



SMALL HANDS IN SOUTH ASIA — Child Labour in Perspective: G.K. Lieten, Ravi Srivastava and Sukadeo Throat — Editors; Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 4753/23, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 695.



Small Hands in South Asia. Child Labour in Perspective

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THIS BOOK is an outcome of the international conference held in Delhi on Child Labour in South Asia funded by the Indo-Dutch Programme for Alternatives in Development (IDPAD) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The 13 essays by academicians, policy makers and activists, offer varied perspectives on the issue.

The introduction provides a succinct summary of the papers, places them in context, and brings into focus various controversies in analysing the phenomenon of child labour. While dealing with the political sensitivity of the issue, the hidden agenda of Western governments and industries, and of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) are pointed out, "Western Governments and industries, particularly in the U.S., are eager to include child labour in the social clauses of international trade agreement, thereby providing them an extra weapon to impede imports from 'low-salary' countries."

Some NGOs "... tend to exaggerate the extent and wretchedness of child labour in order to garner more finances from funding agencies." Given the space constraint, it is difficult to

highlight the nuances of the arguments and results presented in each one of the papers in the book — a bird's-eye view of the broad consensus that emerges, and the controversies that persist on important issues are provided below.

Child rights

Considerable attention has been paid to evaluating the magnitude of child labour in South Asia, in particular in India. In this context, a case against inclusion in the count of child labourers of "nowhere children", and children engaged in activities such as weeding and looking after cattle which may be considered as light and non-hazardous work, has been advanced (chapter 1). Such a position accords primacy to securing certain negative rights/freedoms, such as the freedom from blatant exploitation and the freedom from threats to life and limb.

The considerably more liberal position treating all activities that interfere with schooling of children as labour is advanced in many of the essays, particularly in essays five and 12. This line of reasoning emphasises the importance of securing certain positive rights/freedoms such as the right to development, the right to education, and the right to childhood (these are enabling rights).

Categorisation

In this context it is clear that securing certain privileged positive freedoms for the child should also ensure protection of his/her negative freedoms. To evolve a scheme of priorities, it is important to categorise child labour based on the extent of "wretchedness" of such labour, but excessive attention to prioritisation may lead to restricting concern only to the "hard cases", while ignoring a great many routine and endemic aspects of child labour.

Attempts to identify the causal factors (chapters 3 to 5) point to the limited explanatory power of income poverty, and bring out the importance of "generalised" deprivation as a determinant of child labour/work.

Government intervention to remove malnutrition, to enhance access to drinking water, to create schooling facilities and to provide free education (chapter 11) is emphasised as a means to ending child labour. In a situation where the state is in withdrawal mode, it is important to remind the state of its responsibilities to provide for the basic necessities of life.

Sociological and demographic determinants of child labour (chapter 8) have been studied: the consequence of high fertility and the social attitude towards child labour are identified as promoting labour market participation of children. Chapter two, an interesting one, argues a case for ensuring gender equality in access to education to end child labour.

Empirical studies

The India, Pakistan and Bangladesh related case studies of child labour in industries such as match, carpet, glass bangles, diamond cutting and polishing, "bidi" and incense stick making, sack-stitching and prawn-peeling, garment industries — vide chapters six, seven, eight and 11 — provide vivid accounts of the "wretchedness" of child labour in these industries. The nimble finger (special skills) argument for the use of child labour has been dismissed.

A case for compensating the loss in family income due to withdrawal of child labour is established.

Law and interventions

Legislative state intervention is elaborately dealt with in chapters nine and 10, and covers the ground of context, provisions, loopholes, impact, and enforcement. The insensitivity of the judiciary, the delays in judicial process, the onus of proof of age on the prosecution rather than on the accused, ambiguities in defining the authority to certify age, and inadequate personnel in the labour department are cited as important impediments to enforcing the various child labour laws.

The laws prohibit employment of children in hazardous occupations only in factories, and do not cover the household sector. The industries exploit this loophole by sub-contracting or farming out production (resorting to the putting-out system). Hazardous work in a factory when carried out under the supervision of the parents becomes non-hazardous!

The review of the interventions by the NGOs (chapter 12) stresses the importance of different approaches to the problem, and the need for organising the poor to assert their right to minimum wages and improved education system for their children to end child labour.

In a nutshell, the book is useful, but could have been better if the editors had resorted to the services of a professional editor.

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