Child Labour: Breaking the Vicious Cycle

Kiran Bhattty

Child labour is less a phenomenon of poverty than of social attitudes and sensibilities. Learning skills through education is a sure way to break the cycle of child labour and low income.

In recent months the issue of child labour has attracted considerable attention in the Indian press and elicited several responses from the government. In essence the government's approach continues to be 'welfare' oriented focusing on ameliorating the working conditions where children are employed and at best trying to eliminate child labour in the hazardous industries, which incidentally do not include family or household enterprises.

This article proposes a change in mindset when viewing the problems associated with child labour. Historically, in India child labour has been seen as an economic phenomena. The prevailing abysmal situation with child labour, stemming from the ineffectiveness of the various policies and measures adopted by the government, is indicative of the fact that this basic approach does not deal with the root of the problem. As long as child labour is seen as an economic problem, there will be arguments supporting it and as result a lack of conviction on the part of policymakers and society to eradicate it.

This article attempts to establish that most of the economic justifications cited for child labour are either invalid or at best weak. The major reason being that the social costs and ultimately, even the economic costs borne by the child and the economy as a whole are far too high. Child labour must be seen as less a phenomena of poverty and more of social attitudes and sensibilities. This is evident from the fact that the developed world tackled this problem much before its economies grew strong. And even in the developing world there are countries where this problem is relatively non-existent.

The extent of child labour in certain industries and the social degradation and damage it leads to in the long run must force us to acknowledge the social dimension of the problem and the moral and ethical questions it raises. Only when society as a whole internalises this sentiment will there be enough conviction to make a positive impact on the eradication of child labour.

The notion of children of the poor working alongside their parents is centuries old. However with time, the nature of work that children have been involved in has undergone several changes. It is argued that the relationship between children and work is dictated to a great extent by the stage of economic development or the system of production prevalent in a country. Consequently, a change in the economic system or mode of production brings with it (among other things) a change in the structure of the labour and correspondingly a change in the economic role of children. Thus, with the onset of industrialisation and the prospect of wage labour, children become progressively employed in industry as well as in domestic and commercial establishments. In many instances they can be found working for low wages and very long hours, often under hazardous conditions risking debilitating mental and physical damage.

Recognising the harm done to children that are forced into the labour force at an early age, governments all over the world have sought to eradicate child labour by bringing into force legal measures and social policy prescriptions. However, as seen from various labour and education statistics from the developing world, the condition of children remains deplorable. In India alone it is estimated that 82.2 million children in 1981 were not attending school and 11.2 million were part of the labour force. Government reports in 1983 showed 17.4 million children below the age of 15 in the labour force, constituting 6.8 per cent of the rural labour force and 2.4 per cent of the urban labour force [Wiener 1990].

It is the purpose of this article to examine why after nearly 50 years of independence and despite numerous legislative measures and social policy goals, the situation regarding children continues to be so poor in India. The central proposition of the paper is that the issue of child labour is a 'normative' one and accepting it as such is the first step in combating it. The second step is to recognise the role and importance of education in the scheme of things and therefore to concentrate efforts in the eradication of child labour in the direction of strengthening the education system.

'Economic' Justification and Its Fallacy

So far child labour has been accepted in India because it is believed to have an economic basis that fits into a demand-supply framework.

Demand for Child Labour: The demand comes largely in the form of wage employment in industry or in domestic and commercial establishments, and in the agricultural sector where they are employed in odd jobs. This excludes bonded labour and the self-employed street children of whom there are more than plenty but which cannot strictly be included on the demand side of the analysis. In industry, children lend themselves mostly to employment in the small-scale sector. This is for two reasons. Firstly, there is no statutory protection for children in this sector. The Factories Act (1948) bans employment of children only in units using 10 persons or more with power or 20 persons or more without power. Even the new child labour (prohibition and regulation) act of 1986 excludes family labour which removes a large number of small-scale units that operate as household/family units, from its purview. As a result, child labour in this sector is rampant. Besides, employing children is believed to be a cheaper and more stable proposition, and therefore, a more profitable one. Children can be employed at much lower wages than adults and made to work for longer hours. The piece-rate system of remuneration, that is the norm with child labour, benefits only the employers. Children do not form unions; they are less likely to change jobs quickly and "they can be coaxed, admonished, pulled up and punished for faults without jeopardising relations..." [Singh et al 1980:152-55]. The benefits to employers are so many that an Kanbargi (1988) has found, the producers would rather stop production than hire adult workers because of the great reduction in profits [Burra 1995]. Hence, as children apparently constitute a much cheaper source of labour, and since the law can be easily circumvented to take advantage of this fact, use of child labour in this sector is rampant.

