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**THE FORBIDDEN SOCIAL CRIME OF CHILD LABOUR: A CASE STUDY OF ITS EXISTENCE IN THE CITY OF KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

Child Labour is a grave issue and a social curse that has affected human society all over the world. It has been identified as hazardous to a child's mental, physical, social, educational and spiritual development. This paper is an attempt to view the grave problem of child labour existing in the city of Kolkata, the administrative hub of West Bengal, the causes behind and its impact on the socio-economic scenario of the city. The engagement of children below 14 years of age in hazardous activities has been strictly condemned by the Constitution of India under several constitutional provisions. Despite several rules, regulations and measures undertaken by Government both at Central and State level, child labour continues to maintain its presence in Kolkata's socio-economic scenario thus ignoring penal provisions. The work has been accomplished mainly through generation of primary data and extensive field visits. The existence of child labour has dramatically increased in the city over the years with its steady flow contributed by the neighboring districts and states.

**Keywords:** child labour, parental illiteracy, poverty, social apathy, unskilled laborers

**INTRODUCTION**

Children are incorporated into a range of different employment relations. They may be waged laborers in factories or mines or self-employed workers engaged in street trades (Bequele, et.al., 1995). Child Labour is thus accounted as a violation of human rights across the world. It is a complicated development issue affecting human society all over. Kolkata, one of the fastest developing metro cities of India still has a persistence of child labour despite strict constitutional norms. The integration of women into the labour force in ever increasing number is a feature which is common to all economies (Sharma, 2006). In Kolkata children both boys and girls below fourteen years of age as prescribed by law are employed in hazardous commercial and laborious activities. Children for these activities either come to the city with their parents or are brought from outside to serve as

cheap unskilled laborers. Often their lives are found to be even worse than what they used to be in their native places. Working children in India can be broadly divided into three categories: namely full time child workers employed in hazardous economic activities; children employed for wages but in activities that are not prohibited under the Child Labour Act and children who are engaged as unpaid family workers in family enterprises such as farms, households etc (Kundu et.al., 2010).

**Objectives of the Study**

The study has been initiated to fulfill the following objectives:

- To assess the present scenario of child labour in Kolkata
- To study their social status and condition of living

- To know about their economic background and present condition
- To acquire knowledge about the type of exploitation they are subjected to at their work place by their employer
- To have an overall understanding of their lives and agony
- To study about the various Government measures of rehabilitation to bring them into mainstream of life
- To assess the initiatives of Non Government organizations in improving the lives of these exploited children.

### DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

The work has been accomplished mainly by collection of primary data. Information was generated through extensive field visits on working condition of the child laborers as well as their socio-economic background, their living condition, the driving factors behind their exploitation and abuse at home and workplace, the initiatives of Government and Non Government Organizations (NGOs) in rehabilitation of these children. Apart from the primary data, secondary sources of information have been collected from Census of India and Directorate of Labour, Government of West Bengal. Questionnaires for the purpose of primary data collection were framed for the target groups of child workers and their families. Purposive method of sampling was followed with a sample size of 50 child workers working in different organized and unorganized sectors and 75 families from 141 municipal wards of Kolkata. Field investigation was conducted at workplaces of the child labour along with their employers too.

#### Area under Study

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation has a total area of 187.33 sq. km with a geographical extension of 22°27'N to 22°39'N latitude and 88°14'E to 88°26'E longitude. The territorial jurisdiction of Kolkata Municipal Corporation

(KMC) has been divided into 15 Boroughs consisting of 141 municipal wards. Spatially the city can be divided into North, East, Central and South Kolkata. The district of Haora lies to the North-West, North 24 Parganas on the Northern and North-Eastern side and South 24 Parganas on the South-Eastern and South-Western side. The River Hugli flows through Western part of the city.

