

Globalisation and Child Labour*

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I

The Discourse on Child Rights

The recent heightened interest in the phenomenon of child labour is part of a wider discourse on child's rights which has engaged the attention of international policy makers since the eighties. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is one important manifestation of this new discourse. It would not be out of place to point out that both this discourse on child's rights and the one on child labour are taking place in a particular international context, i.e. that of globalisation.

The subject of children, child's rights, child labour is such a highly emotive one that even the most balanced scholars find it difficult to be dispassionate. There are a few points that one would like to make here regarding the child's rights discourse at the risk of being dubbed reactionary and worse, heartless.

While the discourse is presented in the garb of "Universalism", in effect it propounds notions of child's rights which are essentially western, and which have arisen out of the historical experience of the west. The modern western conception of childhood is barely three to four centuries old, wherein childhood is seen as a distinct and separate phase of life, characterised by innocence and frailty where children were ejected from the real world of work, sexuality and politics, and confined to the classroom [Aries, : 1962]. However this has changed even in the west in this last decade of the 20th century, with the breakdown of the family, widespread and extreme atomisation and consecutively, increased vulnerability of individuals and especially of children.

The experiences of non-western societies has been different, where the transition from childhood to adulthood was more fluid and less traumatic, where the child's world and the adult's world were not so separate and were characterised by more inter-generational reciprocity. Play and work also were not such sharply delineated activities and mingled in a manner that often it was difficult to distinguish the two. More importantly, the child is not viewed as separate from the larger unit be it family, clan, tribe etc.

The present day discourse on child's rights with the individuation of child's rights, has no "space" for the experiences and reality of non-western societies. Moreover, there is an underlying paternalism, since the assumption is that this dominant notion of child's rights is the more 'civilised' one and therefore needs to be universally accepted. Besides, it is a

* *Paper presented at a Seminar on "Globalisation and Democracy in the Third World", Academy of Third World Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi on October 7-8, 1997.*

hegemonising discourse since it denies autonomy and agency to non-western societies and families in dealing with children given their own specific socio-historical-cultural contexts.

II

The International Context

The changed international context is crucial to understanding the problem of child labour. It is not accidental that the present focus on the problem is taking place at a time when most of the Third World countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America and the eastern European countries have had, in the face of a mounting economic and political crisis, to adopt policies of structural adjustment which consciously attempt to change the nature of economic relationships in these societies. Needless to say that structural adjustment programmes have been forced down developing nations by the IMF and World Bank as part of a package deal for being bailed out of the debt crisis.

As a consequence of structural adjustment programmes, there has been a fundamental shift in the very perception of development from models which were more or less autocentric with an emphasis on state intervention, import substitution and a commitment on the part of the state to social welfare towards a model which upholds greater integration in the world economy, a deification of the market as the only arbiter of efficiency and growth and an abdication of responsibility of the state for welfare of its citizens.

An integral element in the neo-liberal paradigm is that growth is crucial and that this growth will slowly trickle down to the poor in the long run. However, many proponents of the new philosophy are also coming to realise that significant sections of the population are worse off than earlier [the 'new' poor] and therefore the need for a 'human' face to structural adjustment.

One important consequence of this has been almost a paradigm shift in the very manner in which human development is perceived. As an illustration of this shift we would draw attention to a study done by the UNICEF on the Impact of World Recession on Children (1984). Summing up the various case-studies, the authors refer to the central concerns of the development literature of the late sixties to the early eighties wherein poverty, malnutrition, high infant and overall mortality primarily result from structural causes and progress in human welfare depends more on the *pattern* rather than the *rate* of economic growth. Specifically, domestic factors such as unequal land distribution, insecure and inequitable tenancy agreements, a skewed distribution of income, misuse of public finance and the socio-cultural marginalisation of entire sections of the population on religious, class and ethnic grounds have a far greater influence on standards of living than the growth - or the decline - of the overall economy. But these are further exacerbated by the operation of the international system wherein developing countries are dependent in myriad ways on industrialised nations. "Colonial inheritance, technical and financial dependence structures and chronically deteriorating terms of trade, and more recently heavy indebtedness, have contributed and still do contribute very distinctly and very directly to the impoverishment of large sections of Third World populations" (Jolly and Cornia, 1984 : 211).

There are many other dimensions to the neo-liberal paradigm, some of which have been implicitly critiqued by the editors of the UNICEF study. But what is important for our purposes is that ironically, while a greater integration of structures and processes is taking place, an ideology or a world-view is being propounded which parcels out social reality into water-tight compartments. Globalisation of the economy is being accompanied by a fragmentation of social vision. One of the latent functions of this fractured social vision is to deal separately and partially with the fall-out of structural adjustment.

Different departments have been created and floated to deal with the different segments of the fall-out, with international agencies taking charge of a separate segment each, whether it be habitat, children's rights, child labour, women, etc. While the number of such "departments" proliferate with the multiplication of social problems, the juggernaut of globalisation moves on integrating not only economic structures but also globalising social evils.