The other reason why there exists a demand for children is that children are supposed to be better than adults at tedious, mechanical jobs that require manual dexterity and nimbleness, rather than training and skills. As a result they are considered ideal for labour-intensive tasks that characterise the method of production in small-scale units. Therefore, not only does employing children keep the wage bill low, it also acts as a disincentive to modernise and use less labour-intensive technology, which would be costly proposition. They are considered an asset particularly to employers in export-oriented industries (also concentrated in smaller units). The reason being that children can be easily laid-off in case of a slack in demand, without compensation, and therefore make ideal employees in export industries where demand is variable. The lower costs thus effected allow exporters to sell at lower prices, thereby apparently giving them a competitive advantage.

Supply of Child Labour: On the supply side, the most commonly cited explanation for child labour in the poverty of households that supply children to the labour force. The perceptions that exist towards children and work are believed to be shaped by the low economic status of the families.
where children are seen as economic assets. It is commonly believed that the families of the working children are so poor that their very survival is threatened by removing them from the labour force. Thus, children work as family labour in household enterprises, assisting in contracts undertaken by parents; take over various household duties to enable parents to do other work; and work outside the home as cheap labour.

Hence, it is perceived that not only do they earn their own livelihood and often that of others as well, they allow parents to spend more time on income generating activities by taking charge of household. Moreover, apologists of child labour believe that the work done by children is more in the nature of an apprenticeship whereby they acquire a skill that will stand them in good stead later in life. Schools, they contend, detach children from the village economy creating aspirations for white collar jobs that are hard to get. And finally it is argued that the quality of schools to them nor are the children motivated to attend. Hence, it appears that the overall economic situation, coupled with a lack of proper educational facilities justifies the persistence of child labour.

Several questions arise in this seemingly simple framework of child and supply that demand a serious re-examination of issues. How much are the children contributing to household income? Are their earnings critical to the survival of the family? How is their productivity and hence their capacity to earn higher wages affected during their lifetime as a whole? What are the long-term effects on industry of persisting with less modern technology that is dependent on child labour? And what is the cost to the economy as a whole of an ever increasing illiterate, low skilled workforce?

Even though there does not exist as yet any empirical studies on the impact of child labour on family income, the work of several researchers shows that it cannot be clearly established that the child and her/his family stand to gain financially from child labour. Vidyaben Shah who has been working in this field for years also finds that in most cases the money earned by children, far from sustaining the family, is used for conspicuous consumption (mostly alcohol) of the male members of the household.

Even on the demand side the so-called advantages to the employers of using a juvenile labour force, are limited and in the long run would cost them heavily in terms of efficiency and quality. True competitiveness which can be achieved only through improvements in efficiency and quality is compromised by using less modern technology using child labour. A good example of this is the WIMCO factory which makes matches more profitably than other match manufacturers because it does so with better technology and no child labour. Neera Burra has also compared a brass ware factory in Thailand with one in Moradabad and found that the former used a level of technology far more sophisticated than what was used in Moradabad and did not employ any child labour. This factory was highly successful and export oriented. The Moradabad manufacturers, on the other hand, find no incentive to modernise as they try and keep their costs low by using low wage child labour. However, in the long run they are bound to lose out to better and more efficient method of production.

With increasing globalisation and integration with the world economy, how long can India afford to persist with low grade technologies, and more importantly, with a predominantly illiterate, low skilled labour force?

Further, several studies show that damage done to children that are pushed into the labour force very early in life makes them unemployable later. In many instances the hazardous conditions under which they have to work result in accidents (some fatal) or health problems that make them unfit to continue working from an early age. As a result for most of their child life they earn much less (if at all) than they could have earned had they not been forced into working in childhood. Besides, the so-called skills earned do not in any way augment the earning capacity of the children as most of the jobs done by them are highly monotonous, low skilled, tedious jobs that condemn them forever in low paying jobs. Clearly, the earnings foregone in adult life, due to disabilities or lack of training and education that could have been attained in childhood, are far greater than what is earned as a child.

Hence, a closer and harder look at the so-called economics of the situation reveals a different story. It is therefore more appropriate to say that child labour perpetuates poverty — it does not reduce it as it condemns one generation after another to its vicious circle.

This brings us to a more fundamental question which is often not discussed at all: that is, the normative aspect of child labour. Can one reduce the choice between education and work to a matter of a few rupees alone? The benefits that accrue from an education far outweigh any benefits that the family derives from the meagre earnings. These benefits are manifest in not just the earning capacity but reflect in other spheres of the child’s (and later, adult’s) life. And it is this aspect that needs to be emphasised at some stage of development.

