EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE SAFETY AND STABILITY (EJLSS)
ISSN2660-9630
www.ejlss.indexedresearch.org Volume 53, 2025 ||



The Reality of Child Labour in India: A Modern Critique

Dr. Altaf Hussain
Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Nilambazar College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Abstract: *Child labour continues to be an ongoing global challenge. Recent international data reveals that approximately 160 million children were involved in various works at the start of 2020 representing nearly 1 in every 10 children worldwide. Roughly half of these children participate in various hazardous works – about 79 million individuals – which directly threatens their physical well being and development. Child labour is most prevalent in low income countries, yet more than half of all child labour occurs in middle income countries. Children may be driven into work for various reasons, most often; child labour occurs when families face financial challenges or uncertainty whether due to poverty, sudden illness of family members, or job less of a primary wage earner. The vast majority of them are found in rural settings and informal urban economies, where children are pre-dominantly employed by their parents, rather than factories. Households overwhelmed by financial strain due to a lack of stable jobs or adequate on wages rely on child labour as a survival strategy.*

Keywords: *burden, supplementing, global estimates, child labour, underemployment, debt, poverty etc.*

Date of Submission: 20-05-2025 ***Date of Acceptance: 30-06-2025***

Child labour encompasses any employment that robs children of their fundamental rights, disrupts their schooling and damages their physical and mental well – being in any works that. It again refers to the work that is dangerous and harmful to children on a social or moral level. Child labour is a global phenomenon as it exists both in the developing and the developed countries of the world. Its prevalence is more in the developing countries as compared to the developed ones, because the families to which the working children belongs, are in urgent need of income and they restart to child labour for their subsistence, whereas children in the developed countries are often working for their pocket money. Informal sector of the rural and urban economies of the developing countries is an important source of employment for a major chunk of labour force particularly child and women labour though the sectoral distribution of working children differs from country to country. Child labour is predominantly confined to agricultural sector followed by services and industry. With this background, the present paper seeks to examine the following aspects: ---

The following key issues are addressed in the present paper: ---

(1) The nature and prevalence of child labour.

(2) The primary drivers and overall scale of youth employment.

(3) Present status of child labour within the nation.

(4) Systems and laws for safeguarding the children throughout the country.

Nature and prevalence of child labour:-

In the urban areas child labour exists both in the formal and informal sectors. Its presence in the latter is more frequent in small manufacturing enterprises, which are spread over wide locations. These can ignore legal restrictions since the children often work along with their elder relatives and friends. They are probably not paid as like the main workers. Domestic servants, work in hotels and restaurants, canteens, wayside shops and establishments or as workers, rag pickers, newspaper sellers, peddlers, coolies, shoeshine boys, vendors or helpers in repair shops are the main occupations of the working children in urban areas.

In this context, child labour is considered a source of cheap labour and means of quick profits by their employers. Consequently, child laborers do not have any bargaining power and are more easily exploited by their employers. The cases of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka show higher incidence of child labour to higher per capita state domestic product. On the contrary, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra and Gujarat have comparatively lower incidence of child labour associated with higher level of state domestic product. Among the various causes of child labour, unemployment, poverty and indebtedness of the households are the most important. Many parents secure advances from the landlords or the employers and return the loans in terms of child labour. In some cases, the children are compelled to migrate temporarily to the nearest cities or the urban areas of adjoining states to earn the necessary subsistence.

The primary drivers and overall scale of youth employment:-

Child labour remains a persistent problem in the world today. The latest global estimates indicate that some 160 million children were engaged in child labour at the beginning of 2020 accounting for nearly 1 in every 10 children globally. Nearly half of children engaged in child labour i.e. 79 million are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health and development. Child labour is most prevalent in low income countries, yet more than half of all child labour occurs in middle income countries. Children may be driven into work for various reasons, most often; child labour occurs when families face financial challenges or uncertainty whether due to poverty, sudden illness of family members, or job less of a primary wage earner. The vast majority of them are found in rural settings and informal urban economies, where children are pre-dominantly employed by their parents, rather than factories. Families burdened with economic pressures due to unemployment, underemployment or mounting debts may resort to child labour as a means of supplementing their meager income. This is often a heartbreaking choice made out of sheer desperation. The absence of quality education is a significant barrier to breaking the cycle of child labour. Many children in India do not have access to proper schools, or if they do, the quality of education may be subpar. A lack of awareness about the detrimental effects of child labour perpetuates the problem. Some families may not fully comprehend the physical, psychological and emotional toll that child labour takes on their children. Conflict situations and mass migrations, whether due to internal conflict, natural disasters or economic instability disrupt families and expose children to the harsh realities of labour. In such situations, children often find themselves without a proper support system, which often lead to child labour. Gender disparities are a significant contributor to child labour, as girls in particular, often face discrimination and are more likely to be engaged in unpaid domestic labour. This deprives them of the opportunity to receive an education and enjoy their childhood. Weak or poorly enforced legislation allows child labour to persist. India has made progress in enacting laws to combat child labour, but gaps remain and enforcement can be negligent. As per the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, amended in 2016 (CLPR Act), prohibits employment of a child in any employment.