The fracturing of the social vision also promotes the illusion that each of the different social fragments can be dealt with separately, and serves to conceal the structural links that bind the different fragments together along with concealing the basic chasm between the North and South that persists and is in fact widening.

III

Impact of SAP

Researches on the Impact of SAPs in the Third World countries both on women and children have highlighted the deleterious consequences for the overall situation of children and the tremendous burden that women have to bear in facing the economic and social hardship that has resulted from SAPs.

The studies of the SAPs on women have highlighted certain features: increasing number of women entering the labour force as compared to men, and that too primarily in the informal sector. As men start losing jobs or are pushed into casual work with a loss of steady income, women start looking for work outside the home to desperately maintain certain minimum standards of living. Studies have documented women's increased labour force participation rates in the Caribbean, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, the Philippines, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador among others (Sparr, 1994 : 21)

A UNICEF study on the impact of the crisis observes:

"From 1981 onwards the rate of female employment increases exponentially... This means that at the most critical point in the crisis, there was a marked drop in male employment going hand in hand with an increase - unparalleled in the last few decades - in the presence of women in employment. This trend is almost certainly a compensatory mechanism to maintain the family economy". (UNICEF, 1989 : 66-67).

This trend, i.e. of increasing female labour force participation, primarily in the informal sector, has been observed in all developing countries where structural adjustment has been accompanied by prolonged recessions (Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa).

The impact of the SAP package have negatively affected women with regard to access to basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, access to common property resources, access to education and skill formation, implications for total household incomes of labouring households in different sectors and the gender-based distribution within households, access to needs for reproduction and nurture of the young, including not only health care but also child care, access to productive employment outside the home, control over the allocation of resources both socially and within the households. All of these have been affected adversely not only because of reduction in government expenditure but also from the general withdrawal of the state from provision of goods and services and a greater reliance on market mechanisms.

The move from formal employment to informal employment and from the public to private sectors favours the feminization of employment at the margins but always in more insecure and poorly paid and more onerous conditions.

Thus structural adjustment policies lead to falls in real wages, unemployment and reduced availability of and cuts in subsidies on basic goods and services. All this affects women in their roles as producers, mothers, household managers, community organisers and the implications are invariably negative in terms of reduced incomes, standard of living and a greater burden of unpaid work (Ghosh, 1996).

In the eighties (considered a “lost decade” for the people of Africa and Latin America, when structural adjustment programmes were imposed on more than 70 developing countries) UNICEF commissioned a study on the impact of structural adjustment programmes on children. The study - *Adjustment with a Human Face* - in two volumes, attempted an analytical framework to measure the consequences of structural adjustment on children (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, 1988). Three sets of variables have been isolated in the production of child welfare:

- a. Real resources in cash or kind at the household level. Here, three main variables influence the level of resources i.e. subsistence production, money incomes (whether from wage, self-employment or from transfers), and the rate of inflation, particularly for food.
- b. Government expenditure on health, education, child care, water and environmental sanitation, supplementary feeding and food subsidies.
- c. Family and community characteristics. The three elements that strongly influence child welfare within the household (and the community) are the time, health and skills (measured by the educational level) of the parents, particularly the mother.

According to the authors, all the three sets of variables delineated above change during periods of recession and “indiscriminate” economic adjustment. While money incomes, government expenditure, food prices and mother’s time and health respond quickly to

changes in economic aggregates, subsistence production is influenced more by structural variables than by fluctuations in the monetised sector of the economy. While mother's level of education is generally unaffected by the crisis, mother's health and time change markedly in times of economic crisis.

The different determinants of child welfare would affect child welfare with varying intensity and speed depending upon the variable selected. In general, it would be expected that the crisis shows its first effects in terms of increasing child labour and school drop-outs, while more acute forms of social stress like malnutrition and mortality would become evident only after severe and cumulative decline have occurred. [Cornia et. al., 1988, Vol. II : 37-38]

The study concludes that the economic changes of the 1980s triggered a sharp reversal in the trend to towards improvement in health, nutrition and educational standards of children. (Cornia et. al, 1988 : 287)

Deterioration in child welfare was documented in 8 countries in Latin America, 16 in sub-Saharan Africa, 3 in North Africa and the Middle East and 4 in South and East Asia. In the eighties, the study notes that per capita GDP fell by 10% in Latin America. Employment growth slowed down, real wages fell, income inequalities worsened and the consumption of the poor declined, government expenditures on social services declined. The consequences of all this was disastrous for children.

The incidence of malnutrition among children increased in Brazil, Chile, Botswana, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Peru and the Philippines. The incidence of low birth weights rose between 1979 and 1986 in several countries including Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and El Salvador.