Experience from several countries shows that the fact of being a low income country is not enough to condone the use of child labour. Historical comparisons with Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, Burma, Kenya, and China show that even in developing countries the principle of compulsory education (whether sponsored by the state or a religious or social group) can be successfully adopted, with corresponding decreases in child labour. This puts to question the notion of industrial development acting as a precursor to the abolition of child labour. Instead, it indicates a political will and commitment to put an end to a problem. It also stresses the role of education in reducing child labour.

Even if we accept the argument that poverty plays a major role in perpetuating child labour, the question then is, at what level of economic well being and development is the problem of child labour to be considered as socially undesirable and therefore eligible for abolishment? As observed by the director-general of the ILO “there are absolutes arising from the inherent dignity of the human person and recognised in international covenants, which nations irrespective of their levels of development, have accepted and therefore should adhere to… [To] invoke the pretext of poverty and underdevelopment for the transgression of universally accepted values is to accept the perpetuation of universally condemned abuses.” Besides, in India, as is evident from income statistics, despite improvements in poverty levels, there has been no corresponding improvement in the prevalence of child labour and slow increase in literacy rates. To finally break out of the vicious circle of poverty and exploitation requires a social mobility that only education can ensure.

**Response**

Two suggestions are offered below for combating child labour. First and principally, compulsory primary education must be introduced, simultaneous with large-scale improvements in the education system. This is undoubtedly the single most effective tool in keeping children away from the labour force. Simply trying to enforce the law will not likely yield results, as the numerous small-scale units that use child labour are highly dispersed and difficult to keep a tab on. Moreover, the law itself has loopholes that can easily be taken advantage of. While there can be no substitute for tightening the law and law enforcement machinery, simultaneously...
adapting the principle of compulsory education could play a decisive role. This would have to be accomplished by strong lobbying by pressure groups, such as religious leaders, NGOs, etc, that stress the importance of education. Wiener in his comparative study has shown that in most countries (developed and underdeveloped) that have successfully adopted the principle of compulsory education and achieved high literacy rates and higher education standards, a major part was played by social or religious groups, urging the populace to get an education as part of their social or moral duty [Wiener 1990]. The panchayati raj could also be asked to put primary education on their agenda ensuring that universal literacy became the norm in area of their jurisdiction.

In this regard the experience from Kerala is particularly noteworthy. In Kerala the work participation rate7 of children in 1971 was 1.9 per cent as against the all-India average of 7.1 per cent. Simultaneously, all children in the 6-11 age group, and 88 per cent of the 11-14 age group were in school. The all-India average in the latter age group was only 38 per cent.

At present, however, the education system in India merely encourages drop outs, and inadvertently pushes children into the lower rungs of the labour market. Strengthening the system of education to make it more attractive to poor children, coupled with a system of mandatory attendance enforced by local pressure groups could be an effective way of controlling the influx of children into the labour force. This would mean improving the quality of teachers, books, curricula and recreational facilities all of which require a substantial increase in the resources committed to education. Private initiatives could be mobilised to play a role here. Midday meals, uniforms, books, blackboards, teaching aids, even land and building, could be provided by private institutions. Another area where improvement could yield immediate results is rationalising the admission procedures and thereby making it more accessible. Presently, the bureaucratic processes (submitting birth certificates - hard for a poor villager to obtain - and other documentation) prevent several parents from approaching the system.

The second suggestion is that non-governmental organisations can play a bigger role in not just providing literacy and non-formal education but also assisting in identifying and monitoring units where child labour is used. This would strengthen the hands of the law enforcing machinery and probably be more effective in bringing the offenders to book.

Notes
1 As it is a well established fact that a lot of child labour is relegated to family units where exploitation is rampant, not including family enterprises into the definition of hazardous industries is a glaring loophole, that seriously questions the government's commitment to the cause.
2 Census of India. 1981, Series-1 Part-2, special report and tables based on 5 per cent sample data. Table C-4 (New Delhi, Registrar General and Commissioner, 1983, p 208).
3 Pravin Visaria of the Gujarat Institute of Development Research, is currently conducting countrywide a study to estimate the impact of child labour on household income. The results are not yet available.
4 Vidyaben Shah made these observations at a seminar organised by the ILO and the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry on combating child labour, in New Delhi in April 1995.
5 For more on the relationship between early entrance into the labour force and life time earning capacity, see Burra (1987).
6 Weiner has shown that of 14 countries in the world with population more than 15 million and per capita income less than $ 500, India ranks ninth in literacy, behind all the countries mentioned above and ahead only of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Sudan and Pakistan.
7 Work participation rate is defined as the percentage of workers to total population.

References