

Exploitation of child labourers in India

T. Kala
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The desperate conditions affecting the rural as well as the urban poor in India are forcing growing numbers of children to toil often in subhuman conditions. They are deprived of their most basic rights as children, including education and a joyful childhood. Most have never been to school or dropped out at very young ages.

Estimates of the number of child labourers vary widely. According to a 1991 census, 11.2 million children aged between 5 and 14 were working in India. But other estimates put the figure far higher. In a supreme court case last December, Ashok Aggarwal, an advocate for a group of non-government organisations, submitted that 100 million children were out of school and working—half of India's 200 million children.

India has the largest number of child workers in the world. They are employed in many industries and trades, including garments, footwear, brick kilns, stainless steel, hotels, and textile shops. Many work in export-oriented hazardous industries like carpet weaving, gem polishing, glass blowing, match works, brassware, electro-plating, lead mining, stone quarrying, lock making and beedi rolling.

The south Indian state of Tamil Nadu has a large concentration of child labourers. An estimated 100,000 children—three quarters of them girls—are employed in the match factories, tobacco mills, tea houses and rock quarries located on the drought-prone plains of interior Tamil Nadu (see <http://ssmu.mcgill.ca/journals/latitudes/4india.htm>).

Small hotels account for much of the child labour in Chennai (Madras), Tamil Nadu's capital, according to a survey by Peace Trust, a non-government organisation. "As much as 43.28 percent of Chennai city's total child workforce work in small hotels and are badly exploited, while medium hotels employ 29.10 percent, and nearly 27.62 percent are employed by large units." It adds: "Nearly 52 percent of child labourers in the city are between 12 and 14 years of age and these children have been subjected to poor working conditions, long hours of work, low payment and sexual abuse".

A study by the Pasumai Trust, Tiruvallur, and the Peoples Forum for Human Rights in Chennai in 2005 found that children working in brick kilns in Tamil Nadu suffered prolonged exposure to sand, dust and heat, leading to skin and stomach problems. They also experienced wheezing, asthma and stunted development, as well as menstrual dysfunction among adolescent girls. Accidents were also common, leading to face fractures and other major injuries.

A Madras School of Social Work study found that among children employed as mechanics, factory and construction workers and weavers, 31 percent worked 10 to 11 hours daily and 22 percent worked 12 to 13 hours. In the unorganised sectors, children were paid piece rates, resulting in even longer hours for very low pay.

WSWS correspondents spoke to some child labourers in Chennai about their working and living conditions. Ramesh, 14, lives with his mother and younger sister in Ayanavaram, a Chennai suburb. His mother works in an embroidery company and earns 100 rupees (\$US2) per day. "Her work starts at 10 am and she returns home at 9 pm. There is no work for her many days. I studied up to 6th standard, but I found it difficult to continue my studies. When I was 11 years I took this job in order to learn mechanical work. My work starts at 9 am and finishes at 7 pm. I get paid 50 rupees (\$1) per week".

Parvathi, 12, lost her parents at a young age. Her elder sister Selvi is 16. "Our mother's elder sister sent us to a Christian mission hostel. There we ate only low quality rice and rasam every day. Apart from study time, we used to do washing and cleaning. Since we didn't want to stay in the hostel any longer, our auntie took us home. She persuaded my sister to get a job in a leather company and I found a job in an export company. I get paid 800 rupees (\$16) per month."

For her work in the leather factory, Selvi gets 900 rupees (\$18) a month. "Since I started this job I have been suffering from breathlessness. I often fall sick and have to go to a government hospital for treatment. I have become slim as a result," she said.

Geetha, 14, lives with her parents and a younger brother. “I studied up to 3rd standard only as I couldn’t continue my studies due to poverty. My father is a load lifter but doesn’t get regular work. My mother works at five places as a domestic maid. Generally she cooks only dinner at home, and at other times we eat food that she brings from her workplaces.

“She has been doing domestic work since she was young. As a result, she falls sick frequently. She suffers from headaches and sores in her hands and feet. Unable to afford proper treatment, she just buys medicine at the medical shop for 5 rupees (US10 cents). Although we are both working, we are struggling to pay the rent and other family expenses.

“Because of our poverty, my parents wanted me to become an apprentice at an embroidery company when I was 10. Then I was paid 15 rupees (US 30 cents) per day. My normal working day is 11 hours, from 8 am to 7 pm. Now after four years I get 50 rupees (\$1) per day. When I do overtime from 7 pm to 10 pm, I get an extra wage of 20 rupees (40 cents).”

In India’s commercial capital, Mumbai (Bombay), there are thousands of small units known as “zari factories”. Boys aged 6-14 work 20 hours a day, seven days a week, kneeling at low tables sewing beads and coloured threads on to vast lengths of fabric. A “zari factory” is a 3 m x 3 m room with dirty floors and hardly any ventilation. The boys have to work, wash, eat and sleep in the same room, with a small smelly bathroom in one corner. They are given only two meals a day.

Following the deaths last year of 12-year-old Afzai Ansari and 11-year-old Ahmed Khan, child workers in “zari factories”, the Maharashtra state government was forced to carry out some raids, which “rescued” over 16,000 children and sent them back to their villages. However, many of the “saved” children have returned to the sweatshops. “This is nothing but recycling of child labour,” Ashok Agarwal, a lawyer and civil rights activist, said.

According to the Maharashtra labour department, most of the boys are migrants from very poor districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in northern India. There are no schools in their villages or even close by. Their parents have no land for cultivation and work for pittance like 10-20 rupees (20-40 cents) a day—that is, if they can find work. Parents send their children to work in Mumbai mistakenly believing that they would escape misery.

Regardless of various legislation and court orders to “abolish” child labour, it has continued for more than a

half century. Civil rights organisations insist that child labour violates the fundamental rights of children under the Indian constitution. Yet, Indian governments have consistently refused to ratify an International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention that seeks to outlaw the worst forms of child labour.

The ILO convention defines a child as one below 18 years of age and stipulates that the minimum age for employment shall not be less than the age for completion of compulsory schooling. Indian legal provisions define the maximum age for compulsory education, and also the minimum age for employment, as 14.

Indian laws, such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, do not prohibit child labour but ban it only in certain sectors such as hazardous industries. But even if tougher laws were introduced, they would not substantially reduce the use of child workers because the root causes lie deeper, in the terrible poverty of their families.

In 2003, the previous Tamil Nadu government of chief minister Jayalalitha Jayaram pledged to end child labour in hazardous industries by 2005 and abolish it altogether by 2007. The central United Peoples Alliance government’s Common Minimum Programme also promised to put an end to the practice. Instead, the barbaric exploitation of children is intensifying.

During the recent Tamil Nadu election campaign, various political parties promised assorted welfare measures to deceive the people. Not accidentally, none of them even addressed child labour. The first step in ensuring tens of millions of children are able to continue their education is ensure a decent income to their parents—something that the capitalist class is organically incapable of doing.



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