#### Definition of Child Labour

Child Labour has been an integral part of the labour force especially in third world countries and enters labour market at tender age (Nanjunda, 2008). It is defined by any work done by a child who is below the age of fourteen years as prescribed by law. The word 'work' means full time commercial work to support and sustain self or to add to the family income. Child labour is hazardous to a child's mental, physical, social, educational, emotional and spiritual development. According to International Labour Organization (ILO), the term 'child labour' is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and
- interferes with their schooling by:
  - a) depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
  - b) obliging them to leave school prematurely;
  - c) requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

#### Factors responsible for Steady Flow of Child Labour in Kolkata

Child labour stands as one of the more persistent social and economic problems in history and in the world today (Hindman, 2002). The following factors are held responsible for the steady flow of child laborers in the city:

1. **Poverty**- Poverty is an important cause of child labour and that working at a young age can have lasting deleterious effects (Cigno, et.al., 2005). Low economic condition coupled with low standard of living has been identified as the most important driving cause behind child labour. Children are forced into hazardous jobs by their parents for reasons of survival. Monetary constraints and need for food, clothing and shelter drives children in the trap of premature labour. Livelihood considerations can drive a child into the dirtiest form of child labour like child prostitution and organized begging.
2. **Parental Illiteracy**- Absence of compulsory formal education of the parents even at primary level is another cause of child labour. It becomes difficult for the children to organize themselves against exploitation in the absence of parental guidance.
3. **Low level of Awareness**- Parents of the working children is ignorant about the bad effects of child labour on the mental and physical development of the child. They are even ignorant about various child labour laws and government programmes undertaken to prohibit and improve the condition of these children.
4. **Social Apathy**- Parental ignorance regarding the ill-effects of child labour is another factor for its steady flow. It contributes to social imbalances as well.
5. **Dearth of Cheap and Skilled Labour in unorganized sector** - In the urban areas there is a deficiency of cheap and skilled labour. For hiring adult labour wage rates are generally high while in case of child labour wage rate is low as they are unskilled and can be easily be exploited.

The problem of child labour is a symptom of the disease, which is widespread due to exploitative structure, lop-sided development, inequities in resource ownership with its correlate of large-scale unemployment and abject poverty among

the countries (Nanjunda, 2009). Thus the problem of child labour is a cumulative effect of a number of social and economic causes and hindrances in society. The incidences of child labour tend to decrease as female members of the family especially mothers begin to work. This process will likely be affected by societal factors namely level of development, the level of social expenditure and the phase of demographic transition (Grootaert, et.al., 1995). But the most important factor contributing to female participation in work is related with their social independence and level of education.

### Consequences of Child Labour

The consequences of child labour are poorly educated and impoverished parents who may be forced to send their own children to work, a poorly educated and skilled workforce that may stunt the growth of economy as a whole and the potential for trade sanctions on the part of developed countries (Hindman, 2009). The following consequences have been documented based on field visits and experiences:

- Child Labour is an issue contrary to human development.
- It affects the sound development of a child and leads to grave social consequences.
- It hampers the overall physical and psychological development of the child.
- The child tends to suffer from malnutrition and a number of other ailments.
- It affects the overall health of the child
- A child engaged in laborious activities remains devoid of basic formal education which affects him in the long run.
- The toiling children often suffer from various physical and mental tortures and exploitation at their work places which affects their personality development.

### The First Attempt to combat Child Labour

Child Labour has survived in the face of increasing industrialization mainly in the

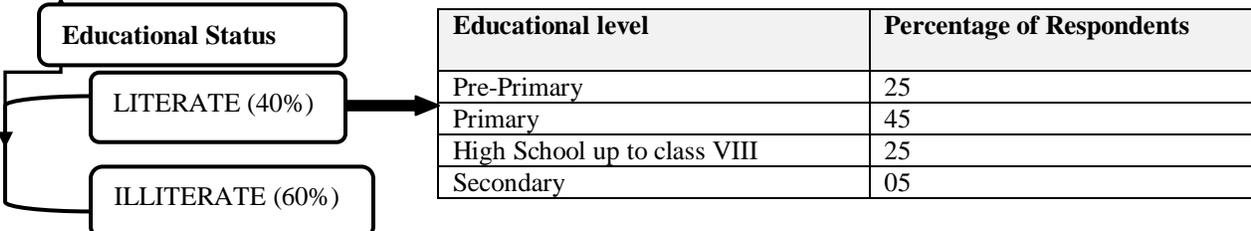
developing world. According to an estimate in India there are over 20 million child workers (Joshi, et.al., 1994). The first initiative to tackle the problem of Child Labour was taken in 1979 when *Gurupadswamy Committee* was constituted. The Committee examined the problem in detail and made some far reaching recommendations. It observed that if poverty continued it would be difficult to totally eliminate child labour and hence any attempt to abolish it through legal recourse would not be a practical proposition. The Committee felt that the only alternative left was to ban child labour in hazardous areas and to regulate and ameliorate the conditions of work in other areas.

