

**Child Labour in India - A
Sociological Study**

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Abstract

Child labor has become an important global issue and it is true that this problem is assuming an alarming proportion. Several factors have been contributing to the flare-up of this social problem. The sight of small kids polishing shoes on the roads, cleaning utensils in hotels and dhabas or working in factories is not unusual. It seems the hardships of life took birth with them only. This study attempts to determine the nature and magnitude of child labour in India and engages with why children are forced to take up employment and what could be the possible consequences of child labour. Methodologically, this study is based on the data collected from various governmental and non-governmental published reports using mixed approach to address the objectives of this study. The findings of the study show that although there has been a decline in the cases of child labour in India from 2001 census to 2011 census however the number of child labour cases is still high.

Keywords

Child-labour, Child rights, Crime, Bonded labour, Prevention

Introduction:

Child labor is disproportionately prevalent in underdeveloped as well as developing nations across the world. It is an indisputable reality that the children of today will be the adult citizens of tomorrow, bearing full responsibility for the nation's growth and development. Child labour is an issue that appears to be endangering the future of many children. Generally, it is a term used to describe any work performed by minors in

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any field, regardless of whether it is suitable for them or not. The most blissful and unforgettable time in a person's life is their childhood. However, children at a tender age are compelled forgo all happiness and live the life of an adult (Gupta and Voll, 1987). It takes away all of their joy and appears to leave a lasting negative impact on their lives. This malpractice and the cases of exploitation of children at workplaces are growing rapidly. While the issue of child labour has received both national and international support for its eradication however, there is a need to take an initiative towards completely bring an end to this problem.

Child labor is a curse not just on mankind but also on the civilization. These young souls are forced to work from an early age in order to provide for the livelihood of their families. The sensitive young brains are eventually negatively impacted by this practice of child labour. The present study is carried out to understand the problem of child labour in India and to investigate the nature and extent of this problem. Right to happiness is the basic right of every human being but some, particularly children, are denied of the right to happiness; they are forced to work in inhuman conditions. Since childhood is an unforgettable period of one's life, so a happy childhood is the right of every child and it is the concern of every welfare state to provide for the children. Childhood must be viewed as a time of innocence and protection as opposed to productivity and preparation for adulthood (Medved and Medved, 1999). The sight of small kids polishing shoes on the roads, cleaning utensils in hotels and dhabas or working in factories is not unusual. It reflects the fact that the hardships of life took birth with them.

Employing children is a crime. It is an act that endangers a child's physical and emotional health as well as hinders their development without giving them an opportunity for good education, food and shelter.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study uses mixed approach to shed light on the problem of child labour in India. It will focus on the nature, factors, consequences and magnitude of the problem in India. The data for this study is extracted from NSS reports and other national statistical reports for analysis. An attempt is made to trace the causes, consequences and magnitude of child labour besides its impact on the over-all condition of the child. The study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem, with a view to generate public awareness in this issue.

Child population and child workers in India

India is the second most populous nation in the world according to 2011 census, however according to the economic analysis of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, India has taken over China in 2023 and is now the most populous country of the world (United Nations, 2023). As per census of 2011, India had a total population of 121.09 crore among which 16.45 crore were children in the age group of 0-5 years and 37.24 crore in the age of 5-14 years corresponding to 13.59 percent and 30.76 percent respectively (table 1).

Table 1:
Total population of India and sex-wise child population (In Crores)

	Persons	Males	Females
Age Group	121.09	62.33	58.76
0 - 5 years	16.45	8.58	7.88
5 - 14 years	37.24	19.44	17.81

Source: Census of India 2011

Among this classification of population the population of children is scattered along the rural and urban landscape in India as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2:
Sex-wise child population distribution in rural and urban India (In Crores)

Age Group	Rural			Urban		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
0 - 5 years	12.13	6.31	5.82	4.32	2.27	2.05
5 - 14 years	27.36	14.23	12.12	9.88	5.20	4.68

Source: Census of India 2011

The above table 2 offers the age-wise and sex-wise distribution of children in the rural and urban areas of India. Table 2 shows that the population of children is around three times higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas. This suggests that children who engage in work are mostly from rural areas. Research conducted on child labour in India shows that there are myriad of factors responsible for child labour being more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas (see: Barman and Barman, 2014).

