



The Cost of Childhood: Understanding and Addressing Child Labour Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

“Child labour is one of the biggest problems in our society. It takes away children’s rights ,education, and happiness, forcing them into work when they deserve care and learning.” This paper looks at how child labor started and changed over time, both around the world and in India. Child labor means making children work in ways that harm their health, stop them from going to school, and steal away the joys of childhood. In the past, especially in farming communities, it was common for children to help their families with tasks like farming, fetching water, or caring for animals. It was seen as part of growing up and learning life skills. But things changed during the Industrial Revolution. Children began working long hours in factories and mines, often in very unsafe and harsh conditions. Many were badly hurt or fell sick. In India, child labor was once part of traditional family life. But under British rule, it became more exploitative, with children used for cheap labor in industries and plantations. After independence, India worked to reduce child labor through education and new laws. Yet, poverty still forces many children to work. To truly end child labor, we need stronger laws, better schools, and real support for families struggling to survive.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



The Historical Origins of Child Labor and Exploitation Through Societal Changes Child labor, defined as the employment of children in any work that robs them of their youth, interferes with their education, and is physically, intellectually, or morally detrimental, has a long history. Its emergence and evolution are inextricably linked to the progress of societies and economies. The exploitation of children in labor jobs has varied according to historical time, societal structure, and economic necessities. From rural communities where children's work was integrated into family survival tactics to the terrible exploitation of children throughout the Industrial Revolution, even today, child labor is still prevalent in underdeveloped countries and global supply chains. Child Labor in Agrarian Societies: Integration into Family and Social Structures. Prior to industrialization, most civilizations were primarily agricultural, and children's labor was widely accepted as a necessary part of life. Child work was not only common in these pre-industrial societies, but it was also an important part of the home and community economies. Work was often viewed as a method to contribute to the family while also learning vital skills for adulthood. In agrarian economies, children generally assisted their parents in jobs such as farming, herding cattle, collecting firewood, getting water, and doing domestic chores. Children helped in subsistence farming by doing what was typically considered less physically demanding work, yet they still had to carry large loads and work long hours in the fields. This was frequently seasonal work, timed to the agricultural cycle, allowing for a balance of labor and other activities such as elementary schooling. In medieval Europe,

child labour occurred in the form of apprenticeships. This approach was prevalent in several crafts, including blacksmithing, weaving, and carpentry. Children, usually from poorer households, were bonded to skilled artisans who gave them training in exchange for several years of labour. While apprenticeships were considered as an educational opportunity, many youngsters faced harsh treatment, hard hours, and little pay. In these agrarian contexts, child labor was viewed as a sort of preparation for adult responsibilities. It was widely recognized in society as necessary for family existence. However, the line between child labor as a kind of education and

child labor as exploitation was sometimes ambiguous. With the development of industrialization, the balance shifted dramatically in the direction of exploitation.

The Industrial Revolution: The Dark Side of Child Labor Emerges.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in the 18th and 19th centuries, radically altered economies, labour structures, and children's roles in the working. Industrialization originated in Britain and extended to Europe and North America, fundamentally altering the way things were produced. Factories, mills, and



mines required a vast amount of cheap labor, and children were frequently viewed as an attractive supply due to their small size, perceived flexibility, and the capacity to be paid substantially less than adults. During this period of time, the most infamous forms of child labor took place in textile mills, coal mines, and other industrial settings. Children as young as five or six were hired to labor long hours—sometimes up to 16 hours per day—in undesirable and unsafe surroundings. In textile factories,

for example, toddlers were trained to crawl under machinery to clear blockages or perform monotonous jobs like spinning or weaving. The machinery was frequently poorly constructed for safety, resulting in several incidents in which children lost fingers, limbs, or even their lives. Similarly, coal mining required particularly hazardous child labor. Boys and girls worked in mines as "trappers," opening and closing ventilation doors, or "hurriers," pulling heavy carts of coal through small tunnels. The work was extremely taxing, and the conditions were frequently fatal. Inhaling coal dust induced respiratory ailments, and the frequent exposure to hazardous conditions resulted in an array of incidents that injured or killed people. Industrialization also caused massive migration to urban areas, resulting in congested and unclean slums where working-class families battled to subsist. Many of these families turned to child work as a means of supplementing their limited finances. This system exploited children, robbing them of education and proper childhoods, while providing industrialists with a cheap, controllable workforce.

