to society. Children usually work to provide financial support to their families. However, they neither get fair and timely wages nor decent working conditions at the worksite. There are many incidences when the children work as bonded labour, slaves or under-skilled workers. Consequently, they face many socio-economic and psychological challenges which may cause permanent damage to their childhood.

Child labour refers to children who miss their childhood and are not able to have the basic amenities which a child should have (ILO, 2013). According to the International Labour Organization (2017), there were an estimated 218 million children between 5 and 17 years engaged in employment worldwide. At the global level, child labour is concentrated primarily in agriculture (71%) which includes fishing, forestry, livestock herding, and comprises both subsistence and commercial farming, only 17% in the service sector and 12% in the industrial sector, including mining (ILO, n.d.a).

Child labour is an integral part of the labour force, especially in India (Singh, 2013, p. 44). Child labourers are involved in many different forms of work, such as domestic work, shop and restaurant work, construction work, housemaid, home-based work and vegetable vendors and many others. They also engage in industry and mining activities which include risks and hazards. These children are vulnerable to physical pain and injury particularly being exposed to health hazards (Levison and Murray, 2005). According to the ILO (2012a), the vast majority of child labour is involved in hazardous occupations such as agriculture, mining, manufacture, construction, bonded child labour, domestic work and fishing. Environmental and occupational conditions can impact the health and development of children. Children working in different sectors such as agriculture, factories, domestic labour, sex workers and carrying out their illicit activities, migrant labourers, and on the streets as vendors etc. The effect of jobs and activities can vary from country to country. Also, there are differences in their working conditions, ages and gender of children involved in the various sectors (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2002).

Poverty creates many problems such as child labour, prostitution, corruption, robbery, increased unemployment, poor living conditions, malnutrition, etc. (Owolabi, 2012; Ekpenyong and Sibirii, 2011). Child poverty refers to children who are born to poor parents. Child poverty differs from adult poverty because it has varied reasons and effects, for example, it robs a child of his/her childhood. It may affect or bear a long-lasting or psychological makeup in their mind and the impact of poverty during childhood leaves permanent effects on children. Poverty influences children in many social ways, for instance, malnutrition can affect health and education which in turn may impact a child's long-term development (Ortiz *et al.*, 2012). According to UNICEF, child poverty

is based on child rights, these children lack adequate nutrition, drinking water and sanitation facilities, health services, education and information (Ortiz *et al.*, 2012).

Practically, poor people face inadequate basic needs such as food, clothing, health facilities etc. People who live below the poverty line, live in severe housing conditions and poor sanitary and hygienic conditions. Many of them live in slums or poor residential areas and some of them lack housing, health care and nutrition sufficiency. Although illiteracy is far more prevalent among poor people, many of them lack education or drop out of school because of the high cost of schooling. In general, poor people earn little and, in such cases, parents are not able to take care of all the responsibilities of their children and they oblige their children to work to increase household income (Khan, 2001).

Among 218 million, 152 million are victims of child labour, almost half of the 73 million, work in hazardous child labour. Among 152 million children in child labour, 88 million are boys and 64 million are girls. According to ILO (2017), the largest numbers of child labour are working in hazardous work. The children are vulnerable to diseases and they struggle with long-term physical and psychological pain. Under such vulnerable conditions, they are neglected from the basic need of food, clothes and shelter. Many studies argued that they are exposed to psychological stress and hopelessness at a young age. Health is one of the important aspects of child labour. The children are often ignored by their parents or they may not be aware of their children's health. The Indian government has enacted several laws and regulations to eliminate child labour. However, despite all the efforts, the incidences of child labour continue to be prevalent.

CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA

The use of child labour is very prevalent in India and the cause is deep-rooted with poverty. UNICEF India has an estimated 28 million children aged 5–14 involved in work (UNICEF, 2011) Child labour is not a new phenomenon in India where children have always worked. Several key factors affect child labour in India, most notably is poverty. Child labour in India is to be found in almost every sector of the informal economy. The rate of poverty is highest among people in Uttar Pradesh, however, the proportion of the urban population living in slums. The region is dominated by families of large sizes generally people are living in households with eight members. There is a gender difference that existed between boys and girls in India. There are more male children are involved in economic activity than female children. Since girl's work is more invisible and as a result, hidden and not reported.

The high incidence of child labour is much higher in rural areas than urban areas and most of the child labour in rural areas is engaged in agricultural activities. During 2009–

2010, the numbers of child labour in the age of group 5–14 years has declined by 10%, but still a large number of children working especially in rural India, because of the agricultural activities (Sharma *et al.*, 2012). However, the incidence of child labour in rural areas is high than in urban areas. Although most child labourers prepositioned from poor households and poverty is more prevalent in rural areas than in urban India. Another reason is bonded labour which is usually common in rural areas in India where traditional class or caste. Migrant labourers are mostly vulnerable to bonded labour because they have no choice sources of credit so, due to debt their whole family forcing their children to work as bonded labour.

Despite having several legislations and programmes, a large number of child labour are still out of school. Child labour is not able to access school education due to family- and school-related factors. The problem of child labour increases due to lack of education and vice versa and therefore, working children get stuck into the vicious circle of poverty, labour and lack of education. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 provides right to every child between the ages 5 and 14 years for free and equal opportunities of education till the completion of elementary education in a neighbourhood school. Ironically, according to UNICEF (2020), there are close to 6 million out of school children in India. Ironically, out of 100 students, 29% of girls and boys drop out of school before completing the full cycle of elementary education (UNICEF, n.d.). The majority of the Out of School Children are concentrated in six states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal.

DEFINITION OF CHILD LABOUR

The term child labour has many definitions from different scholars. According to Osment (2011), the term ‘child labour’ refers to when children are working in any type of work that is dangerous and harmful to children’s health or the work hinders their education. For Moyi (2011), child labour refers to low wages, long hours, physical and sexual abuse. According to Edmonds and Pavcnik (2005), child labour is viewed as a form of child labour abuse, when children work in bad conditions and hazardous occupations.

The meaning of the term child labour also varies among organisations, ILO argues that child labour is difficult to define. It depends on the type of job and if the age is under 18 and if the job intervenes in the children’s education and development (ILO, 2004). A child, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 refers to a person under the age of 18. The World Bank assumes that child labour can do a serious threat to long-term national investment. Furthermore, according to UNICEF the problem of child labour can have more bad consequences besides all the concerns of investment or its relation to economic activity (ILO, 2013; Weston, 2005).

Bhat (2010) asserts that the definition of child labour is not simple because it includes three difficult concepts to define, which are 'child', 'work' and 'labour'. He claimed that the term of childhood can be defined by age but in some societies, people cease to be a child at different ages. The onset of puberty occurs at different ages for different people. Therefore, Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999 (No. 182) defines a child who is under the age of 18 years (Bhat, 2011). The definition of child labour differs among societies, for example, in Africa and Asia they do not consider the work of 15 years old person as child labour, they view child labour as a good task that children learn skills from work. They distinguish between child labour and child work, where child work is considered to be a part of the children's training to be responsible adults while child labour is thought to be exploitative (Omokhodion and Odusote, 2006).

'Not all work that children do is severe', according to ILO reports (2002), 'if a work does not hinder children's schooling or do not affect their health physically and mentally, then it is generally not categorized as child labour'. For instance, helping parents at home, looking after siblings, or working for pocket money after school hours and during holidays. Also, Aqil (2012) assumed that not all work that children do can harm their health or considered exploitative, but it depends on what kind of work they are involved in and how many hours they work. It also depends on work conditions or environment. However, Weston (2005) argued that any work children do, can be damaging to their health because the work can be abusive, exploitative or hazardous and it can influence their health. Omokhodion and Odusote (2006) argued that any work that children do outside the home is classified as child labour. According to them working outside the home is usually exposed to environmental hazards which may affect their health and safety.

