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**INDIA'S CHILD LABOUR: INITIATIVES AND CHALLENGES**

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**INDIA'S CHILD LABOUR: INITIATIVES AND CHALLENGES****Dr. Praveen Kumar S.****Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology****Sri Adichunchanagiri First Grade College, Channarayapatna, Hassan (D)-573116****Affiliated to Hassan University, Karnataka****Contact number-7795419540, Email- [praveenbn12@gmail.com](mailto:praveenbn12@gmail.com)****Abstract**

"If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children." – Mahatma Gandhi

Child labor remains a critical issue in India, as the premature entry of children into the workforce during their formative years often comes at the expense of proper education, limiting their prospects for a better future. This problem is deeply rooted in poverty and has severe consequences for the nation as a whole. Children under the age of fourteen account for 3.6% of India's total labor force, with approximately 85% engaged in traditional agricultural activities, less than 9% in manufacturing, services, and repairs, and about 0.8% employed in factories.

A growing concern is the increasing prevalence of child domestic workers in urban areas, where working conditions are entirely unregulated. These children are often subjected to harsh treatment, including working without adequate food, for extremely low wages, in conditions akin to slavery. Cases of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse among child domestic workers are also reported. Families often justify this by claiming to place their children in such roles for care and employment opportunities.

The elimination of child labor is a national priority, with grassroots-level efforts underway in India. Numerous non-governmental and voluntary organizations, along with national and international agencies, are actively working toward this goal.

This paper explores the factors contributing to the rise of child labor and the various challenges it poses. It also outlines potential strategies to address these issues. Ultimately, we conclude by proposing solutions that may prove effective in overcoming the challenges associated with child labor.

**Keywords: Abuse, Child labour, Poverty, Society.**

## Introduction

### Child Labour: Definition and Context

The **Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986** defines a *child* as any individual who has not reached the age of 14. The Act explicitly forbids children from engaging in occupations listed under Part A of its Schedule, which includes jobs like domestic work, work in roadside eateries or restaurants (dhabas), catering services at railway stations, construction work near railway tracks, plastics manufacturing, and automobile garages. Additionally, Part B of the Schedule restricts children's involvement in specific hazardous processes, such as making beedis, tanning, soap production, brick kiln operations, and roof tile manufacturing. However, these prohibitions do not apply to workshops run by family units or government-recognized educational institutions.

According to the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, *child labour* encompasses work that robs children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, while posing risks to their physical and mental development. It involves tasks that are harmful to children's health, safety, and morals and disrupt their education, either by preventing school attendance, causing early dropouts, or burdening them with excessive responsibilities alongside their studies.

The definition of child labour varies across contexts and legislations, with no universally accepted standard. In India, for instance, the permissible minimum age for work differs across laws: the **Factories Act, 1948** prohibits employing children under 14 in factories, the **Mines Act, 1952** sets the minimum age at 15, and the **Plantations Labour Act, 1951** allows children as young as 12 to work.

Globally, child labour has sparked significant debates, with differing perspectives among economists, sociologists, historians, and human rights advocates. Economists argue that child labour is often a transitional phase in economic development, historically common during periods of industrial growth. However, growing awareness of the physical, moral, and psychological harm caused to children, coupled with concerns about human rights, international labour standards, and human capital development, has renewed opposition to the practice.

Child labour persists largely due to the interplay of poverty, social inequality, traditional norms, and systemic issues like unstable employment, inadequate access to credit, and high fertility rates. Many families depend on the additional income from children to improve household nutrition, support the education of siblings, or secure better economic prospects. Simultaneously, employers often seek child labour due to lower wage costs.

Despite stringent labour laws, child labour continues to challenge development efforts in underprivileged regions. Recognizing this, the Indian government introduced the **National Child Labour Policy** in 1987 to address the issue and promote children's welfare.

## II. Literature Review

Child labor has been a central focus of development economics for a considerable time (see ILO, 2002). Numerous international studies, both theoretical and empirical, have explored various dimensions of child labor, typically addressing three fundamental questions:

- (a) What causes child labor?
- (b) What are the effects of child labor on human development?
- (c) How do different policies influence the magnitude and forms of child labor?