Present status of child labour within the nation:-

The extent of child labour is quite significant in various parts of the country. The national and international agencies have been focusing their attention not only on elimination of child labour in various industries but also reveal the facts of the prominence of child labour. Majority of the working children are concentrated in the rural areas, where 60 percent of them are below the age of 10 years. 24 percent are in business and trade, while 36 percent of them work in households, restaurants etc. There is a good percentage of child labour are unrecorded, but are engaged in collection of rags and hawking goods. The more unfortunate ones are those who are employed in various hazardous industries, including tea gardens etc. There are times when their bodies ache, minds fog, hearts cry, spirits bleed, but on the order of the employer they work 10 to 15 hours a day at a stretch. Several factories in Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Andhraprdesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat West Bengal reveal that a large number of child workers have sunken chests and thin bone frames which give them a fragile look. Most of these have scabies on hands, arms and in legs. The heads of a few are shorn probably because the skins on their skull have developed various types of infections. Most of these children come from extremely poor households. They are either school dropouts or have not gone any school.

The last national census of India on 2011, estimated the total number of child labour, aged 4-15, to be at 12.6 million, out of a total child population of 253 million in 5-14 age group. Notably, the constitution of India prohibits child labour in hazardous industries. UNICEF estimates that India with its larger population has the highest number of laborers in the world are less than 14 years of age, while sub-Saharan African countries have the highest percentage of children who are deployed as child laborers. The International Labour Organization, estimates that agriculture, at 60 percent, is the largest employer of child labour in the world, while the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates 70 percent of child labour is deployed in agriculture and it's related activities. As reported by UNICEF, there has been a 54 percent increase in child labour in urbanized areas for children between the ages of 5 to 14. As per census 2011, the total population in India in the age group 5-14 is 259.6 million and out of these, 10.1 million (3.9 percent of total child labour) are working either as main worker or as marginal worker. It is to be mentioned here that more than 42.7 million children are out of school. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan. Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are the main states in India where maximum number of child laborers are present, even in Delhi the capital of the country has over 1 million child laborers'. While in terms of least number of child laborers in the country are Sikkim, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

Systems and laws for safeguarding the children throughout the country:-

The Child labour still remains a pressing issue in India, fueled by a complex interplay of factors such as poverty, economic pressures, lack of education and many more. The fight against child labour is a collective effort and together we can ensure that every child can experience the joys of childhood and access the opportunities they deserve.

Protecting children from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation is integral to the holistic development of children as it enables them to become active participants in their own development and the development of the nation. A child who sells flowers or magazines or working as child labour in various activities in the society is one who is deprived of a normal, healthy and secured family life and is denied his or her basic rights of nutrition, health, education and development. There is no single policy prescription to eliminate the adverse effect of child labour. Since the Right of children to free and compulsory education Act or RTE now stipulates compulsory and free education of children up to the age of 14, which makes education as fundamental right of a child was passed in the parliament on August 4, 2009. The government's decision is in line with the convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which prohibits any form of child

labour until the age of 14. The abolition of child labour is not possible so long as every citizen is not made free from the bondage of poverty and is assured of a minimum standard of living. A strategy for rehabilitation of child labour is necessary and kept provision for punishment to those employers, house owners, land lords and others who encourage and employ these innocent children.

A modern comprehensive critical analysis of child labour in India moves beyond looking at the issue as just a symptom of absolute poverty. Instead, it evaluates the systematic, structural, legal and economic contradictions that allow the practice to survive. Modern research highlights a massive category of children who are neither enrolled in school nor registered in any workforce. Yet again, child labour has visibly declined in formal manufacturing due to export regulations, it has shifted heavily into unmonitored informal networks. Over 70% of rural child workers remain in agriculture. In urban centers, they are clustered in unregulated settings like home based textile units, brick mills, street vending etc. Thus child labour acts as both a consequence and cause of economic distress. By replacing necessary schooling with low skill manual work, it suppresses adult wages and leaves the next generation trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Legal and Policy Gaps:--- Critics point out a fundamental flaw in the child labour (prohibition and Regulation) Act. While the law bans employment under 14, amendments allow children to help in family enterprises after school hours. Employers regularly exploit this provision to disguise systemic commercial exploitation as harmless family assistance. Thus welfare initiatives, including the National Child Labour Project (NCLP), often face operational bottlenecks, budget deficiencies and inconsistent regional enforcement. This leaves rescued children without adequate long term rehabilitation or vocational pathways.

Essential Path Forward:---- To move past the current standstill, policy must shift from mere prohibition to comprehensive prevention. This requires:-

1. Enforcing strictly mandatory high quality public education up to age 14.
2. Providing direct financial social protection to vulnerable families to offset the loss of a child's wages.
3. Upgrading monitoring systems to audit small family run workshops and agricultural sectors.

To effectively combat child labour, it is essential to address the cause of child labour and provide families with sustainable alternatives. This includes implementing poverty alleviation measures, promoting accessible and affordable education and raising awareness about b the detrimental effects of child labour in India on a child's physical, mental and emotional development. In addition, UNICEF implements a number of programmes that promote the establishment of a protective environment for children at local level in partnership with state governments, district administration and civil society. The focus of these interventions is to strengthen the district and village level child protection mechanisms, ensuring that children are going to school, learning and not working to mobilize communities to promote social and cultural norms to address issues such as child marriage, trafficking and child labour and linking vulnerable families with social protection programmes of the government. A society that protects its children today builds a stronger and more prosperous nation tomorrow. Therefore, ending this issue of child labour should be a collective responsibility and an urgent priority for everyone and as the new millennium has already started, so we all must have a fresh look for a better future,

REFERENCES:-

1. Kurukshetra, May 2012. A Monthly Journal, vol. 60.
2. Prasad Rao (2006): Labour Force Participation and Economic Development, Associated Publishers, New Delhi.

3. Yojana, November 2012: A development Monthly Magazine, Vol 56.
4. Southern Economist, December 1, 2011, Golden jubilee year of publication Vol 50.
5. P.K.Dhar (1993): Indian Economy- Its Growing Dimension.