As is evident from table 2 above that the highest percentage of child labour in 2001 was in Uttar Pradesh (15.22%) followed by Andhra Pradesh (10.76%), Rajasthan (9.97%), Bihar (8.82%), Madhya Pradesh (8.41%), West Bengal (6.77%) and so on. However in the year 2011, the highest percentage of child labour was observed in Uttar Pradesh

(20.59%) followed by Maharashtra (11.41%), Bihar (10.37%), Andhra Pradesh (9.30%), Madhya Pradesh (6.58%), and so on. One important observation that table 2 above reveals is the fact that for majority of states/UTs, the number of child labourers has gone down, however, in few states/UTs the number of child labourers has slightly gone up.

Table 2:
State/UT-wise child labour in India and their percentage share**

States/UTs	No. of child* labourers 2001	No. of child* labourers 2011	%age share of child* labourers in the state	
			2001	2011
Andhra Pradesh	1363339	404851	10.76	9.30
Arunachal Pradesh	18482	5766	0.15	0.13
Assam	351416	99512	2.77	2.29
Bihar	1117500	451590	8.82	10.37
Chandigarh UT	3779	3135	0.03	0.07
Chattisgarh	364572	63884	2.88	1.47
Dadra and Nagar H	4274	1054	0.03	0.02
Daman and Diu	729	774	0.01	0.02
Delhi UT	41899	26473	0.33	0.61
Goa	4138	6920	0.03	0.16
Gujarat	485530	250318	3.83	5.75
Haryana	253491	53492	2.00	1.23
Himachal Pradesh	107774	15001	0.85	0.34
J&K UT	175630	25528	1.39	0.59
Jharkhand	407200	90996	3.21	2.09
Karnataka	822615	249432	6.49	5.73
Kerala	26156	21757	0.21	0.50
Lakshadweep UT	27	28	0.00	0.00
Madhya Pradesh	1065259	286310	8.41	6.58
Maharashtra	764075	496916	6.03	11.41
Manipur	28836	11805	0.23	0.27
Meghalaya	53940	18839	0.43	0.43
Mizoram	26265	2793	0.21	0.06
Nagaland	45874	11062	0.36	0.25
Odisha	377594	92087	2.98	2.12
Puducherry UT	1904	1421	0.02	0.03

Punjab	177268	90353	1.40	2.08
Rajasthan	1262570	252338	9.97	5.80
Sikkim	16457	2704	0.13	0.06
Tamil Nadu	418801	151437	3.31	3.48
Tripura	21756	4998	0.17	0.11
Uttar Pradesh	1927997	896301	15.22	20.59
Uttarakhand	70183	28098	0.55	0.65
West Bengal	857087	234275	6.77	5.38
India Total	12666377	4353247	100	100

**Children in the age group of 5 – 14 years*

*** Data Extracted from Census of India 2001 & 2011*

Child labour - A Debate

It is well said that 'just as dogs were raised to hunt for their masters before they were pets; so are children raised as a source of income for their family'. Millions of children in India toil as virtual slaves, unable to escape the work that will leave them impoverished, illiterate, and often crippled by the time they reach adulthood (Human Rights Watch, 2003). India is often described as the largest democracy in the world. India won its independence in 1947 and three years later, the Constitution of India was adopted and thus India looked forward to a utopian future. One aspect of this was the attainment of free and compulsory education within ten years of the enactment of constitution i.e. by 1960. Another was the assertion that no child will be forced by the economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength. But unfortunately, the well-being and rights of children count less. Children are the most important assets of a nation. They are indeed the future of the country. A healthy and educated child of today is the active and intelligent citizen of tomorrow. Thus, the topmost responsibility of a nation is to give a descent childhood to the young and vulnerable group of children and to allow them to prepare for a descent adult working life. But in reality, there is a wide gap between the conditions of children and their standards. The government has taken many initiatives but they are inadequate and insufficient to handle this problem.

In India, child labour is not a new phenomenon. It has been in existence since time immemorial and thus constitutes an ugly feature of the social life of our country. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century, the factory and industry pacified their advancement (Narasaiah, 2005). Agriculture became more mechanized. Children started being employed in different organized and unorganized sectors in both rural and urban settings. In rural sector, children are engaged in

fields, plantation, forestry, domestic job, fishing and cottage industry. While in urban sector, they are employed at houses, shops, restaurants, small and large industries, transport, garages, etc (Shukla and Ali, 2006). This is so because children provide a cheap and uncomplaining labour force as against adults who could be more demanding and hence more difficult to handle. Also children are preferred as they are not unionized and so can easily be controlled or tortured without any fear of backlash. Though the category of the child labour is very heterogeneous, however, they can broadly be classified into four main categories.

