

Child Labour Practices in Kargil (Ladakh)

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Abstract

Child labour is a very common phenomena in India with millions of children working both in cities and in the villages. The State of Jammu and Kashmir is no exception with the added disadvantage that some of the children working there are in remote parts of the state. This study concentrates on one such remote area, Kargil in Ladakh and looks at the child labor in the dominant handicraft industry there. It tries to explore the causes and assess the nature of exploitation of child labour in the handicraft industry.

Introduction

The problem of child labour is not a concomitant feature of modern society only. In fact, the problem has been there since the very dawn of human civilization. The reasons for this phenomenon are varied and have been changing as the time passes by. Avenues of child labour over the years have broadened. As a matter of fact, the problem is vexed and wide spread and is not a characteristic of any particular type of economy.

Any work, whether manual or mental, which is undertaken by a child, who is below 14 years of age, for monetary consideration, is called child labour. Homer Folks, the chairman of the United States National Labour Committee has defined child labour as "...any work by children that interfere with their full physical development, their opportunities for a desirable minimum of education or their needed recreation."

Child labour is a global phenomenon and a harsh reality. Child labour is both an economic and a social evil. In assessing the nature and the extent of the social evil, it is necessary to take into account the character of the jobs on which the children are engaged, the dangers to which they are exposed and the opportunities of development which they have been denied. Thus, child labour is recognized by the sociologists, educationists, and development workers, medical professionals as hazardous and injurious to the child, both physically and mentally.

Child labour is a pervasive problem throughout the world. However, the industrialized economies especially of Europe, North America, Australia etc, have by now reduced it to a large extent. The problem of child labour as faced by the developing economies today has indeed serious dimensions. Africa and Asia together account for over 90 percent of the total child employment. Though there are more child workers in Asia than anywhere else, a higher percentage of African children also participate in the labour force. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the number of children aged 5-14 years in the year 2000 who were economically active was 211 million, while the number classed as child labourers was 186.3 million. Of these 120 million are estimated to be in full-time work.

Since ages, the prevalence of child labour has been common in India. It has the largest number of world's working children. And again according to the Ministry of labour and other NGO's estimate, there are 55 million children in the labour force at present. According to their estimates there are 25 million children employed in agricultural sector, 20 million in service jobs (hotels, shops, and as servants in home) and 5 million in the handloom, carpet making, gem cutting and match making industries. As many as 91 percent of child labour in India is in rural areas, while 9 percent is in the urban areas. In India every third child is a working child and every fourth child in the age group 5-15 is employed.

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The phenomenon of child labour in Jammu and Kashmir 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. The difference, however, remained in the nature of employment. Since the state is predominantly agriculture oriented, the children help their parents in the fields and the farms. The break-up of the child labour employed in different crafts is not available. It has been estimated that embroidery and carpet are the major crafts in the state and about 78 percent of the craft workers are engaged in these activities. About 89.28 percent of handicraft units are of household type. It is worth noting that family workers are not less exploited. History is full of instances where parents themselves turn to be the most ruthless exploiters of their own children. Work force employed in the handicrafts and handlooms in the state is dominated by the males. Females constitute less than one-fourth (24 percent) of craft work force. In the context of child workers harmful effects can be seen in the form of their improper physical development, varied kinds of illness and physical deformities, damage to the central nervous system, lack of the capacity to adjust with other persons in the society, inability to express views, etc. Karl Marx observed that "the result of buying the children and young persons of the underage by the capitalist results in physical deterioration and moral degradation."

There are many causes of child labour, poverty, being one of the main reasons followed by illiteracy and ignorance of the parents. Child labour has given rise to a number of socio-economic problems. It is beyond any doubt that children are forced by the circumstances to do labour in tender age when they should have been in the schools. In the nut shell we should say that the life condition of child labourers in handicraft sector is pathetic and miserable and getting worst day by day.

It is within this above thematic perspective that the following hypothetical points were laid down.

Objectives

- I. To make a detailed study of child labour in the handicraft sector with special reference to their life conditions in Kargil.
- II. To access the nature of exploitation faced by the children involved in labour activities.
- III. To explore the causes of child labour in the handicraft sector in Kargil.
- IV. To examine the social implications of life conditions of child labour in the handicraft sector.
- V. To suggest the measures for amelioration of the child labour.

Methodology

The study is primarily an empirical one and based on an extensive sociological investigation in the field. It specifically concentrated on child labourers in Tehsil Kargil. A sample of 100 respondents (comprising of 65 child labourers, 17 heads of the households, 9 employers, 6 social workers (notables) and 3 concerned government officers) was selected to give representation to all areas, fields, sexes, ethnicity and income-occupational-educational groups and sub-groups while a detailed interview schedule was used for child workers, heads of the households and employers. In-depth interviews with social workers, notables and Government officers were carried out within the limits of interview guide. Moreover, observation method was also used to get the real and relevant information. The field of handicrafts covered in this study was carpet-weaving, wool-work, *paper-machie*, copper and brass, wood-work, wicker work and willow basketry, stone work and sculpture, jewellery, *shawl-bawfi*, etc. The relevant data and information were collected in the field by the researcher himself. After collecting the information from the field, the data were statistically treated, explained and analyzed in the logic of other facts and theories.