In Africa, between 1980 and 1989, per capita GDP for Sub-Saharan Africa dropped by a fifth. In the eighties, the number of African countries in the category of the least developed countries of the world rose from 16 to 28. In 1990, 14 African countries had an under-5 mortality rate that was above 200 per 1000 and 8 countries had an IMR that was above 200 per 1000 (*UNICEF, 1992*).

In Brazil, over and above the general deterioration in the health of children consequent upon the new policies, the ILO in 1992 noted that 12 million adolescents (in the 14-18 age-group) were working. The Federation of Agricultural Workers of Pernambuco estimated that 30 per cent of the region's workers were children below the age of ten. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, out of 2.9 million children and adolescents working in agriculture, 62.3% received no wages. The ILO estimated that 7 million children in Brazil worked as slaves and prostitutes.

That child labour is a survival strategy in the face of crisis is clear from the experiences of many countries. A UNICEF study on Adjustment Policies in Ghana during the 1980s refers to the increasing intensity of child labour and its interconnections with deepening poverty and reduced access to basic services. While some forms of child labour (domestic household chores and seasonal agricultural work) was not unknown earlier in Ghana, with households becoming poorer, child labour was more crucial to making ends meet and had intensified, leading to high drop-out rates especially among girls, increased child labour in urban informal

sector, and pawning of children into domestic service to reduce living costs of poor households [Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, 1988, Vol.II : 106].

In Peru, the effect of stabilisation policies have led to contractions in incomes and employment in the urban, modern, sector, while reduced social expenditures have had a greater impact in rural areas. There was an overall decline in real public expenditures in social sectors between 1977 and 1985, and in 1985 per capita food consumption was 26 percent lower than the already low levels of consumption ten years earlier. All these converged and resulted in an overall decline of living standards of the population, higher morbidity, greater numbers of children prematurely in the labour market, and higher rate of school drop-outs [Figueroa, in Cornia, Jolly & Stewart, 1988, Vol.II : 175].

The UNICEF study of the Philippines also documents an increase in child labour with meagre opportunities for adult employment. In metropolitan Manila alone, street children numbered from 40,000 to 75,000, and the incidence of children begging, stealing, scavenging through refuse and engaging prostitution also increased (UNICEF, 1988, Vol. II : 213).

The authors of the UNICEF study are emphatic about the absolutely disastrous consequences of the adoption of the SAPs on the welfare of children. However, their conclusions suggest “a broader approach”, one which combines adjustment with the protection of the vulnerable and the restoration of economic growth, i.e. adjustment with a human face. (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, 1988, Vol. II : 290-291).

The thrust of such an approach is that the adoption of a different set of policies is not only desirable but also feasible to prevent disasters in the short run which will help adjustment in the proverbial long run. However, it is our contention that the very rationale of the neo-liberal paradigm assumes that for the all-important goal of economic growth, some sections of the population specifically the poor have to be sacrificed or dispensed with. Cornia et. al believe that it is possible to give a human face to SAP but this to our mind is unfeasible in the long run precisely because the polarising logic of the global system will necessarily perpetuate uneven development and the core-periphery distinction will persist and even exacerbate. Of course, globalisation will lead to the creation of new elite islands in the periphery - a globalised elite - but this will further intensify the division between the rich and the poor and more will join the ranks of the poor and the destitute in the Third World. The same process is also at work in the developed world.

Uneven development and the logic of polarisation inherently characteristic of the capitalist system will now operate on a global scale to perpetuate new inequities, exacerbate and intensify older forms of inequities thus leading to small islands of super-prosperity both geographically and socially along with devastating vast areas of the planet particularly the Third World, leaving the vast majority of the population destitute and highly vulnerable.

IV

The Social Matrix of Child Labour in India

In order to understand the phenomenon of child labour, it is necessary to focus on the structural roots of child labour, its embeddedness in the wider social matrix and its inter-relatedness to wider social processes.

One would like to begin by reiterating a very obvious truism that the phenomenon of child labour cannot be understood or analysed outside the context of the family/household. Our discussion on the family/household does not presume the family to be a harmonious unit with no clash of interests or hierarchy. Gender and age hierarchies notwithstanding, the family continues to be the most important social buffer for the individual, be it adult or child. The family is the site where production and reproduction of life takes place. There are many who talk of the family as the unit wherein human capital is generated. It is also a unit for production, distribution and consumption. Apart from the above dimensions, there are the cultural, social, psychological and emotional functions that the family performs, which by no means can be under-emphasised. But for our purpose, we are concentrating on the family as a unit of production and reproduction of life and livelihood. The goal of every family household is to achieve a certain equilibrium between the production/reproduction of life, and the production/distribution of the means of livelihood. The strategies for achieving this equilibrium vary, depending on the type of household, and the position that the household occupies in the social economy.

The typical peasant household in India would try to achieve a certain balance between labour and consumption depending upon the size of the family, the number of working members and the size and quality of land owned or worked on. This equilibrium helps the family to exist as a unit in the most trying situations. Child work/labour cannot be torn out of this very real social context, and in fact is an integral part of the survival strategy of households.