RURAL AND URBAN CHILD LABOUR

Child labour persists all over the country. However, the child labour is classified into two broad types: rural and urban child labour. Child labour has been a complex rural problem, as well as children helping out on the farm with their families. The vast majority of child labour is involved in agriculture. On the contrary, the agricultural sector is the mainstay of a developing countries economy, particularly in India (Baker, 2008). At global level, rural children were more likely to be engaged in economic labour activities compared to urban children, because poverty is more prevalent in rural areas especially among those who depend on agriculture (Akarro and Mtweve, 2011). Poor rural families consider making their children work on farms, which may increase a household's income (Serwadda-Luwaga, 2005). Rickey (2009) pointed out that many rural areas lack basic services such as electricity and access to drinking water. In such cases, their children must fetch water especially girls, who are more involved in housework.

Child labourers also exist in cities. According to the World Bank, child worker is typically a sign of urban poverty in many countries. Urban children usually are involved in domestic work or sales. Their working conditions are very poor, unhealthy and crowded. They work for long hours with very low wage or no wage. Girls are usually the most vulnerable; they are typically trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation in urban centres such as Mumbai, Calcutta and New Delhi (Baker, 2008). They face many problems due to poverty. Poor urban children are at particular risk of many problems such as lack of education, healthcare, and social protection (Baker, 2008).

Urban children attend more to a school than rural child labourers. Urban areas provide better educational access, quality and infrastructure than rural areas. For poor rural children living far off from school, transportation cost often becomes a challenging affair for their families (Huebler, 2008). According to Edmonds (2007), rural children work more and for longer hours than in urban regions. Regarding attendance, due to limited access to school rural children are more likely to be involved in child labourers. Moreover, urban and rural areas differ in the terms of how schooling and child labourers are related. Education levels are generally very low among child labourers in rural areas (Edmond, 2007).

GENDER DISCRIMINATION AMONG CHILD LABOUR

In India, child labourers are both boys and girls who work at a tender age. There has been gender discrimination among child labour in terms of performing activities. Boys and girls often do different jobs, and it differs by country and industry wise, for instance, boys are more economically active than girls and boys can be found in different types of economic activities. For example, boys are more concentrated in manufacturing, trade, restaurants, hotels and transport, while girls are more concentrated in agriculture and domestic work (World Bank, 2005).

Another study by Edmonds (2007) found that a large number of child labourers are engaged in domestic works who employed by private households. Edmonds (2007) assumed that boys tend to engage more in industrial activities than girls. Boys are more likely to be found in fishing, wood furniture manufacturing, construction site, retail trade of grocery, while girls are likely to work in textile, handcrafting and in private household services.

Mamadou (2009) asserted that boys tend to be engaged more in economic activities, while girls are more involved in household chores or taking care of siblings. In general, girls are often made invisible in labour whereas, they represent a very large proportion of working children. This is because, parents often decide to send only some of their children to school, and it is often the girl who loses out (Bhat, 2010). Ray (2001)

carried out research in Nepal and Pakistan where he assumed that gender bias was more prevalent in the case of Pakistan than compared to Nepal. In Pakistan, boys are more likely to work longer hours than girls and rural children are poorer than urban, while it was the opposite in Nepal.

CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR CHILD LABOUR

Education of child labour has been a serious issue in India. The problem of child labour decreases the opportunities for education for poor working children. Consequently, it depresses the participation and retention of child labour in school education which decreases gross enrolment rates. Such problems raise concern for the barrier of education for child labour. Child labourers are among the worst affected groups of children who have been deprived of school education. Considering this background, this section identifies three of the main educational gaps faced by child labourers, that is, the access gap, participation gap and retention gap. These gaps address many of the educational backwardnesses among child labourers in India.