Results and Discussions

1. Sex and Age

It is a well established fact that age plays a dominant role in shaping personality and values of responsibility to work and to participate in different walks of life. Distribution of the child labourers according to their sex and age group is presented below in the table 1.1.

Table 1: Distribution of the child labourers according to sex and age group

S. No.	Sex	No.	Percentage	Age Group	No.	Percentage
1.	Male	1	1.53	5 to 10 years	6	9.23
2.	Female	64	98.46	11 to 14 years	59	90.76
	Total	65	100.00		65	100.00

Source: Field Study 2007.

The study further indicated that most of the female child labourers belonged to illiterate or very little educated families. The societal preference for male children result in girls being valued less, fed less, educated less but worked harder and deprived of every opportunity to broaden their personal, social and intellectual horizons. In most economically disadvantaged families, greater the poverty, the more aggravated is the situation of the female child. In certain families, the rules of permission and restriction on women and female children are much more stringent which allows for greater exploitation and discrimination.

The notion of temporary membership in the parental home results in the perception of the female child as a burden to be passed on to another family where she remains an outsider, a household drudge, a reproductive machine and unpaid worker throughout her life. Further, girl's economic participation goes unnoticed as they are employed in either family labour or domestic work or in unorganized sector, like in handicrafts work. The data confirm the impression that children usually enter the field of handicrafts work around eleven years of age.

2. Education

Education, formal or informal aims at developing the positive quality of the child and helps the individual realize his potentialities. All the children working in the handicraft sector interviewed have been to school at one point or the other. Accordingly, the child workers were asked to state their educational qualification/background.

Table 2

Educational attainment of the child labourers and whether the children were still attending school or not

S. No.	Educational Attainment	Number	Percentage	Still Attending School or not	Number	Percentage
1.	Upto 5 th	32	49.23	Yes	3	4.61
2.	Upto 8 th	33	50.76	No	62	95.38
	Total	65	100.00		65	100.00

Source: Field Study 2007.

The reasons for dropout and not completing the studies were varied and vexed. The primary reasons being less interest in studies or failing to cross a particular class or treating education as fruitless because of parental illiteracy and ignorance, poverty of the family, gender discrimination and the influence of peers, etc. To stop the trend of leaving the school, once the student fails in a particular class, the authorities are supposed to be flexible, which is not the case here.

It is disheartening to note that out of sixty five child labourers interviewed, only 3 (4.61 percent) were still attending school and the majority 62 (95.38 percent) had left the school for good at primary and upper primary levels. Thus we see that out of 65 child labourers, not even a single child has completed his/her education up to high or secondary level. In order to stop the dropout rate or to retain the children in schools, there is a need to provide vocational education to all the children after they complete their primary education.

3. Family background

In the present study an attempt has been made to collect salient features of social and economic conditions of the family with a view to examine its impact on the child. Direct observations coupled with the discussions with the parents of the child labourers yielded some material on this point. Some of the child labourers who were having one amongst the parents dead were specifically observed and interviewed. Accordingly, we wanted to know the size of the child labourer's respective family, which is reflected from table 3.

Table 3

Size of family and single parent families of child labourers

S. No.	No. of Family Members	Number	Percentage	Parents Alive/Dead	Number	Percentage
1.	1 to 5	2	3.07	Father Alive Only	8	12.30
2.	6 to 10	53	81.53	Mother Alive Only	2	3.07
3.	11 to 15	10	15.38	Both Alive	55	84.61
	Total	65	100.00		65	100.00

Source: Field Study 2007.

The children, who belonged to the small family category, work either because there was no earning member in the family or just to enjoy with friends at the handicraft centre and at the same time learn some skill. Most of the children of this category added that they have to work because their father had died and being the eldest child, it was their duty to look after the family.

When parents were asked to state the reasons for putting their children to work at a very tender age the lack of quality education, poverty, skill acquisition, inaccessibility of schools and cultural role/tradition were the main forces stated by them to send their children to work instead of schools. On the other hand the employers employ them for helping poverty stricken families, skill acquisition, low payment, long hours work, having soft fingers and hands.

Different types of handicrafts work were being undertaken by children like *shawl bawfi*, embroidery, knitting and carpet weaving. As we know that Ladakh is a cold region, the coldness of the region increases the demand for the warm clothes and bedding and the girl child is best suited for the work who can do it even while preparing food and also when they are busy with other domestic work.