### Scenario of Child Labour in the city core of Kolkata

The study in different Boroughs consisting of municipal wards of the city has revealed that families from South 24 Parganas (Hingalganj, Gosaba and Sandeshkhali), Malda (Harishchandrapur, Kaliachak, Bhagwanpur I and Bhagwanpur II) Murshidabad (Dhulian, Jangipur,

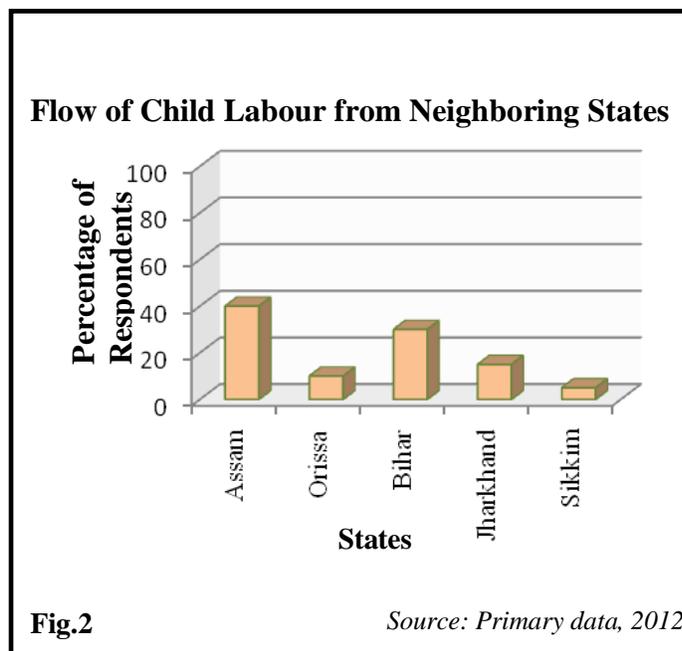
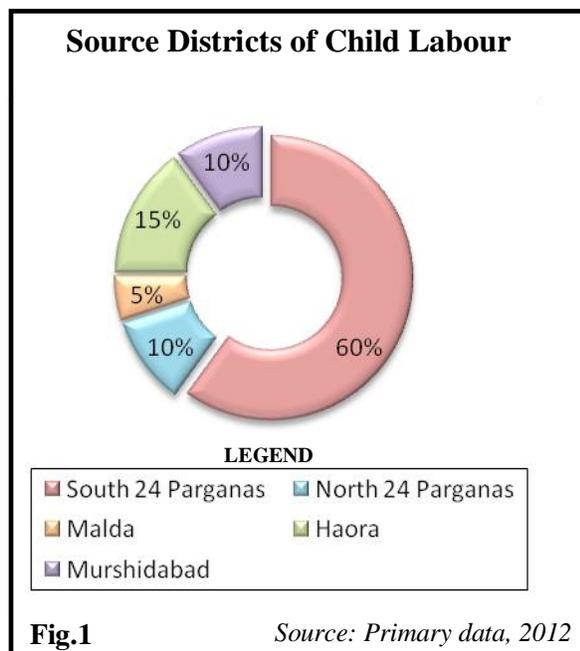
Lalgola and Debipur), Haora (Shibpur, Uluberia, Liluah and Bauria) etc come to the city in search of work (Fig.1). The male member usually has a big family to support with at least 3-4 children, parents and wife. The eldest child is sent to work to support the family. A huge inflow of child labour is observed from Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Assam especially from upper Assam valley (Fig.2) who is generally employed in hazardous industrial units in the city. The extensive field visits have revealed that 40 per cent of the working children below the age of fourteen years remain deprived of formal education and among the rest 60 per cent, 45 per cent do not get chance to study after completing primary level of education (Table.1). The incidences of school dropout are extremely high in case of these exploited children. The reasons have been social as well as economic including poverty, big size of family, status of unemployment of head of the family, parental negligence, parental illiteracy and lack of awareness.