These questions are deeply interconnected. Theoretical studies often examine the underlying reasons for the persistence of child labor, its implications for the economy, and the potential impact of various policy interventions on child labor decisions.

Pioneering contributions in this field include the work of Basu and Van (1998). Other notable studies have been conducted by Lieten and Ben (2001), Grootaert and Kanbur (1995), Anker (2000), Bhalotra (2000), Basu (1999), Galli (2001), Jafarey and Lahiri (2002), Rammohan (2000), and Rosati and Deb (2002), among others.

Empirical studies have sought to measure the trends and extent of child labor while also testing the validity of various theoretical propositions regarding its causes, impacts, and policy responsiveness. Key contributions in this domain include Ashagrie (1993), Grootaert and Patrinos (1999), Bhalotra and Heady (2003), Beegle et al. (2003a, 2003b), Goldin and Katz (2003), Edmonds (2004a, 2004b), Bourguignon et al. (2003), Weiner (1991), Ravallion and Wodon (2000), Addison et al. (1997), and Ray (2000a, 2000b).

In the Indian context, significant studies have been conducted by Chaudhuri and Wilson (2000), Ray (2000c), Cigno and Rosati (2000), Burra (1995), Mishra (2000), Chandrashekhar (1997), Weiner (1991), Majumdar (2001), and Reddy (2000).

Most research has focused on children engaged as wage earners in the labor market. However, this approach tends to underestimate the overall contribution of children, especially girls, to the economy and society. It often overlooks both economic and non-economic domestic duties performed by children, which are far from insignificant. Notably, the phenomenon of neither “Nowhere Children”—those neither attending school nor participating in the labor market—is more prevalent in developing countries than the recorded number of child workers, highlighting the need for a broader perspective in studies of child labor.

## III. Objectives

1. To identify the causes and consequences of child labour in India.
2. To explore effective measures to eliminate child labour at its source.

#### **IV. Research Methodology**

The research primarily relies on a literature review and secondary data gathered from various sources, including census surveys, reports, newspapers, journals, articles, and websites.

#### **V. Discussions**

##### **Child Labour: History**

Child labour in India can be understood by analyzing it through three distinct periods: ancient, medieval, and modern.

##### **a) Child Labour in Ancient India**

In ancient India, child labour was primarily seen in the form of child slaves. These children were often bought and sold as commodities, and in some cases, their parents' debts to landlords bound them to work in agricultural fields at very low wages. This form of bonded labour extended to children, who worked alongside their parents to repay or reduce the debts owed to landlords. Children also helped with household tasks and family crafts, learning skills by observing and participating in these activities. Ancient Indian society, which was predominantly rural, was made up of small and marginal economic units. The economic condition of slaves, hired workers, and unskilled laborers, including children, was poor, especially in the agricultural sector. Child labour was widespread in ancient India and was commonly found in occupations where wealthy landlords employed children in tasks related to agriculture.

##### **b) Child Labour in Medieval India**

In the medieval period, child labour remained prevalent. The increasing pressure on land led to smaller landholdings, and growing families had to find additional sources of income. This led to the rise of landless labourers, many of whom were bonded to large landowners. These families often employed their children to assist in their economic activities. Additionally, rural artisans typically worked in family units, with occupations passed down through generations. Children were introduced to their traditional craft from a young age, and child labour was common across many sectors. The rulers of the time did little to eradicate child slavery, and in many cases, they actively encouraged it to further exploit children for their own gain.