1. **Child labour in bondage:** This enables the employer to deem ownership rights over the child. In this case, a child is sold for a little sum but borrowed for various purposes. Due to this a child loses all his basic rights. As we see in the rural areas of India, children are often found working on farms, doing menial labour or other domestic labour for the landlords, which is the result of the indebtedness. They work in order to pay off the debt or the loans borrowed from the landlords. It has also been found that children in this category are often lured in prostitution, pornography, begging, drug peddling and other petty crimes.
2. **Girl child labour:** On the basis of gender, women have always faced discrimination in almost all spheres of her life and similar is their case as a girl, as a child and as a labourer. In both rural and urban areas, it has been found that the percentage of girls is higher than that of the boys. The reason for this is that girls are often put to work as domestic servants engaged in cooking, cleaning, fetching water, taking care of younger siblings, etc. (These jobs are sometimes non-remunerative and so are not considered as labour).
3. **Street children workers:** We often see street children working as rag-pickers, hotel workers, vendors, shoe-shiners, garage and petrol pump assistants, etc. All these children are included in this category. It has often been found among the street children that they are prone to a variety of diseases and abuses both sexual and physical besides indulged in drug addiction. They don't have any prospect of medical assistance in this regard.
4. **Itinerant child labour:** We have often seen people migrating from one place to another in search of job. These people wander in groups' alongwith their family. Their children have often been found engaged in agricultural labour, in construction work, brick-kilns, mines, circus, etc. It also includes those children working on trains, cleaning compartments or singing jingles, etc.

As a nation, if young children are allowed to work, society is creating a class of uneducated people that will not be able to reach their full productive potential. Ultimately, the nation will be unable to compete with other international societies especially in a world that relies on people's capacity to use modern technology. Child labour in poor countries is an integral part of labour force. Children are forced to enter labour market at a tender age to earn pittance or contribute to family work (Lancy, 2022). These children who are in the growing process permanently distort or disable their bodies when they carry heavy loads or are forced to adopt unnatural positions at work for long hours.

The concern over child labour is now greater than in the past both within India and the rest of the world. India has all along followed a pro-active policy in the matter of tackling the problem of child labour and always stood for constitutional, statutory and developmental measures that are required to eliminate child labour.

Magnitude of Child Labour:

There are a number of definitions of child labour however those used by government and academic circles can vary a great deal. The census of India defined child labour as any person under the age of 14 engaged in any one of the 59 occupations or processes listed as hazardous under the India's Child Labour Act of 1986. This definition builds on the ILO's Convention on the worst forms of child labour, which identifies child labour based on the characteristics of work involved (International Labour Organization, n.a.). India's 2011 census counted 16.45 million child labourers. Official statistics tend to under-estimate the number of child labourers for a few reasons. Typically, child labour is conceptualized as involving gainful economic activity, either for wage or non-wage based remuneration. Practically, state regulators face difficulties in identifying children that work at home or in informal economy, where the overwhelming majority of production in India takes place. Interestingly, a large chunk of child population in India as per the 2011 census are neither working nor attending school. The Indian state has no official knowledge of how these so called nowhere children spend their time. Many of the children are likely to be contributing to the livelihood of their families, typically working at home or on the family farm. These activities fall outside the restrictive or legal definition of work used for official statistics.

As per the census data however, the trend on the magnitude of child labour is not uniform across the country. There is a decline in the incidence of child labour in southern and western Indian states and UT's between 2001 and 2011. However, there has been an increasing trend in

the eastern and northern Indian states and UT's as shown in Table 2. This is the reflection of the emerging crisis of poorer regiments of population. The phenomenon of child labour in J&K is in no way different from that of the one prevailing in the rest of the country. Its evolution, growth and magnitude have followed the same pattern. However, the difference lies only in the nature of employment. Since J&K is predominantly agriculture oriented one and so children help their parents in fields and farms. Though with the advent of modern factory system, there has been a change and increase in the avenues of employment marginally, however, majority of the children continued to work in the fields followed by traditional handicrafts sector.

Factors of child labour

The socio-economic backwardness followed by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, demographic expansion, etc. are commonly considered as the most prominent causative factors for large scale employment of children (Naidu and Ramaiah, 2006). Besides these, low income of bread-earner of the family, ignorance, inequitable distribution of land assets, insufficient protective legislation, etc. also contribute to the rise of child labour in our country (Sen, 1983).