**Table.1: Educational level of Child Labour**



Educational level	Percentage of Respondents
Pre-Primary	25
Primary	45
High School up to class VIII	25
Secondary	05

*Source: Primary data, 2012*



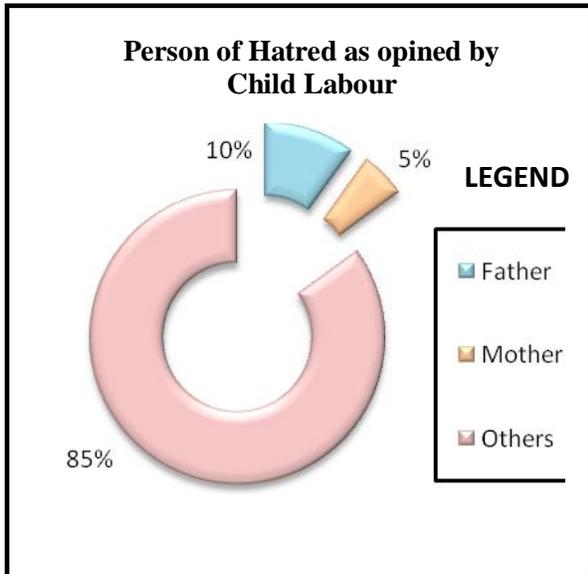
The head of the family generally work as auto drivers, rickshaw pullers and van-pullers, marginal workers in industries or as contract laborers. Apart from their wage been spent on food and clothing, a substantial portion is wasted on liquor and gambling. The children and women in these families are subjected to immense physical and mental torture (Fig.3). The children are generally employed at very low rates as cheap unskilled labour in industries, small factories and

garages as unskilled mechanics. They also work as domestic help where they are often thrashed and abused. They are also employed in roadside food stalls, tea-stalls and sweet (Table.2). The tanneries here employ children at very low wage rate as cheap unskilled labour. These children are prone to various health hazards like skin infection, breathing problem etc. Due to inadequacy of safety measures in these units they are also prone to acid and chemical burn.

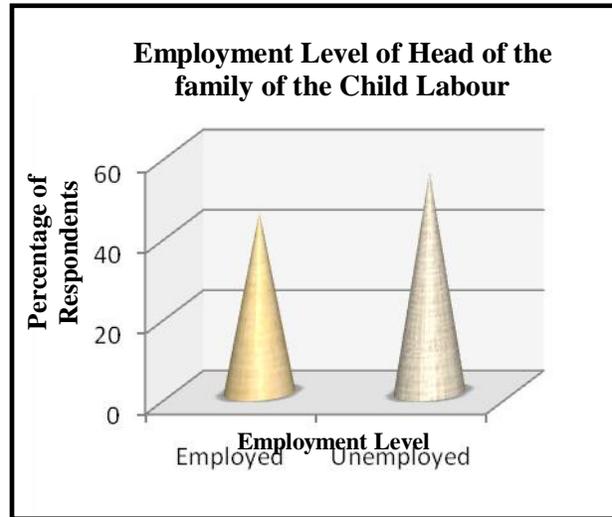
**Table.2: Places of work of Child Labour**

Place of work	Percentage of Respondents
Roadside food stall	30
Tea-stall	25
Sweet shop	10
Garage	5
Households as domestic help	15
Small scale factory	10
Others	5