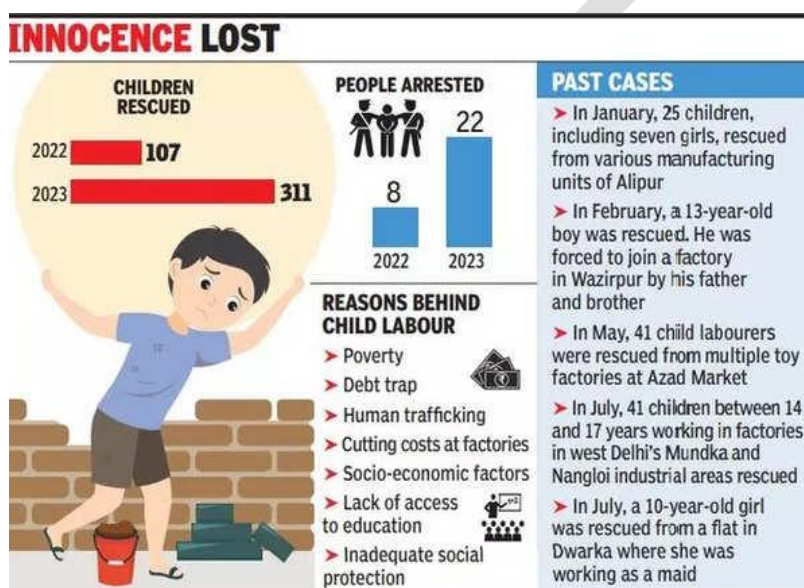
##### **c) Child Labour in the Modern Era**

In the modern era, children have continued to be involved in various economic activities. In pre-capitalist and socialist societies, including India, children were employed in guilds and trade occupations, where work relationships were typically informal and extended from the family unit. Children were not assigned hazardous tasks and were gradually introduced to work as part of their socialization and training. However, this dynamic began to change with the rise

of capitalism and industrialization in the 18th century. The capitalist economic model transformed family-based economies and led to the mechanization of agriculture, which displaced many workers. As families lost their traditional livelihoods, extreme poverty led to the increased use of children in the labour market. With few alternatives for adult employment and limited access to education for children, child labour became more entrenched.

According to data from the 2010 Census, child labour is more prevalent in urban areas, with 15.55% of children working in agriculture and 12.31% in manufacturing. In rural areas, the figures are slightly lower, with 1.71% in urban areas and 1.22% in rural areas working in the electric, gas, and water sectors.

### Reasons for the Increase in Child Labour



The causes of child labour are diverse and complex, stemming from a variety of factors. One significant reason is the easy availability of child labour, often with minimal obligations for employers.

**Poverty** is the primary factor driving child labour. Poor families, struggling to make ends meet, often allow their children to work, even in poorly paid jobs, to supplement household income. Extreme poverty and unemployment push children into such roles. Economic pressure compels parents to prioritize survival over legal or ethical concerns, leading them to collude with employers in exploiting their children.

Parents often view their children as an additional source of income, encouraging them to start working at a young age. This early involvement in work also leads to early marriage and childbearing, increasing the family's financial burdens and, in turn, contributing to national economic strain.



**Other contributing factors include:**

- Employers prefer hiring children because they are inexpensive, easier to manage, more disciplined, and quick to adapt.
- School dropouts are more likely to end up in child labour.
- The loss of a family's primary breadwinner can force children to work.
- The lack of state-sponsored family allowances in India.
- The absence of mandatory education laws requiring children to attend school up to a certain age.
- Slow progress in enacting and enforcing protective labour laws.
- Evasion of existing child protection laws by employers.
- The death of parents leaves children vulnerable to exploitation.
- Family members, such as a father with substance abuse issues, may squander resources, further impoverishing the household.
- Social structures, particularly the caste system, also play a role. In lower castes, children are often seen as being destined to serve upper castes, limiting their future opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

The root of child labour in India lies in the exploitative socio-economic system, compounded by a lack of awareness, limited job opportunities, and ineffective socio-economic institutions. These conditions continue to perpetuate child labour, and the absence of widespread public awareness exacerbates the problem.

**Consequences of Child Labour**

Child labour is a serious social issue and a significant waste of national potential. The economic necessity for children to work to support their families deprives them of opportunities for education, recreation, and play, stunts their physical growth, disrupts the normal development of their personality, and undermines their preparation for future responsibilities. The risks faced by child workers often go unnoticed or ignored.