4. Wages

The monthly earning of child labourers is dependent upon various factors like the nature of job (skilled, unskilled or semi-skilled work), duration of working hours, nature of employment (daily wage, contract or regular), etc. The distribution of the monthly income of the child labourers brings out the fact that a large proportion of them 37 (56.92 percent) earn between rupees hundred to five hundred per month and 27 (41.53 percent) earn between rupees five hundred to one thousand per month. There were only 1(1.53 percent) child who earned more than one thousand rupees per month. All the children were receiving their income in cash, some on daily basis, some weekly and some monthly depending upon the type of work they were doing. Quality of work, experience and skill were the criteria which determine the wages, responded majority of the child labourers, their parents as well as the employers interviewed.

5. Working conditions and Health problems

The nature and the quantum of work have their effects on physical as well as mental growth of the workers, especially the young ones. Handicrafts work particularly *shawl-bawfi* and carpet weaving requires using of fingers intensively for working with wool and cotton threads concentrating heavily on the fine knots used for weaving by sitting down for hours. In such situation aching and irritation of eyes, fingers, joints' pain, back pain, stomach and chest pains caused by inhaling cotton and wool dust can be said to be natural. So far as protection against work hazards is concerned the child labourers responded otherwise.

Problems due to long working hours, hard and hazardous jobs, poor diet, etc. puts stress due to which the children complained of backache, headache, eye irritation and joints pain, although space for work was sufficient. There is complete absence of medical care at the work places. When asked whether their employers help them financially if they fall sick, they shook their head to convey "no". The chronic and lifelong diseases emerge in a situation in which government officials as well as the parents do not take it seriously, but become the part of that situation. So, without taking serious note of the diseases child labourers cannot be saved from its disastrous implications. Our observation also reveals that the employer is not concerned about the health problems and safety measures from injuries and accidents of children.

6. Reaction of family members about child labourers' economic contribution

The data reveals the reality of the existing situation prevailing which allows the child labourers to have a very handsome response from the family members about their contribution. Some others bring it to our notice that the reaction about their contribution in the family was satisfactory as they were contributing to

some extent in maintaining and balancing the budget of the family. The visitors of the children were often visiting the handicraft centres to know about the progress of their wards in skill acquisition.

7. Female child labour and sexual exploitation

Every child labour is likely to experience some difficulties in his/her job. Some of these difficulties may be of a permanent nature or of casual, temporary and/or occasional types. But the question of female child being sexually exploited remains there always. Sexual exploitation may take many forms and is usually under reported and not talked about openly. The overwhelming response of eighty percent female child workers said yes, that they are very prone to be sexually exploited. Entry of children into work was not a matter of choice but a matter of economic compulsion, largely to supplement the family's income. Majority of the child labourers said that it is mostly the employer of the centre and people of his relation who are always in search of opportunity for sexual harassment/exploitation.

8. Child labour laws and its abolition

Government of India has enacted a number of legislations which prohibit and regulate the employment and working conditions of the child labourers in various occupations and vocations. More than ninety percent of child labourers and their parents were not aware of any such legislation. But the majority of employers knew about Minimum Age Act to employment and in spite that they were employing children for low wages, easy to handle, less employee-employer conflict, etc.

A dominant majority (97 percent) of children under work were having no awareness of the child labour laws and their existence in Kargil. There is no awareness amongst the masses about child labour laws although both parents and employers favour the abolition of child labour for various reasons including the effect of work on child's future. Lack of quality education as well as lack of concern on the part of government and civil society is the primary reason for lack of awareness about child labour laws and the damaging consequences of child labour.

Considering the present socio-economic conditions, one may argue that child labour should not be abolished, as many poverty stricken families fail to provide the minimum living and social requirements to their children. That is why what many people advocate not the total ban on child labour but improvement of the conditions under which they work. Eliminating child labour will save the lives of many children from its damaging consequences but at the same time will affect a chunk of population for want of economic compulsions. Thus abolition of child labour will not only increase misuses of the children and their families but it will encourage children and the members of their families to adopt unfair means to meet their needs and will divert children and adult members to delinquency and criminal activities. On the other hand we approached the employers who were in favour of child labour and enquired from them what make them to favour child labour and the response was poverty elevation and development of child. We further approached the employers who were against child labour and asked them why not they were in favour of child labour and their opinion was that it is detrimental to health, adds to school dropout and illegal.

9. Role of governmental and non-governmental organizations

About twenty five percent employers favoured the implementation of legislations strictly with same code of conduct everywhere and compulsory schooling up to fourteen years of age for the elimination of child labour. Around ninety percent employers supported to provide some training to the child labourers so that they can earn partly to meet their personal as well as family requirements.