The second point one would like to make is the inter-connectedness of the family/household to the wider structures of the society, be it community, caste, tribe and/or class and its susceptibility to the wider social, economic and political processes. The micro structure of the family/ kin-group and its relationship to the macro structure of the state and the international system is quite complex, more so in a society like India which is characterised by a diversity of structures. Thus, if one were to perceive of the phenomenon of child work/labour in terms of concentric circles, the family household would constitute the smallest and most immediate circle, with the community/caste/class forming the next one, the nation-state constituting the next one and finally with the international system the largest one. The extent to which each of these concentric circles impinges on the others would depend on the historical context, the evolution of social structures and their inter-linkages. With the increasing integration of the world system over the last two/three centuries, the inter-linkages between these different structures have only become stronger, leaving the smallest unit - the family - extremely vulnerable, depriving it of any autonomous sphere of action and choices.

The latest round of integration - i.e. Structural Adjustment Policies - has only further intensified the process. Studies have shown that the brunt of the present crisis and shocks of globalisation are being born by the families, principally of the poor, and within the families - it is the women in the families. The pressures on women to increase the family income in the face of inflation, decreasing social sector budgets has resulted in more children being put to work either to substitute the mother in the domestic chores in the case of girls, or to add to the family kitty.

V

Estimates of Child Labour in India

According to the 1991 Census, India has a child population (0-14 years) of 197 million. Both the 1981 and 1991 Censuses classify workers into main and marginal workers. Thus a child worker is one who is either a main or marginal worker. According to estimates based on the 1991 Census, there are 12.7 million main child workers and about 10.6 million marginal child workers.

The agricultural sector employed 76 per cent of child labour in 1991. Out of the 12.7 millions full-time child labourers, 35.2 per cent worked as cultivators, while 42.5 per cent were agricultural labourers. The percentage of child labour in manufacturing rose from 3.01 per cent of total child labour in 1971 to 5.7 per cent in 1991 (Chaudhri, 1997; 796).

The incidence of child labour has declined from 7.6 per cent to 5.4 per cent in 1991. The work participation rates (WPR) of children as per the Census and the NSS (50th Round) is declining though the decline is faster in the rural areas than in the urban areas. (Duraismamy, 1997; 810). According to the Census of 1991 only 50 per cent of the children in the 5-14 year age group are reported to be attending school of which only 0.2 per cent are workers, and 45 per cent are neither in school nor reported to be working (Duraismamy, 1997:811)

This raises an important issue of under-reporting of child labour in the Census which is partly due to the fact that a lot of children's productive work in household industry and in family farms is not recognised.

Children in peasant families grow up assisting the family in various tasks. They assist in secondary agricultural activities - the boys graze cattle, assist in agricultural work, while the girls assist in household chores and looking after younger siblings, thus releasing the mother for work outside the home. In all peasant homes, work is an integral part of socialization of the child. In situations of extreme distress, where families have been pauperised and made destitute, children are also sold off into bondage to pay off family debts or just to stave off starvation. It is estimated that there were 2.6 million bonded labourers, of which at least 8% were children.

In artisan households, they start working as apprentices fairly young so as to learn the occupations that will be their calling in later life. Thus, among the communities of potters, blacksmiths, rope-makers, basket-weavers, handloom-weavers etc. children start learning their skills at quite a young age as preparation for their vocations in adult life.

In the urban areas child labourers are concentrated in the informal sector and in the small-scale cottage industries where they are generally working for paltry wages and in establishments where conditions of work are far more oppressive and exploitative than the less oppressive and hostile precincts of a home. They are found in tea stalls, restaurants,

workshops, factories and working as domestic servants, apart from the street-children who survive on rag-picking, carrying loads and being shoe-shine boys.

In industry, children work as full-time workers in the carpet industry located in the Mirzapur-Bhadohi belt in U.P. and in J&K, the match and fireworks industry in Tamil Nadu, the diamond-cutting units in Surat, the glass industry in Ferozabad, the brassware industry in Moradabad, silk-weaving at Varanasi, the pottery units at Khurja and the tea plantations of Assam and Bengal.

If one were to look at the spatial concentration of child labour, the states of U.P., Bihar, M.P., A.P., Orissa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu account for most of the child labour in India. Amongst these states, the states of the backward and poverty-stricken heartland of India accounts for a large percentage of child labour.

The Informal Sector

One of consequences of the adoption of SAPs has been an increase in child labour. In fact, Cornia et. al state that an increase in child labour and school drop-outs is one of the more immediate consequences of the crisis.

Specifically the adoption of structural adjustment programmes in India have resulted in an overall increase in social and economic insecurity, which puts extreme pressure on the families of the poor to somehow cope and survive. Besides, the expansion of the informal sector operates both indirectly and directly to increase child labour. The expansion of the informal sector (wherein labour-intensive processes requiring lower level skills are farmed out) has led to an increase in women working under onerous conditions to eke out a livelihood. This has invariably meant that children also start working with their mothers or do various domestic chores to relieve their mothers for work outside the home. More importantly, the subsidiaries of multinational corporations sub-contract part of their production to small firms which rely heavily on child labour. Even large export-oriented national enterprises resort to similar sub-contracting.