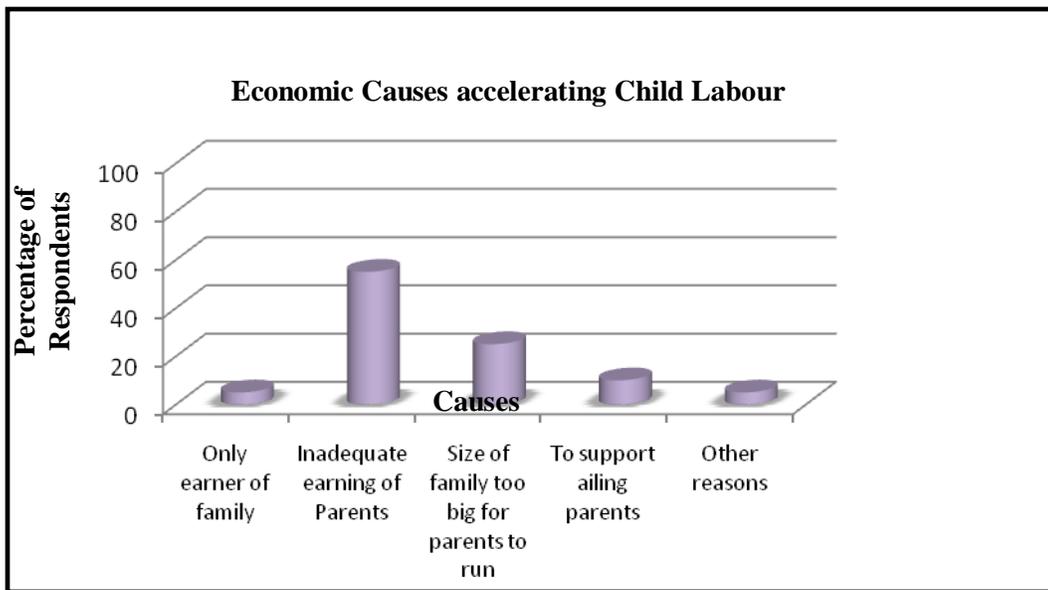
*Source: Primary data, 2012*



**Fig.3** Source: Primary data, 2012



**Fig.4** Source: Primary data, 2012



**Fig.5** Source: Primary data, 2012

Majority of the surveyed households have unemployed male head of the family (Fig.4) with working females employed as household maid, cook, nurse etc. Some of the women run tea stalls or food stalls along the roadside. The driving force of child labour identified in the city is economic where the child labour is the only earning member of the family. The child has a big family to support

with ailing parents or where the earning of the parents is inadequate to run the family (Fig.5). The age group of child labour includes four-twelve years in the city with maximum dominance of children working in hazardous sector aged between ten-twelve years. Their earning is in the form of wage in industries, factories and garages where they earn approximately Rs.30-40 per day.

In case of children working as domestic help their salary ranges between Rs.250-300 per month. A number of children are brought in the city been sold by their parents who are compelled to work as child prostitutes. The girl children are often subjected to hilarious crimes like physical abuse and domestic violence. The news of disappearance of girl children from low income families often strikes newspapers. A thorough probe reveals either they are kidnapped or sold to middle-man who further sell them to brothels. Prevalence of child trafficking especially that of working children is an issue of concern in the city. Child laborers are sent to work in *zaari* factories in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka etc. They are extensively employed in firework industries of Tamil Nadu. In West Bengal a massive proportion of working children are employed in illegal firework factories of South 24 Parganas. Various NGOs have been found to be working on eradication of child labour in the city. But there are some NGOs which have been found to provide education, food and clothes to these children. Their work and activities are really praiseworthy. They run night schools in various clubs in slums and shanties, give food, clothes, arranges recreational activities like sports, games for these children. They also take initiatives in rehabilitating and mainstreaming these children socially.

#### **Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986:**

As per the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 'child' means a person who has not completed his 14<sup>th</sup> year of age. The Act prohibits employment of children in 18 occupations and 65 processes contained in Part A and B of the Schedule to the Act (Section 3). Any person who employs any child in contravention of the provisions of section 3 of the Act is liable for punishment with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than three months but which may extend to one year or with fine which shall not be less than Rs 10,000 but which may extend to Rs 20,000 or both.