Access to Education

Access to school education is one of the major challenges for child labourers (Sakurai, 2010). Many children in India are out of school, which is primarily due to the inaccessibility of school education due to a variety of reasons (Vasavi and Mehendale, 2003). In India, many factors are leading to educational challenges for child labourers. The factors can be classified primarily at two levels—family level and school level. At the family level, the main causes of inaccessibility to education and schools are continuous poverty, illiteracy of parents, the opportunity cost of education, lack of community awareness, migratory nature of work, lack of inclusive policy and so on. At the school level, there are several factors such as non-availability of a school, the distance of a school, discontinuity of education during mid-term and inability to return, delay in admissions due to a change in place and school, lack of special schools, and so on (Guarcello *et al.*, 2008).

The following section focuses on some of the crucial factors affecting access to school education for child labourers.

Cost of Education

The cost of education is a key contributing factor when it comes to the inaccessibility of education for poor and vulnerable children (Betcherman *et al.*, 2004). The poor families believe that they have greater incentives to put children to work than to send them to school because the expected returns to education are less than the returns from

work. While research suggests that economic returns favour schooling, families are unable to educate their children because of various obstacles or constraints (Chamarbagwala, 2008). These most often impact poor or vulnerable families that cannot afford the direct costs of education or the opportunity costs of losing the labour of their children.

Parents who send their children to primary school must shoulder many indirect costs, such as uniforms and textbooks (ILO, 2007). The parents earn low wages and are not able to afford such expenses on the school education of their children. Furthermore, they incur the opportunity cost, which is the wage that the child would earn if she or he was working instead of going to school (ILO, 2007). Such cost of education becomes unaffordable for many poor families. This indicates extreme poverty in society, which has already been discussed in the previous sections. While poverty and opportunity cost are important 'pull' factors in dragging children prematurely into the labour market, there are important 'push' factors too, particularly social exclusion, both within the education system itself and within the local communities in which the schools are situated (ILO, 2007).

Availability of Schools

The distance of schools from households is another major problem for school education (Guarcello *et al.*, 2008). Children in rural and village areas face difficulties in going to school due to the lack of availability of schools in nearby locations. In remote areas, public transport is weak and unaffordable for young children, which also hinders child labourers' access to school education (Bhat, 2010). However, the availability of schools has been shown to increase the school attendance of the children.

Admission Procedure

Admission procedure has been another constraint in accessing school education for the migrant workers' children (Rustagi, 2012). Child labourers migrate from one region to another and thus face problems with school admission. Migrant workers find it difficult to get their children enrolled in schools due to a lack of awareness about various procedures and documents required during the admission procedure. Furthermore, the re-admission of these children to a different school in another state is very challenging for them. Such problems lead to many cases of children leaving school education (Vasavi and Mehendale, 2003). Critically, the retention of school education among these children is exceptionally low.

The admission of the child labourer to a school is a misguided indicator in understanding the educational impact of child labour. There is a need to measure the effect of child

labour within actual classroom learning. The learning achievement is of most relevance; the public or private return to investment in school is not realised if children do not learn effectively while in the classroom. School attendance and achievement are of course intricately linked. Children who perform poorly in the classroom or are forced to repeat grades are much more likely to leave the school system prematurely (Guarcello *et al.*, 2008).

According to the Children's Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, education is a legal right, and essential for the reduction and abolition of child labour. Without compulsory education, the government cannot enforce child labour laws. If the school-leaving age is lower than the minimum age of employment, children are likely to seek employment illegally, and the enforcement of child labour laws is rendered more difficult (Roy *et al.*, 2015).

Participation in Education

School education has been a serious problem for many children in India. Child labourers have been subject to exclusion from schools. The involvement of children in work results in an overburden of work, longer working hours, extreme poverty and impermissible for leaves generally lack educational facilities (ILO, 2007b). Therefore, working students (those engaged in any form of child labour) may also have less interest in academic pursuits or have a lack of value for school education (Guarcello *et al.*, 2008). Child labourers are usually not able to invest time in their school education as they are occupied by work. The time spent in work activities interferes with their ability to engage in the learning process and affects their performance in schools (Guarcello, 2005), and therefore, they end up prioritising work over school education. The following section analyses the issues and challenges faced by child labourers in school education.