Here it would be instructive to mention the World Development Report (1995) - Workers in an Integrating World-In this report the World Bank is actually in favour of the trend towards informalisation. The reasons for this are revealing-"In many Latin American, South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, labour laws establish onerous job security regulations, rendering hiring decisions practically irreversible and the system of worker representation and dispute resolution is subject to often unpredictable government decision making adding uncertainty to firms' estimates of future labour cost" (World Development Report, 1995 : 34).

But elsewhere in the report the World Bank tries to sanitise this approach by rejecting policies that "favour the formation of small groups of workers in high-productivity activities" which lead to dualism, segmentation of the labour force into privileged and under privileged groups that "tend to close the formal sector off from broader influences from the labour market, at the cost of job growth".

However, the real thrust of such an approach is to abdicate any responsibility for the protection, security and reproduction of the huge work force in the rural and urban sector of

the economy and impose the whole burden of the reproduction of labour power on an increasingly stagnant and impoverishing agriculture and rural hinterland, on caste, community and extended kin networks (which are being rendered fragile by the operation of market forces), on backward regions, on poor families and specifically the women and the children.

In a recent study of workers in the informal economy in Gujarat - Foot-loose Labour - Jan Breman (1996) has perceptively and sensitively analysed the saga of the workers in the informal sector, their journey from being small and marginal peasants and agricultural labourers through seasonal or permanent migration to their status as casual workers in the burgeoning informal sector at the bottom rungs of the urban economy. Needless to say that the overwhelming majority of these workers are those who have been at the bottom rungs of the Indian caste-based social hierarchy, i.e. the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the other backward castes and minority groups particularly the Muslims.

This is a far cry from the World Bank's perception where the self-employed peasants on leaving the countryside first become waged labourers in the urban informal sector, earn some money and learn skills during their sojourn at the bottom of the urban economy, save and finally set up an independent business. (Breman, 1996: 12)

The table below gives an idea on the importance of the informal, unorganised sector.

Table I.I.
All-India sectoral distribution of main workers, 1991

	Organized Sector		Unorganized Sector		Total	
	Persons (in lakhs)	Percentage share	Persons (in lakhs)	Percentage share	Persons (in lakhs)	Percentage share
Occupation: Agriculture and allied activities	15	5.6	1847	73.3	1862	68.8
Mining and manufacturing	98	36.5	257	10.2	355	13.5
Services	155	57.9	417	16.5	572	17.7
Total	268	100.0	2521	100.0	2789	100.0

Source: Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, August 1993; see also Kulkarni 1993: 659.

Hardly 10 percent of all workers in India form part of the formal sector.

India's Child Labourers

The overwhelming majority of child labourers in India come from communities and groups which are at the lower rungs of our traditional, caste-based social hierarchy, i.e. the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and minorities, especially the Muslims. These also constitute the bulk of the small and marginal peasantry, landless and agricultural labourers and artisan groups. This amounts to the majority of the Indian population. These, in short are the poor of India and it is from the families and communities of the poor that child labourers come from. Thus when we are talking of child labourers, we are in essence referring to the children of the poor.

It is therefore not accidental that studies of many of the industries where there is a substantial presence of child labour like the carpet industry, the match, brassware, glass and bangle, locking-making, slate, gem-polishing industries and the tea plantations show that the overwhelming majority of the children working in these industries come from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward classes and Muslim communities.

The fact that the bulk of India's child labourers hail from communities that derive their sustenance from occupations that principally require manual labour reveals the wider, complex and variegated social matrix in which the phenomenon of child labour is embedded.

Why do children work?

The communities which supply the bulk of India's child labourers are the victims of a social system which is characterised by unequal access to the principal productive resources and assets. The agrarian structure is still by and large characterised by extreme inequities, with a small handful of landowners owning and controlling most of the land, and the vast majority

of small and marginal peasantry operating small and uneconomic land-holdings, forced to turn to agricultural labour for a period ranging from 3 to 7 months of the year. In 1992, 72 percent of the rural households owned less than 2.5 acres of land. Those who are landless have of course to rely only on agricultural and other labour to earn their livelihood. The inequities of the traditional social order have been further aggravated due to the development model that has been pursued.