**A. Health Hazards**

- Tuberculosis and bronchitis
- Muscle atrophy
- Weakening and deformation of bones
- Eye diseases
- Stunted growth
- Arthritis in fingers
- Damage to nails
- Excessive fatigue, malnutrition, and disruption of endocrine gland functions

## B. Economic and Social Issues

1. **Economic Problems:** Child labour leads to several economic challenges, such as the use of low-productivity labour, resulting in inefficient use of human resources.
2. **Unfair Competition:** The employment of children creates unfair competition with adult workers, leading to higher adult unemployment, lower wages, and poor working conditions.
3. **Family and Social Disruption:** Child labour disrupts normal family life and promotes the breakdown of societal norms. Children who become economically independent too early may also engage in risky behaviours, such as early sexual activity, substance abuse, and premature marriage, often resulting in early parenthood.
4. **Impact on Education and Vocational Development:** The most detrimental effect of child labour is its interference with education, severely limiting children's chances for future vocational development. Without education or skills, children are often condemned to a life of illiteracy and exploitation as low-wage workers.
5. **Unsafe Working Conditions:** Poor and dangerous working environments often lead to fatal accidents and permanent disabilities. The vulnerability of child workers is heightened by malnutrition, making them more susceptible to diseases and other health issues.
6. **Abuse and Isolation:** In some cases, child workers endure physical and mental abuse, long separations from their families, and even conditions resembling imprisonment. The lack of educational opportunities in these jobs reduces their future prospects and traps them in low-paying, unskilled work for life.
7. **Lack of Basic Protections:** Child labourers often suffer from the absence of clear, written contracts, lack of health care, feeding programs, and social security. Legal regulations covering child employment are often insufficient and poorly enforced, leaving many children vulnerable to exploitation.
8. **Need for Systematic Evaluation:** Unless there is regular evaluation of child labour practices and targeted policy decisions to address the deficiencies, the situation is unlikely to improve significantly, either in quality or quantity.





### Child Labour: Initiatives by the Government of India

1. **National Policy for Children, 1974:** This was India's first policy focusing on the needs and rights of children, recognizing them as vital to the nation's future. The policy aimed to ensure that constitutional provisions and the UN Declaration of Rights for children were implemented. It outlines the services the state should provide for the complete development of a child, including physical, mental, and social growth from birth through adolescence.
2. **National Policy on Education, 1986:** This policy stressed the need for special attention to removing disparities in education, particularly for women, Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Scheduled Castes (SC). It focused on equalizing educational opportunities through scholarships, adult education, recruitment of SC teachers, and incentives for poor families to send children to school. It also emphasized a "child-centered approach" and launched initiatives like "Operation Blackboard" to improve primary education.
3. **National Policy on Child Labour, 1987:** This policy provided an action plan to address child labour. It focused on legislative actions and integrated development programs aimed at improving the welfare of children, particularly in areas with high child labour prevalence.
4. **National Nutrition Policy, 1993:** Introduced to combat undernutrition, this policy used both direct and indirect approaches, focusing on food production, distribution, health, education, and rural and urban development, to improve child nutrition.
5. **National Population Policy, 2000:** This policy aimed at improving the status of children by emphasizing free and compulsory education for children up to age 14, universal immunization, and reducing infant and maternal mortality rates.
6. **National Health Policy, 2002:** The policy sought to improve public health through better infrastructure and equitable access to health services across all regions and communities.
7. **National Charter for Children (NCC), 2003:** The NCC highlighted the constitutional rights of children and the role of society in fulfilling their basic needs. It focused on protecting children from exploitation and abuse, ensuring their survival, and providing education and skills for adolescents to become economically productive citizens.
8. **National Plan of Action for Children (NPA), 2005:** Adopted to enhance children's well-being, the NPA addressed key issues such as the abolition of female foeticide, child marriage, and child abuse, while promoting legal and social protection for children in difficult circumstances.