20th Century Labor Laws and the Global Shift: Regulation of Child Labor.

The twentieth century saw a considerable shift in attitudes and legislation about child work, especially in developed nations. As economies industrialized, compulsory education grew more common, and labor regulations designed to safeguard minors were aggressively enforced. Even when child labor began to reduce in the West, it remained prevalent in many developing nations, where it was linked to poverty and economic underdevelopment. One of the most essential factors for lowering

child labor in industrialized countries was the growth of public schooling. Governments began to recognize that educated citizens would be more productive in the long run, prompting the passage of compulsory schooling legislation. Many Western countries eliminated a huge number of youngsters from the work market by requiring them to attend school until a set age. Education became viewed not only as a right, but also as a societal need, altering cultural perceptions of childhood and children's roles in society. Along with compulsory education, labor laws were enacted to limit child work. In the United States, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established minimum working ages and limited the types of work that children might legally do. Similar laws were enacted throughout Europe and other industrialized countries, effectively ending the official exploitation of minors in industries and mines. On



a global scale, organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) were founded to promote labor rights, including the abolition of child labor. The ILO's Minimum Age Convention of 1973 established global norms for the minimum work age, contributing to the framing of the child labor argument as a human rights problem.

1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHILD LABOR IN THE INDIAN SETTING

In ancient India, child labour was often part of familial and community activity, in which children helped with agrarian and home activities, not as labourers in the modern sense, but as members of a socioeconomic unit. Religious and social books from this time period, such as the Manusmriti and Arthashastra, indicate that

children's employment was integrated into caste and family vocations, particularly among lower castes and artisanal families. In such societies, labour was part of a broader cultural and economic structure, where talents and responsibilities were transmitted intergenerationally rather than perceived as exploitative. In medieval India, trade and handicraft thrived, and families frequently organised labour around specific artisanal and agricultural enterprises. Guild systems (shrenis) gained popularity in industries such as textiles, metalworking, and weaving. These guilds hired apprentices, including youngsters, who learnt crafts through structured supervision rather than exploitative conditions. Child labour was less a legal issue than a part of socioeconomic continuity. However, the presence of bonded labour, particularly among the lowest castes, suggests that certain forms of child exploitation may have persisted, with children from bonded families bound to landlords or clients by indebtedness structures that were difficult to escape. The colonial period saw a substantial change in the structure of child labour in India. British dominion transformed the Indian economy, destroying many ancient economic organisations

and imposing a new labour model centred on commercial manufacturing and industrialisation. The East India Company's trade monopoly and the creation of enormous plantations and mills created a demand for a cheap and flexible labour force, which included women and children. Children were frequently exploited by industries because of their nimbleness and low pay. Colonial documents, such as the Royal Commission Reports on Labour from the nineteenth century, show the harsh working conditions, long hours, and low earnings that characterised child labour in these industries. For example, children as young as six or seven were often engaged in textile mills, mines, and plantations. This period represented a significant transition from medieval India's highly protected and skill-based labour arrangements. In reaction to mounting accusations of child exploitation, British authorities implemented some early labour



rules. The Indian Factories Act of 1881 was the first law aimed at regulating child labour, requiring a minimum age of seven for factory employment and limiting the number of hours children could work per day. Further modifications to the Factories Act in 1891 and 1922 raised the minimum working age and attempted to improve working conditions, albeit without rigorous enforcement methods. It is important to highlight that British efforts to restrict child labour were inspired by growing criticism in England about the exploitation of colonial subjects, especially children. Anti-colonial campaigners such as Dadabhai Naoroji and Romesh Chunder Dutt emphasised the exploitative economic systems that facilitated widespread child labour. However, colonial reforms were mostly ineffectual in reducing child labour because the British administration's primary goal remained to maximise revenue for the empire. In the 1950s and 1960s, as India implemented socialist economic policies under leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, the government prioritised industrialisation and public sector expansion while paying little attention to rural economies, where child labour was most common. Education programs, such as the National Policy on Education, intended to universalize primary education, but these efforts fell short due to the economic difficulties faced by low-income families who relied on their children's earnings.