According to official data, there are today 73.05 million agricultural labourers, 48.5 million males and 28.3 million females. Agricultural labourers can expect, on an average to find work for about a 100 days in a year. Over the last three decades, development policies have aggravated the condition of the peasantry with increasing numbers of the small and marginal peasantry slipping into the ranks of agricultural labourers. Between 1961 and 1991, the proportion of cultivators has declined while that of agricultural labourers has increased. The same trend can be observed with regard to child workers. The shifts in the sectoral incidence of child labour over the last three decades reflects the larger processes at work. Between 1961 and 1991, the proportion of child workers who were cultivators has gone down sharply while those who were agricultural labourers' has gone up (Chaudhri, 1997 : 796). This means that a vast section of our population dependent on land and agriculture for their livelihood are getting pauperised and getting alienated from land. The tribals who constitute about 8% of the population are also getting alienated from traditionally held lands either through the chicanery of vested interests or through development projects. The adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes has resulted in an overall worsening on many fronts (Gupta, : 1994).

The general trend whereby the mass of producers have been losing control over any means of livelihood which we noted earlier, has exacerbated. There has been a consistent decline in the share of the self-employed in the work force from 61.4 percent in 1970-73 to 54.8 percent in 1993-94, while the share of the self-employed in agriculture in the total rural work-force declined from 49.77 percent in 1987-88 to 44.4 percent in 1993-94 [Jayadevan, 1996 : 763]. An important pointer to the distressing conditions prevalent with regard to employment opportunities (as well as underemployment) is the share of casual labour in the work-force. As observed by Jayadevan, "The unemployed and underemployed are too poor to remain unemployed for any significant length of time. They have little choice except to end up taking any casual work/ wage labour on a day-to-day basic irrespective of quantum of return. These hordes of casual workers suffer from frequent unemployment and mostly remain in abysmal poverty" [Ibid].

The proportion of regular wage/ salary workers in the work-force declined from 12.1 per cent in 1972-73 to 10.0 per cent in 1987-88 and to 8.3 per cent in 1993-94 in the case of rural males. It also declined in the case of rural females from 4.1 per cent in 1972--73 to 3.7 per cent in 1987-88 to 2.8 per cent in 1993-94. This has increased the percentage of casual wage labour from 22.0 per cent in 1972-73, to 31.4 per cent in 1982-88 and to 33.8 per cent in 1993-94 in the case of rural males while it increased from 31.4 per cent in 1972-73 to 35.5 per cent in 1987-88 and to 38.7 per cent in 1993-94 in the case of rural females [Jayadevan, 1996 : 765].

The extreme insecurity faced by the bulk of rural households is evidenced by the fact that 37 per cent of rural Indians are landless and they get employment only for 137 days in a year, and non-agricultural labour gets work for only 152 days in a year. There is a great

underestimation of those living on daily wages since both the NSS and the Census categorise as workers only those who work for 180 days in a year.

The NCAER's human development profile of rural India based on a survey of 33,000 households points to lack of employment stability as a major reason for the high percentage of rural poverty [H.T., 5 Dec, 1996].

A study on the "Social Cost of Economic Reforms" conducted by Gupta and Pal for the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi reveals that the poverty ratio shot up from 35.5 per cent in 1990-91 to 39 per cent in 1993-94, and that the number of poor increased by 48 million in the 3-year period.

The artisan groups are also facing an uncertain and bleak future. The handloom sector, is a major employer, next to agriculture, with about 25 lakh weavers. Official policy leading to an increase in cotton yarn prices led to a severe crisis, leading to suicides and starvation deaths amongst the weavers. The plight of other artisan groups is no better.

The artisans once the backbone of the Indian economy are facing a tremendous survival crisis. The artisanal population in 1980 may be estimated to anywhere between 74.53 lakhs to 1.25 crore. An analysis of the changes that have occurred between 1961 and 1981 show that: a) there was an overall contraction of around 29 per cent in the artisanal population; b) the employment share of the artisanal sector in relation to the non-household or organized sector declined in most of the industrial groups. This was particularly so in the case of jewellery work, leather work and textile work; c) there was a net decline in the number of workers in the artisanal sector in all the groups; d) there was a net decline in the number of female workers in the artisanal sector in most of the industry groups. (Dev, 1996 : 890). These groups are also swelling the ranks of agricultural labourers.

The agricultural labourers, cultivators and the artisans constitute the bulk of the rural poor. These are also the very people who migrate in droves to the cities with every periodic drought or famine or due to "development" projects, and who constitute the urban poor. It is these groups that provide the bulk of the labour to the burgeoning informal sector.

These recurrent disasters seriously hamper the capacity of these families to physically survive. After every such disaster, their options for survival are further constricted leading these families, men, women and children to sell their labour power far below subsistence levels. Child labour in such a situation is a survival strategy.

When the process of marginalisation goes below a certain threshold, i.e. when families slip below the poverty line, then the phenomenon of child labour appears. Thus at times of drought, famine and other such natural and social disasters, when distress is acute, millions of families of landless and agricultural labourers, poor and marginal peasants and artisans face a tremendous survival crisis.

The atmosphere of overall insecurity which has been endemic in the Indian social scene has only further intensified, with the introduction of the 'reform' under SAP. Per capita availability of food grains has also gone down in the post-reform period. In 1991 it was 510.1

grams per day, while it declined 468.8, 462.7, 469.5 and 501.9 grams per day for the year 1992, 93, 94 and 95 respectively [Dev, S. 1996 : 890].