School participation responds to a wide range of variables, including parental education, social norms and customs, socio-economic and cultural background, family bondages, ineffective mid-day meal schemes at the village level and infrastructural facilities in the school (UNESCO, 2019; Waseem, 2015; Shahidul and Karim, 2015; Vasavi and Mehendale, 2003; Kabeer, 2003; Admassie, 2003; Drèze and Kingdon, 2001). Participation in school education is one of the critical issues related to the education of child labourers. The impediments of participation in formal schooling can be analysed broadly in two aspects: personal and school-related factors. At the personal level, socio-cultural factors such as language, culture, and family background restrict them from getting involved in the formal education setting along with other students. There are also family-related factors, such as earning wages, bearing family responsibilities, and lack of support by the parents to continue education (Aqil, 2012; Mukherjee and Das,

2008). According to Sasmal and Guillen (2015, p. 271), 'If the poor parents send their children to work instead of sending them to school, they became deprived of education and acquire skills, and in effect, the children may grow an unskilled adult worker'. Consequently, child labourers may remain poor and uneducated as they grow and have children of their own, thus possibly leading to poverty and a lack of education in the next generation, as they may also be forced to send their children to work to supplement the family income. It becomes a vicious circle of child labour problem. Such factors hamper them to integrate with the school culture, learning process and curriculum.

Curriculum and Medium of Instruction

At the school level, there are several factors such as curriculum, teaching and learning process, the role of teachers, the school environment and so on, which alienate child labourers from school education. Due to their rural background, child labourers hesitate to integrate and survive in a new atmosphere and feel alienated in the classroom (Deb and Rosati, 2002). The curriculum and medium of instruction also affect teaching and learning processes and often fail to disseminate education to the poor and vulnerable children. Child labourers may not be able to comprehend the curriculum and the language used to deliver the teaching and learning process. However, there is limited literature on teachers' responses toward child labourers, considering their continuous participation and academic engagement.

The curriculum and language of the textbooks are designed in urban contexts, which results in the exclusion of children belonging to rural areas (Orazem and Gunnarsson, 2003). The language in these textbooks is generally either Hindi or English, which is difficult to understand by children belonging to remote areas where there may be a different local language altogether. This, of course, results in them being unable to comprehend the contents of the textbooks (ibid). Since many child labourers migrate from different places or regions and have distinct socio-cultural and linguistic identities, they have difficulty engaging with the curriculum and language taught in the classroom. This leads to feelings of exclusion in the classroom, which results in poor learning skills, low participation and high dropout rates of migrant children (ILO, 2007).

School Infrastructure

School infrastructure also influences the participation of child labourers in school education. Many schools in India do not have proper infrastructural facilities such as buildings, classrooms, toilets and playgrounds. Several studies report that there is a lack of a sufficient number of teachers, stationery, and educational facilities for the economically weaker areas (Khanam and Ross, 2005; Ray and Geoffrey, 2004; Deb

and Rosati, 2002). Consequently, the inadequacies and weaknesses in national educational systems lead to poor academic performances, learning outcomes and low returns of education among child labourers (ILO, 2002).

Exclusionary Practices

The exclusionary practices with children belonging to poor and rural backgrounds gradually alienate them from schools. Sedwal and Kamat (2008) have discussed that there has been a debate on a 'blame-game constructed by the popular media, which accused teachers of reinforcing exclusionary practices in schools. Such circumstances lead to low learning outcomes due to ineffective teaching, an incomprehensive syllabus, and no coaching support in schools, as well as in the family (Mamadou, 2009; Banerji and Mukherjee, 2008; Guarcello, 2005; Orazem and Gunnarsson, 2003; Heady, 2000). Teachers are certainly important actors in education reform and must apply participatory practices during teaching-learning processes in the classroom (ibid). Ironically, there is a lack of teacher's responses to child labourers in the literature studied.