#### **Major Activities under National Child Labour Project (NCLP) in Kolkata**

- ❖ Intensive Child Labour Survey in the city
- ❖ Raising Public Awareness regarding the grave problem of child labour
- ❖ Stepping up enforcement of Child Labour Act to withdraw children from hazardous work
- ❖ Establishment of Special Schools to provide :
  - Bridge Education for mainstreaming in formal Education.
  - Pre-Vocational training
  - Mid-day meal provided by Ministry of Human Resource and Development
  - Payment of Stipend ( Rs 100 / per child / month )
  - Health Check up: A Doctor for every 20 schools.

#### **Findings from the Study**

The condition of Human Development especially child health condition and literacy rates are extremely miserable in various Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, India etc. It is often assumed that the amount of child labour in a country is determined by the nature and extent of poverty in that country (Hobbes, et.al., 1999). Child Labour has emerged as a curse in the urban society of Kolkata. As an administrative hub of West Bengal, the city of Kolkata shows evidence of the clear existence of child labour in almost all activities of the city. Children below 14 years are employed here as domestic help with low monthly salary compared to adult domestic help. The children work as regular wage earners in restaurants, sweet shops, garages, furniture shops, tanneries, butadiene factories, chemical factories etc. These children are even employed as *bedi* (country cigar) and *zaari* workers. They work under hazardous conditions and are sometimes abused physically and mentally by their employers. They are subjected to beating, scolding and abusing.

Poverty has been identified as the prime driving force behind child labour. These children come from families below poverty line. Their parents are either unemployed or low wage earners. The size of their families is big with the number of siblings been four-five. Literacy rate among such children are low though in some areas with initiative of NGOs and local clubs they are given basic education. In some areas night schools are run for these children. Due to low financial condition and extreme hard work these working children are found to be malnourished and underweight with improper physical growth and mental development. Sometimes these children come in contact with persons who tend to influence their proper psychological development as well. They are exploited by the local goons who use them as crime partners. It was even more shocking to know that sometimes the girl working children are forced to enter into flesh trade by their families. These children come in the city either from neighboring states or districts with their families who consider them as means of earning money. They are not only exploited by their employers but also by their drunken fathers.

The Government has taken steps to tackle the problem of child labour but the results have not been satisfactory in various areas of the city. A number of NGOs are working in the city to rehabilitate these exploited children. They provide them with food, clothes and education. They sometimes arrange recreational activities like games and sports competition for them. Various Government run projects on child labour are also going on with inadequate coverage when compared with their huge prevalence in the city.

#### **Suggested Remedial Measures to combat Child Labour**

Based on field investigation some remedial measures have been suggested to combat problem of child labour in the city:

- Laws to combat child labour should be strictly implemented both at State and Central level.

- Corruption and negligence regarding the menace of child labour offences should come under strict control.
- Vigilance and monitoring of the life style of child labour is essential.
- Rehabilitation procedures adopted by the Government and NGOs should be an orchestrated effort.
- Public awareness to be enhanced regarding the grave consequences of employing children in hazardous occupation and processes.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Child labour is perceived to be an economic necessity of poor households and the exploitative aspect in children's work is associated with the profit maximizing motive of commercial enterprises, wherein children are made to work long hours, paid low wages and denied opportunities for education (Sharma, 2006). The prevalence of child labour is a hindrance to human development in any area. The children are subjected to enormous physical and mental torture at their workplaces. Poverty and parental ignorance drives a child to the field of child labour. The city exhibits presence of toiling children engaged as unskilled workers in factories, hazardous industries, restaurants, shops and as domestic help in households. News about physical and mental abuse often hits the newspapers which reflect their tragic condition at their workplaces. Though both the Central and State Government has taken various policies and programmes to combat the problem of child labour but the prevalence of poverty and illiteracy in the state has limited the implementation and success of these initiatives. The Government and NGOs should undertake more strict steps and regulations to combat this grave problem. The world must be beautiful not only for the children from elite communities but also for them whose lives are stricken by poverty and negligence.

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