While there has been a shift in consumption patterns from cereals to non-cereals in the case of the bottom 30 per cent of the population, there has hardly been much improvement in the cereals and nutrient intakes in the rural and urban areas. The per capita food intake of the poorest 30 per cent was 1,599 kilo calories per day in the rural areas and 1704 kilo calories per day in the urban areas as compared to the required 2,200 calories per person per day. This chronic food insecurity would affect the health and nutrition of both adults and children among the poor. The irony is that inspite of self-sufficiency in food-grains, malnutrition is widespread, more so among women and children. The proportion of pregnant women with anaemia is as high as 88 per cent and about 53 per cent of the children under 5 were under-weight at the all-India level in 1993-94. The percentage of child malnutrition is higher in Bihar (63), Uttar Pradesh (59), West Bengal (57), Madhya Pradesh (57) and Maharashtra (54) [Ibid].

It is important to note that it is not individuals but families and households that face the survival crisis and so the strategies that purport to cope with the problem have to deal with the families. According to the available data, there are at least 39% of India's population below the poverty line, the bulk of the poor being in the rural areas. The numbers below the poverty line in 1993-94 was 244.87 million in the rural areas and 79.4 million in urban areas. An alternative estimate by the NCAER for 1994, based on a four-year study of 33,000 rural households in 16 states came to the conclusion that 16 percent of the rural population had access to less than Rs.3 per day.

It is within the context of these abysmal poverty levels that one has to view the situation of the families and consequent real life-choices or (lack of them) that are thrust on them. The high maternal and infant mortality rates, the shocking extent of malnutrition of both adults and children (65% of Indian children are under-nourished) the extreme vulnerability to disease, appalling literacy levels, and the almost endemic poverty are part of an integral whole, and the phenomenon of child labour cannot be torn out of this context. In short, child welfare cannot be divorced from human welfare.

VII

Strategies for the Elimination of Child Labour

Policy makers and social analysts at the international level have always oscillated between a position of total abolition and amelioration of the conditions of child labour. But the ground realities have led to an awkward combination of the abolitionist approach with one which emphasises amelioration of the conditions of child labour. This is reflected in the ILO's IPEC programme, the long-term objective of which is to eliminate child labour. But a transitional period is envisaged wherein the attempt is to "regulate and humanize" the employment of children.

Of late, however there has been an increase in the tide of abolitionism with international organisations, like UNICEF taking a position that abolition of child labour is not negotiable,

and that child labour must be ended even before poverty is ended. Ironically, this current of abolitionism is mounting precisely at a time when the developing world is forced to accept policies of structural adjustment, which make the position of these countries and the poor in them much more vulnerable. The negative consequences of these policies have been acknowledged with the international agencies articulating the need for a 'human face' to structural adjustment.

One of the major elements of the strategy for the total abolition of child labour is the emphasis on education. The UNICEF sees education as the cutting edge of the strategies to prevent and eliminate child labour. According to UNICEF, there is no single, more relevant policy instrument for eliminating child labour.

Having said this, the UNICEF is also constrained to state that strategies complementary to education need to be "*concurrently implemented*". These include income-generation, payment of minimum wages, empowerment of women, law enforcement and convergence of social services on identified families of child labourers.

Many NGO's in India have also been articulating a view point which undercuts the approach that shocking poverty, arising out of unequal access to productive assets and resources, structurally in-built inequities and a pattern of development which further intensifies these factors, is the root cause for the prevalence of child labour amongst the poor. The formulation that has emerged from this school of thinking is : poverty is not the cause of child labour, child labour is the cause of poverty - compulsory education, according to these NGOs is the only weapon to tackle the problem of child labour.

The strategy of compulsory education as the core of policy initiatives to end child labour glosses over the complex social matrix within which child labour is embedded, reproduced and sustained. This matrix is characterized by stagnation in agriculture and handicrafts, fast eroding control over means of livelihood of the mass of peasantry, artisans, fisherfolk etc. and a commercialisation of the entire economy which wipes out the basic producers. Besides, there is the implicit assumption that all learning takes place only in schools, which is problematic in itself. In this context, the works of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich need to be mentioned.

The most important lacuna in this position however, is that it ignores the present day international context, i.e. of acute world-wide crisis and the structural causal links that bind the countries of the South to those of the North. The example of Sri Lanka is often mentioned as a success story. But the high literacy rates achieved by Sri Lanka was due to heavy state expenditure in health and education. One wonders whether such examples are relevant when the state is withdrawing altogether from its commitment to social welfare.

What is distressing is that the Government of India's position while acknowledging the deep structural roots of the problem and advocating a phased abolition of exploitative child labour, has been characterized by a deplorable lack of political will. Of late even the Government's stand-point is undergoing a metamorphosis under the impact of the winds globalisation.