### Key Schemes for Child Welfare:

- Integrated Child Development Services Scheme
- Integrated Child Protection Scheme
- National Child Awards for Exceptional Achievements
- Rajiv Gandhi Manav Seva Awards
- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

- National Rural Health Mission
- UJJAWALA Scheme (for the prevention of trafficking)
- Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for children of working mothers

Despite these focused initiatives, challenges persist in improving child survival, development, and protection. Gender inequality, particularly regarding the girl child, remains a concern.

**Statistics:**

- Uttar Pradesh and Delhi accounted for 47.6% of child abductions.
- Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra contributed to 44.5% of child rape cases in 2011.
- 132 foeticide cases were reported, with significant numbers in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Punjab.
- There was a 27% increase in cases of minor girls being procreated, with significant numbers from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Andhra Pradesh.
- Maharashtra had 74% of cases of buying girls for prostitution, while West Bengal had 77% of selling girls for prostitution.
- 113 cases of child marriage were reported, with the highest number in West Bengal.

**Trends in Human Trafficking and Juvenile Crime:**

- The trend in human trafficking, including cases of procuring and selling girls for prostitution, showed a fluctuating decline from nearly 5000 cases in 2006 to around 3500 cases in 2011.
- Cases of juvenile crimes under the IPC remain concerning, though they represent about 1% of total crimes.

**CHILD LABOUR: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

First and foremost, the responsibility lies with us as individuals living in society. It begins in our own homes. Never allow underage workers, whether in domestic service or elsewhere. Offer financial assistance to street children and unite with others who are willing to help. Form welfare groups dedicated to their well-being. Ensure that children have access to education, shelter, and food. If each of us contributes from our own position, progress is achievable. Do not allow children to endure strenuous and dangerous work in factories. Boycott those who exploit children, and speak out against them. Educate others about the laws against child labour. Raise awareness and take personal responsibility, making informed decisions to support change.

Secondly, governments have a crucial role to play. They should enact and enforce strict laws to combat child labour, punishing those who force children into hard work. Governments must also ensure that children have access to basic necessities like shelter,

food, and education. Every child should have the freedom to grow and learn without the burden of labour. It's essential for governments to recognize that children are often exploited for criminal purposes, and they must take appropriate measures to protect them.

Lastly, in this era of globalization, international organizations can significantly contribute to the fight against child labour. They can raise awareness worldwide, support children financially, and fund programs like "Education for All." These organizations can also apply pressure on governments to enforce laws that ensure children's welfare. A joint effort from individuals, governments, and international bodies can create a powerful movement to eradicate the harmful impacts of child labour.

Children are symbols of innocence and purity. It should bring tears to your eyes to see them suffering, hungry and homeless on the streets. As the youth of today, we must raise our voices and work together to make the world a better place for the generations to come.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

It is clear that the incidence of child labour in India has been declining in recent years. However, around 40 million children are still out of school, of which 6 million are engaged in work outside their homes. A significant issue is the existence of a large group of "Nowhere Children," who are neither working nor attending school.

When examining the factors contributing to child labour, poverty stands out as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for its persistence. While poverty plays a role in keeping children out of school, it does not always lead them into the workforce. Other factors, such as the lack of educational infrastructure, appear to play a more critical role in pushing children into labour. While the physical aspect of educational infrastructure is important, the human component is proving to be even more vital.

Educational infrastructure plays a crucial role in addressing child labour, and expanding access to quality education, particularly at the elementary level, is essential for its eradication. In terms of physical infrastructure, the acute shortage of school buildings has largely been addressed, but the real challenge now lies in the human resources—ensuring that schools are adequately staffed with qualified teachers. It is essential that teachers have sufficient time to attend to individual students, creating an environment where learning is enjoyable and children are encouraged to stay in school.

Furthermore, the functioning of schools needs to be reformed, with non-formal educational systems, such as those under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), proving to be effective in enrolling out-of-school children. The increasing number of children attending these non-formal institutions can be attributed to SSA's flexible approach,

which often includes non-traditional school hours and informal teaching methods. This allows children to attend classes after completing their daily work duties, ensuring that their right to education is upheld without compromising their ability to contribute economically. Such approaches hold the potential to meet the promise of universal education while also supporting children's broader rights to work and live.

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