Economic liberalisation reforms in 1991 opened India's markets to global investment, increasing worldwide scrutiny of labour abuses, especially child labour. As part of these reforms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), stepped up their advocacy efforts, emphasising the importance of addressing child labour in the context of human rights and ethical labour practices. Although India has made significant headway in eliminating child labour in recent decades, difficulties still exist. According to India's 2011 Census, more than 10 million youngsters were still working in various capacities. The COVID-19 epidemic exacerbated these concerns, with many low-income families losing jobs, resulting in a revival of child labour as children were driven back into the workforce to sustain household income. School closures and limited access to online education compounded these issues, putting children at danger of long-term labour exploitation. The historical trajectory of child labour in India indicates significant socioeconomic inequities that were exacerbated by colonial exploitation and impacted further by post-independence economic policy. While statutory measures have evolved to combat child labour, enforcement is difficult in informal sectors, where child labour is strongly ingrained in the socioeconomic fabric. To effectively reduce child labour, a multimodal approach is required, combining strong enforcement with socioeconomic reforms that alleviate poverty, increase educational access, and improve family income security. Furthermore, initiatives to improve community understanding about the negative



impact of child labour on long-term economic prospects are critical in changing cultural norms that support this practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In research, methodology is the framework or methodical approach that describes how a study will be carried out. It covers the plans, techniques, and protocols for gathering, evaluating, and interpreting data. In order to guarantee that the research process is organised, dependable, and consistent, methodology is crucial.

2.1 AREA OF STUDY

The survey of the study is done in the Ganeshguri and Hatigaon area of Guwahati under Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of Assam. The present study has selected various restaurants, tea stalls, shops and others like children begging on the streets according to convenience of the study. The study covers those areas and analyses the situations and conditions of children of the selected areas.

2.2 AGE GROUP OF RESPONDENTS

Depending on the requirement of the study, the age group of 12-40 has been selected. The age range remains broad since the parents of the children were also taken into consideration.

2.3 TYPE OF RESEARCH

This research is of the Explanatory kind. The study describes and provides a more thorough explanation of the phenomenon at hand.

2.4 METHOD OF RESEARCH

In order to provide a contextual grasp of the phenomenon under study as well as an in-depth understanding of its underlying meanings and patterns, the study requires to utilize a Qualitative approach.

2.5 SAMPLING

The Purposive method of sampling was utilized in this study. Purposive sampling is a class of non-probability sampling procedures in which units are chosen purposively because they exhibit the traits required in the sample. The sample was chosen on purpose on the basis of judgement and requirement of the study.



2.6 TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

Primary as well as secondary means of data collection have been employed in the study. Firsthand information was obtained by going to the field, taking down the specifics, and using electronic devices to capture the responses. The study also uses a variety of publications, journals, articles, and reports that are specifically related to the topic under investigation.

2.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was conducted with due regard for ethical considerations. Prior to performing the research, respondents were informed about it and their consent was acquired. Every element was being kept as confidential as possible. None of the respondents were coerced into participating and even they did so voluntarily. Personal details are hidden from view, ensuring the security of participants' information to minimize the danger of privacy invasion.

2.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the significant limitations of the study was the respondents' unwillingness to participate. When approached, both children and some of the parents appeared anxious and hesitant. Most did not want to share information about themselves or their employers. Another concern was the limited amount of time and children who worked were scattered all over the location, making it difficult to locate them. Respondents were unable to devote significant time to the interview due to their workload, and a few were not allowed the opportunity to interact because the activity is unlawful.

2.10 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In research, a theoretical framework is an organised method for comprehending and evaluating a certain issue or event. By connecting your research questions, goals, and technique to preexisting theories, concepts, or models, it establishes a framework for your investigation. In essence, it serves as a lens through which you analyse the data and interpret your conclusions.

2.10.1 Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, which was inspired by Karl Marx and later expanded by researchers such as C. Wright Mills, focusses on power dynamics and inequality as the causes of societal problems. This theory offers an important perspective for examining child labour as a result of systemic inequities.



- **Class Struggle and Exploitation:** Child labour in the informal economy is sometimes a manifestation of economic inequality. Wealthy elites and companies may profit indirectly from cheap, unregulated labour, maintaining a system in which marginalised families rely on their children's work to survive.
- **Global Capitalism:** Conflict theorists say that in a globalised economy, multinational businesses outsource to nations with lax labour rules, which drives child labour. As informal economies become increasingly integrated into global supply systems, exploitation persists.
- **Institutional inability:** From this standpoint, the state's inability to enforce labour rules and provide universal education is viewed as an intentional oversight that helps the ruling classes by preserving a pool of cheap labour.