Retention in Education

The caste dynamics, gender discrimination, regional differences and school integration processes are primary factors affecting the retention of students in school education. Despite having enrolled in schools, many child labourers are forced to leave school education, mainly due to ineffective policies, legal framework and implementation at the ground level.

Many children drop out of school because they have to work, and it is equally the case for many to become discouraged by the school because of the inferior quality of education provided. Child labourers are children who are mostly out of school for reasons such as familial, social, economic, and policy loopholes (Mukherjee and Das, 2008). Child labourers in India do not continue their school education due to their workload. The dropout rates are higher among children belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The dropping out of the school of children of Scheduled Castes is mainly due to unequal behaviour with students in the classroom and classroom activities, and lack of access to public infrastructure in schools (Hoque *et al.*, 2017).

Scheduled Tribes have different cultural settings and social experiences. The children of tribal communities live mostly live-in villages and have different languages. The dropout rate among children belonging to Scheduled Tribes depends upon the following reasons: seclusion from mainstream education, the medium of instruction and lack of co-relation with syllabus and learning activities (Rena, 2009; Larsen, 2003). In India, children belonging to Scheduled Castes are still excluded from school education. Similarly,

Muslim children also face several challenges, which results in grade repetition, low learning outcomes and low retention rate among the Muslim community (Hoque *et al.*, 2017).

Ineffective Policies

Due to the loopholes in policies, ineffective educational programmes and lack of proper legal mechanisms, the children of SC, ST and minority communities face more vulnerabilities in accessing, participating and retaining school education in India. There is a need to include children of scheduled caste communities into mainstream formal education to avoid undesired child labour activities (Hogue *et al.*, 2017). Simultaneously, the state has to provide social protection to child labourers to overcome the challenges of poverty, hunger and seclusion. The inclusive and target-oriented approaches are two main aspects necessary for the improvement of school education for child labourers (Mukhopadhyay and Sriprakash, 2013).

Quality of Education

The quality of education is an important component for the retention of children in schools (Govinda and Bandyopdhyay, 2008). The quality of education has been understood as broad target for quality improvement and is focused mainly on student attendance, retention and academic achievement (Mukhopadhyay and Sriprakash, 2013). They are unable to understand the purpose of learning and examination in the school (Joshi, 2010).

This led to narrow down the understanding of the quality aspect of education which does influence the equal opportunities of educational benefits in the society (ibid). In the context of child labourers, the method of teaching has been critical to inculcate subject knowledge and help them to understand basic concepts. Teaching methods affect their academic engagement and learning practices in the classrooms. Consequently, the inclusion and participation of children belonging to vulnerable and marginalised sections remain unaddressed and overlooked at the policy level (Kabeer, 2001). Therefore, the quality of education needs to be addressed in the policy debate under the inclusive education approach.

CONCLUSION

Child labour has been a serious challenge for society. India has witnessed this problem for a long time. Child labour occurs due to several reasons such as poverty, unemployment, large family size, homelessness, lack of education among parents and so on. In India, there are broadly two types of child labour region wise: rural and urban

child labour. Children are found working in many economic activities such as domestic work, canteen and hotel work, industrial work, vegetable vendors, shops and other unorganised establishments. The gendered discrimination of child labour has been found among child labourers. Both boys and girls have different nature of activities and girls get less wages than boys.

Education is a critical opportunity for child labourer in India. Child labourer does not get opportunities to educational facilities. The educational challenges can be studied in two levels: first personal/family level and second, school level. At the personal level, there are factors such as poverty, unemployment, large family size, unawareness of parents about education and so on. At the school level, educational challenges occur due to access, participation and retention of children. This paper further discusses the issues and challenges of education for child labour under these three categories.

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