An example of the radical-sounding but ill-conceived initiative of the Government of India in the recent Eighty-third Amendment Bill which attempts to make the right to education a

fundamental right. One of the major lacunae in the Bill is the fact that a whole group of children in the age group of 0-6 are left out of the purview of the Bill.

The underlying assumption seems to be that the education of children and child-care in this age-group belongs to the domain of the family. This is a retreat from the commitments made in Article 45 of the Constitution which talks of education for children upto the age of 14.

Apart from the obvious fact that early childhood care and education is so vital for the full and healthy development of human beings which the Bill has ignored the more disturbing aspect of the Bill is that in the prevailing precarious socio-economic context the overwhelming majority of the families cannot provide early childhood care and education without the support of the state. There are about a hundred million children in the 0-6 age group, of whom sixty million are below the poverty line. The government seems to have turned its back on these sections.

Moreover, the Bill leaves out of its purview the so-called “unaided” private schools. There is also a provision implicit in the Bill which allows for penalising the parents who do not send their children to school. Already, the states of Tamil Nadu and Goa have introduced laws which penalise the parents. The overall thrust of the Bill is that it is loaded precisely against those sections which actually need free education. The assumption behind such an initiative [and this is shared by a wide section of policy-makers, academics and NGOs] is that this will be a major step towards eliminating child labour.

We would like to advocate a strategy which is based on a recognition of the socially variegated manifestation of the phenomenon of children working. This would involve an acknowledgement of the child work/ child labour dichotomy, the former being characterized by children working in the family/ household while the latter category is constituted by children working for wages either in industry or agriculture.

A further distinction needs to be made even amongst the children working for wages and those who are in the most exploitative kinds of situations who need to be targeted first. Children working in hazardous industries and occupations, bonded child labourers, street children and child prostitutes need urgent attention. Needless to say, policy initiatives will have to focus on the families of child labourers, if any measure of success is to be achieved. Child prostitutes are a particularly vulnerable group whose problems need redressal on a priority basis.

These families need to be identified and a multi-pronged approach, the core of which would be to address the poverty of these families, along with a package of health and education for the children is called for.

Even while dealing with hazardous industries, a specific analysis of each of these industries has to be undertaken. The fact that most of child labour in these industries is really in the informal sector, specifically small units which come under the category of “cottage industry” is a fact that has to be taken into account while devising a strategy. One reason for the internationally orchestrated campaign against child labour in the countries of the South is really because the small-scale informal sector is really competitive, since the cost of reproduction of labour-power is borne by poor families, poor regions and specifically by the

women and children. The focus on child labour in these sectors tends to ignore the structural linkages both backwards (i.e. stagnating agriculture etc., which ensures a steady supply of child labourers) and forwards (i.e. the linkages with the international system).

One question that we need to ask ourselves is: in the attempt to get rid of child labour in these industries, are we going to contribute to a process whereby the entire small-scale, informal sector is going to be wiped out ?

Or can we not devise strategies /policies which while addressing the supply dimension of child labour (i.e. preventing such supply from the 'catchment' areas through all sided development measures) can also alter the structure of industries in a manner whereby the small-scale /informal units can be made viable without having to take recourse to super-exploitation of women and children ? In the case of the carpet industry which I had occasion to study one of the problems is the large number of intermediaries between the manufacturer/exporter and the weaver/ master craftsman. Co-operatives of the small loom owners/ weavers, with these having direct access to the market needs to be considered.

Samir Amin has also referred to precisely such a process when he talks of democratic repoliticization of the people and asks whether it is possible to transform activities described as "informal" into a peoples economy. Under present conditions, these activities are fully integrated into the global system and ensure the reproduction of the labour-power at a minimum cost.

We would like to end with just one point. A piece-meal approach to the problem of child labour will not work. Getting rid of or even drastically reducing child labour in one particular industry will not deal with the unrelenting 'supply' of child labourers. A holistic approach to the problem is necessary wherein the structural roots of the problem need to be addressed. Otherwise, we may end up pushing child labourers into more onerous and oppressive situations.

The last point that I would like to make is regarding the inter-connections between globalisation and social unrest in the third world. Chossudovsky posits a direct connection between the economic reforms and the intensifying social unrest in the third world. The restructuring of the world economy "denies individual developing countries the possibility of building a national economy", transforming the third world into reserves of cheap labour, and thus "globalising" poverty [Chossudovsky. 1997 : 1786]

But what is significant is that this is not only economically ruinous but that it exacerbates inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-caste and inter-community conflict. Chossudovsky traces how this has happened in Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda, For example, in the case of Somalia, the economic reforms undermined the fragile exchange between the 'nomadic' economy and the 'sedentary' economy.

This aspect of the impact of reforms is particularly significant for a diverse and plural society like India, where the different communities are ranged along a social hierarchy with inequitable access to productive and other resources.

This has ominous consequences for the social fabric in our society and its implications for democratic processes generally.

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