2.10.2 Human Rights Perspective

Child labour is viewed as a violation of fundamental human rights from a human rights standpoint. International legislation like the International Labour Organization's (ILO) conventions and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) serve as the foundation for this framework.

- **Rights and Dignity:** All children are entitled to health care, education, and safety from exploitation. These rights are violated by child labour, which also limits children's future chances and keeps them in poverty cycles.
- **Legal Frameworks and Advocacy:** This viewpoint is centred on strengthening legal safeguards against child labour and promoting their implementation.
- **Intersectionality:** The human rights approach also looks at how vulnerabilities are exacerbated when child labour collides with other types of discrimination, such as gender or ethnicity.

2.10.3 Feminist Theory

The gendered aspects of child labour, especially the exploitation of girls, can be better understood through the lens of feminist philosophy.

- **Gendered Labour Roles:** According to feminist theory, females are frequently disproportionately impacted by exploitative work. They might labour in domestic labour, which is underappreciated and frequently shielded from government scrutiny.



- A key idea in feminist theory, intersectionality examines how different types of oppression—like gender, class, and race—intersect to give females particular vulnerabilities in the job market.
- Advocacy for Gender Equity: Feminist viewpoints support laws that cater to the unique requirements of females, like protection from gender-based violence in the workplace and access to education.

2.10.4 Globalization Theory

The theory of globalisation investigates how international political and economic structures contribute to the continuation of child labour.

- Global Supply Chains: In sectors including manufacturing, textiles, and agriculture, exploitative child labour is frequently connected to global supply chains. This viewpoint investigates how multinational firms profit from low-cost labour in developing nations.
- Economic Inequality: As a result of globalisation, there are now more economic differences both within and across nations. Families are frequently forced to send their children to work due to the ensuing poverty.
- Policy and Regulation: The role of international organisations and treaties in preventing child labour is also covered by globalisation theory. It draws attention to the conflict between attempts to uphold labour standards and global economic interests.

DISCUSSION

3.1 Introduction of the Interview

I have done fieldwork and collected data for the current project. Semi-structured interviewing was done during the process. This was the case because there were predetermined ideas of questions to be asked and gradually, the questions came up organically throughout the dialogue with the responders. Interview subjects included children as young as 12 years old who worked in restaurants, shops, and begged on the streets, as well as a few adults who were either parents or employers.

3.2 Major Findings

According to the research at hand, child labour in the study area is caused by the following factors, which are equally prevalent elsewhere.



- Poverty is a key source of child labour, as extensively documented in several research. Poverty, is a big motivator for children to engage in productive activities in the informal economy. Most of the informants hailed from families with low incomes. Children from low-income families are often obliged to work at a young age to supplement their parents' income. Work is important for these children to meet their fundamental requirements, mainly food. Children should go to the nearby street to get food or money. Often, their parents are unable to provide food for them. So, they must work.
- Parental Unemployment, while not a major cause of child labour in the study areas, some parents send their children to work to supplement their income. According to one of my informants, his father has been out of work for the past two years. Children with unemployed parents often have to labour for a living. One respondent's father was disabled and so unable to work, while another had an ill parent who was unable to afford for treatment and stayed bedridden, finally shifting the financial burden to the child.
- Child trafficking is the practice of removing children from their communities of origin through coercion, fraud, or the threat or actual use of violence in order to exploit them as forced or enslaved labourers for sex or labour. One of the study's key findings was that two of the respondents, both girls, did not know their parents' names or place of birth. A local resident of the study region claimed during an interview that both of them had been sold when they were too little to even recall. They have been in the begging business ever since.
- Another significant result of the study was the gendered distribution of labour. The work as well as the dangers appeared different for girls and boys. The girls were frequently sent to beg on the streets while the boys worked in the stores and restaurants. A handful of the girls admitted that going begging was part of their daily routine and that their mothers punished them if they didn't. Some of the children even admitted to have been handled inappropriately at their places of work. A respondent, Jyoti, a girl 14 years old claimed that she had been groped at the street while begging.