Poverty in India is a major contributing factor which has given rise to the problem of child labour. In India, approximately 40% children live a life of poverty. It is very hard to arrange the meal for two times a day and that is why small children are compelled to go for work to earn (Kaur and Kaur, 2003). At the same time, the inadequacy of the wage of adult earning members of the family compels them to send their children to work and supplement to family income (Tripathy, 1989). Another reason would be the need of income to the family because sometimes children have to support their family members so they generally run towards industries.

Similarly the higher rate of illiteracy indicates the ignorance of persons who push their children to join child labour force instead of providing them education. Children seek work because of their unemployed parents or adult relations in the family, which is sometimes due to under-employment of the adults (Tripathy, 1989). The reason for this under-employment is the large size of the family. A person believes in having more and more children without realizing the fact that they would be able to provide the basic amenities of life to their children.

In some industries like bidi, glass, matchbox, carpet, etc, children as workers are increasingly preferred. There is the lack of organizational support to child labour which is the most plausible reason for their preferential employment in such industries. They have no voice and

strength to fight for their dues, rights and privileges. Besides, there is no institutional set-up which can apprise them of their rights and mandatory provisions.

In brief, child labour manifests itself due to a variety of well known factors that are worth to mention here once again:

- i. The first and foremost cause of the child labour is the income level of the family. An agricultural labourer earning less than 50 rupees per day is unlikely to spare time and money for furthering his or her child's education. In-fact, work is a burden for the child but a support for the family.
- ii. Poor parents have the lack of adequate access to credit and hence these parents are forced to engage their children in some extreme forms of child labour like bonded labour.
- iii. On the grounds of gender, bias amongst girls is a key factor behind the higher prevalence of child labour in vulnerable households.
- iv. There are children from certain minority groups like SCs and STs who, because of their social status and deprivation, have no or least access to get themselves enrolled for educational attainments.
- v. Large families result in the lack of income since there are more mouths to feed. Family Planning programmes have shown that in many cases where the birth rate drops in a given region, child labour declines.
- vi. Another reason for the absence of parental support for the education of the child is the parent's own illiteracy and poverty.
- vii. The poor social and legal awareness about the concept and nature of child rights, especially among political and economic leaders must be addressed.
- viii. There has always been a big demand for the cheap, undemanding and unorganized labour, making children attractive as labourers.

Consequences of child labour:

The popular perception of child labour is strongly negative and it is unclear theoretically that to what extent child's labour is harmful. In-fact the prevalence of child labour is a bolt on the conscience of a society. It harms not only the present generation but also the posterity. If one conceives the idea of child labour, it brings before eyes the picture of exploitation of little, physically tender, illiterate and under-nourished children working in hazardous occupation and unhealthy conditions.

However the major consequences of child labour include physical injuries and malnutrition, which are caused by badly maintained machinery on

farms and in factories or the hazards encountered in industries such as mining, ceramics or fire-works manufacture. Pesticide poisoning is also one among the biggest killers of child labourers (Khan, 2022). The global death toll each year from pesticides is supposed to be approximately 385 million (Boedeker, Watts, Clausing and Marquez, 2020). It has been found that the growth deficiently is prevalent among working children who tender to be shorter and lighter than other children. These deficiencies also had an impact on their adult life. Long term health problems including a variety of cancers are common those children who are forced to work with dangerous chemicals. At the same time, exhaustion and malnutrition are the result of under-developed children performing heavy manual labour, working long hours in unbearable conditions and not earning enough to feed themselves adequately. In-fact, children are remarkable imaginative and re-silent but also heart-breaking, fragile and vulnerable.

Conclusion

Child labour as a problem is assuming an alarming proportion. There are several factors, which have been contributing to the flare-up of this social scourge like poverty, illiteracy, lack of social awareness, over-population and unemployment. India is undoubtedly a highly populated nation in the world. And due to poverty, the hunger-driven children are forced to go out and fend for themselves and their families as well. So there is an urgent need to improve productivity on the one hand and on the other there is a need to focus on the provision of basic amenities like food, clothing, health and education to these marginal sections of the society. Alongside, the vicious cycle that exists between poverty and child labour as well as between illiteracy and child labour needs to be tackled. Poverty is no excuse for denying a child the basic right to survival, protection, development and participation.

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