Non Governmental Organizations are also working in the field for the eradication of child labour. There is hardly any awareness found among the child labourers, parents and even employers about the NGOs. All the sampled employers responded that the NGO's should help financially to the families of child labourers and which to my understanding no NGO is in a position to provide. We further asked the employers

whether they can play any role in the elimination of the child labour and the response we got is shown in table below.

Table 4
Role of employers in the elimination of child labour

S. No.	Employers role	Number	Percentage
1.	No employment to children	1	11.11
2.	Create awareness	9	100.00
3.	Inform authorities	2	22.22
4.	Motivate them to go to school	3	33.33

Source: Field Study 2007.

10. Focussed Cases

Apart from serving the written schedules, we also followed the method of observation and maintained the field diary during the field work. We witnessed some special cases of child labourers which highlighted the nature, causes and consequences of the problem. The study of these cases will certainly lead to a deeper and wider sociological understanding of the phenomenon of child labour.

Special Case-1

An eye opener case during the field visit came to our notice was that of a girl who was only thirteen years old. She was engaged in handicrafts work at a very young age. She narrated the facts as to how she was forced to join this work. Actually her mother was engaged in this work but God loved her more than any body and took her into his custody. There was nobody in the family to take the work/tradition. Therefore, finding no option, she stepped into the shoes of her mother and started handicrafts work to maintain the tradition of the family as she was elder in family. She further narrated that she earns very little which is usually spent on family requirements. She has always this apprehension that like her mother she may not went into the custody of God at a very young age.

Special Case-2

Sadeeqa nick named Payal is a teenager. She belongs to block Shargole of Kargil. She is always on work from early morning to late evening. While narrating her story, she said that she was only seven and a half years old when she joined the handicrafts work. Her parents forcibly put her into this work. As in their locality/area it is a tradition to send female child/children at a very tender age for work. She has to perform both domestic as well as handicrafts work.

She wakes up before dawn, to prepare tea and breakfast for everyone in the family including her parents and siblings. She is the elder daughter of their parents. Then she washes the previous night's utensils and brings water from a good distance for the day's use. Again she has to bring water in the evening for drinking and other purposes. As she completes the work in the morning at home, she then leaves for handicraft centre where she performs the handicrafts work upto evening. She also brings it to our notice that many a times she would take the unfinished work to home and complete it upto midnight. She hands over all the earnings to her father and does not keep anything with her.

Sadeeqa was very much interested in studies but her parents were having other ideas for her. One could easily observe desperation current on her innocent young face. When she was asked if the opportunity will be given for studying will she go. Her answer was no, as she has lost interest in studies and will feel ashamed with little children in the class at this age.

Special Case-3

Angmoo, a girl of thirteen years resides in a far flung village of Kargil. She belongs to a very poor family. For maintaining the delicate balance of the family budget and to keep the wolf away from the door, her parents had no alternative but to send her into the handicrafts work to save the family from a shipwreck. Her house has two bedrooms and a kitchen with common hall. It takes her around one and half an hour to do dusting, sweeping and mopping. She has also to do the most arduous work, i.e. hand washing of clothes early in the morning before leaving for handicrafts work. She works almost eight hours a day and six days in a week with water, the only facility available in the handicraft centre. During off-days she carries domestic and agricultural work in the family.

Paid very less for her labour; working in unhygienic conditions with no health security narrated the innocent Buddhist girl with a desperate voice. She would like to attend school rather than handicrafts work but the condition at home and the need to supplement the family income stops her from doing so. She is also aware that working at this age will affect not her present only but the future too and is working now with the intention to make the future of her siblings secure by not allowing anything to become an impediment in their schooling. She loves to leave the work if the alternative is provided and dreams to be a rich person in future so that she can break the bond between child labour and her family.

Suggestions for Solution

1. There is dire need to impart education to the child workers. Though child workers cannot attend normal school during the usual school hours, the only alternative is to provide them some agency of education at the time when they are free. There should be special schemes for development of socially and educationally disadvantaged groups of the society.
2. Governmental and non-governmental organizations should organize awareness programmes regarding the consequences of child labour and motivate common people, village heads, teachers and other employers, senior citizens, etc. and seek their cooperation in respective areas to serve the purpose.
3. Media should play its role in generating awareness among the people regarding the upliftment and betterment of socially, economically and educationally backward communities by providing them information regarding various programmes and schemes launched by the government for their upliftment.
4. Attractive and free pre and primary school education system is necessary to attract children towards education instead of work and income. Community based school extension programme, i.e. to make people aware of benefits and necessity of education, to encourage and convince children to go to schools is essential, etc.
5. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other related agencies have to play vital role to make aware the down-trodden communities regarding the rights of children and harmful effects of child labour.
6. Government should take up steps and consult scholars, academicians, planners belonging to different streams in order to frame policies about the future and overall development of these unfortunate children.

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