5.3 Analysis

The study finds that child labourers frequently lack formal education for a variety of reasons. Many of my informants live and work with their parents, other family members, or non-family members like employers, "guardians," etc. In the research locations, these working children are living in extreme poverty. Children who work and live on the streets, separated from their parents, lead lives of desperation. Some self-employed children live together in small rooms that they rent, while others, such as child porters, spend the night in renting rooms or on verandas. Young children spend lengthy hours in



the unorganised economy. They put up long hours using their underdeveloped physical and mental abilities to create something that would help them meet their fundamental requirements or provide for their families. Additionally, they don't have time to play and engage with friends and peers of their age; in addition, child labourers were unable to have adequate time for eating and relaxation. When children's participation in productive activities becomes stressful and exploitative or causes them to become estranged from their families, it can negatively affect their psycho-social development. The children lack the opportunity

to play and engage with others if they are required to work for extended periods of time. The majority of them were trafficked when they were very young, so they have no idea what love and affection are in a family. The begging industry is a very clever means of making money by appealing to people's sympathies. People sympathise with the children who work for it and lend them money, the parents or employers forcing them to beg on the streets. If the kids refuse, they are frequently beaten and subjected to other forms of violence. The gendered distribution of labour,

as well as gendered risks and dangers, are critical points to underline. It describes how girl children are subjected to a variety of forms of exploitation, including sexual abuse, violation of space, physical violence through beating, and so on. Many of them are raped and become pregnant at a young age. Many are beaten and subjected to ongoing abuse. Some of these jobs pose health risks. Thus, it is acceptable to assume that children in the study areas are exposed to many types of health problems because of the difficulties of the jobs they perform or the living and working situations they endure. Children that work directly with cars, such as garage apprentices, car cleaners, taxi boys, scrap iron collectors, and tree cutters, often sustain injuries. They have a significant impact on their entire physical development. Most working conditions are dangerous.

CONCLUSION

The persistent practice of child labour, despite global advances in human rights and economic growth, highlights the complicated interplay between poverty, socio-cultural norms, and insufficient policy enforcement. This issue, which is firmly founded in historical and structural injustices, continues to deny millions of children their basic rights, perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. This conclusion synthesises significant observations and provides a reflective analysis for policy and practice by focussing on socioeconomic variables and the critical role of gender in defining child labour patterns. Child labour is fundamentally an economic issue, determined by poverty and families' urgent survival requirements. In many low-income communities, families rely on child labourers' earnings to satisfy



basic requirements like food, shelter, and healthcare. This reliance is accentuated in areas where adult employment opportunities are few or poorly compensated. The informal sector, which is characterised by low salaries, volatility, and a lack of legal protections, presents an ideal environment for child labour abuse, as children frequently serve as a flexible and cheaper labour force. Another important determinant is education. In communities with limited access to quality education, the opportunity cost of educating becomes prohibitively expensive for low-income households. The lack of inexpensive and accessible educational systems maintains a cycle in which children are dropped from school or never enrolled, forcing them into the labour force. Furthermore, insufficient investment in rural and marginalised communities causes inequities in educational facilities, which perpetuates child labour in those areas. Gender significantly influences the nature, extent, and effects of child labour. Girls and boys have diverse experiences with child labour, reflecting broader gendered cultural norms and expectations. Girls are frequently forced to a "double burden" of labour, which includes both economic and household duties. In many cultures, females are required to help with household duties, caregiving, and other unpaid domestic tasks from a young age, which often occurs alongside or in place of formal education. Boys are frequently employed in physically demanding and hazardous labour industries such as agriculture, construction, and mining. These positions not only expose them to immediate health and safety dangers, but also deny them educational possibilities, restricting their long-term economic prospects. The gendered division of labour entrenches separate but equally harmful kinds of exploitation, maintaining gender inequities throughout generations. Furthermore, initiatives that fail to address the underlying socioeconomic causes of child labour, such as poverty and a lack of education, are unlikely to have long-term improvements. While punitive measures aimed at employers may reduce the visible frequency of child labour, they do little to address the underlying economic pressures that cause families to rely on their children's wages. Finally, child labour exploitation is a multidimensional issue that stems from fundamental socioeconomic and gender inequities. Effective solutions necessitate coordinated efforts at the local, national, and international levels, combining strong policy frameworks with specialised interventions that address the specific needs of vulnerable children.

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Example Citations in the Paper

- According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), child labor continues to be a pressing issue, affecting an estimated 160 million children worldwide. • Research by Edmonds and Pavcnik (2005) highlights the economic

implications of child labor in global supply chains.

- UNICEF (2019) emphasizes the need for integrated policies to address the root causes of child labor, particularly in developing countries.