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RURAL CHILD LABOUR MARKETS IN INDIA:
NATURE OF CHILD WORK PARTICIPATION
AND ROLE OF THE FAMILY

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The aim of this paper is to highlight the limitations in analyzing child labour participation especially child labour markets. Child labour market participation in the market is largely shaped by combination of labour demand in the markets as well as the socio-economic location of the family. This paper provides a brief account of the size and nature of labour market participation of children and changes over time. It suggests that if the aim of universalizing elementary education has to be achieved, all concerned agents, including the family necessarily need to adopt a cohesive and committed approach against the use of child labour.

The nature of child labour use in rural India is dictated by the availability of children as cheap labour on the one hand and the need of their households for such work contributions on the other hand (Rodgers and Standing, 1979). In that sense, the use of child labour occurs in both paid and unpaid forms as well as in the non-marketed contexts. The underformation of rural labour markets in India is one constraint for examining the child labour markets, while the forms of labour use adopted and the context under which child labour is deployed forms another constraint. The use of children in employments not considered appropriate for them, such as in hazardous industries, which are legally banned in the country, is another dimension of the restrictions laid upon analyzing child labour markets. By assigning child labour use as illegal and prohibitory, the recognition of children as workers, the demand for protection of their rights or their mobilization into unions is foreclosed. However, since not all forms of child labour use are similarly considered illegal, the use of children in labour activities continues. Protection of child labourers from exploitation by employers and contractors, whether in terms of lower wage payments or employment and working conditions, is made more difficult partly due to the ambivalence in legal provisions and partly due to the socially acceptable utilization of children in work spheres.

In as much as markets pertain to the presence of labour demand and supply factors interacting at an exchange rate, all uses of child labour do not necessarily occur within the labour markets. The use of children in family enterprises and farms which is fairly common does exhibit demand for such labour and the presence of its supply. However, whether supply responses can be ascertained to changes in demand for their labour or vice versa with or without wages, that is, the exchange rate, as a key determining factor displays the novel aspects of these labour markets. In other words, child labour utilization is not always

governed or responsive to typical labour market factors of demand-supply interactions. It certainly requires a further incorporation of household decisions based on the decision makers' notions of availability of time-leisure considerations of all family members and their relative opportunity costs.

An examination of rural child labour markets is constrained by the nature of child labour use in Indian villages. Most of the work undertaken by children is for the family with relatively smaller proportion of them in strictly, paid labour market domains. The secondary data sources reflect only some parts of the entire picture, since substantial segments of child labour utilization remains outside the enumeration processes. The issues of contestation that emerge in the context are the distinctions drawn between child work and labour; hours of work put in by children, boys and girls; paid and unpaid labour forms; work undertaken for an employer versus own household contribution; working as helper as opposed to undertaking self employed activities on own account basis; and hazardous and non-hazardous work. The socio-cultural levels of acceptance by different agents concerned in the context of child workers brings in issues of appropriate age at which a child should undertake skill development and training for labour market participation, the child's responsibility and own concern for the household works, and even the appropriateness and relevance of education as available to the children in their localized context. All work undertaken by children up to the ages of 14 years pertaining to economic activities categorizes them as child workers in India.

What is the exact magnitude of rural child workers in India? Are the estimates available from secondary sources reliable? What do these statistics reveal? India has two prominent data sources - the decennial Census of India and the quinquennial National Sample Survey (NSS). The Census provides total number of child workers as enumerated given the definitions adopted for economic activities, while NSS as part of its employment-unemployment survey calculates proportion of child workers, their sectoral distribution and labour market characteristics. The patterns of work among different age cohorts of children can also be elicited from these sources. The data provided by secondary sources on child workers is challenged by non-governmental organizations working for elimination of child workers (see Leiten and White (eds), 2001; Mishra, 2000; HAQ, 2005). The latter claim the numbers of child labourers to be far larger than identified by secondary sources. The restrictions in definitions and enumeration methods followed are enlisted for this shortfall.

The 2001 Census of India enumerates over 11 million rural child workers (see Table 1). While this in itself is a large number, there are 191 million total children in the age cohort 5-14 years, making the share of child workers seem a meager six per cent. Boys constitute six million while girls are five million among child workers. The total child workers have risen in actual numbers over the decade 1991 to 2001- by nearly one million workers! Both boys and girls among the 5-14 year old children who are working have risen over the decade. The percentage increase of girl child workers is 13, while the working boys are relatively lower at 9 per cent.

Table 1
Rural Child Workers in India

Child Worker Category (in millions)	1991	2001	% Change
Total Child Workers	10.25	11.35	10.65
Male Child workers	5.46	5.92	8.56
Female Child workers	4.80	5.42	13.02

Source: Census of India, 1991 and 2001.

The child work participation rate, calculated as the proportion of child workers in the population of 5-14 year old children is about six per cent for all children as well as for Scheduled Castes (SCs). The proportion of tribal children working shows a higher rate of 11 per cent (see Table 2).

Table 2
Child Work Participation Rates in Rural India

Category	All	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes
Total	5.94	6.02	10.64
Male	5.94	6.06	9.65
Female	5.95	5.98	11.69

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2001.

The participation of children across the states of India is considerably varied spanning a low of less than one per cent in the southern state of Kerala to a high of 17 per cent in northeastern state of Mizoram. The states of Mizoram, Sikkim, Nagaland and Meghalaya among the northeastern and tribal dominated regions and Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka report high child work participation rates as per the 2001 Census of India.

The labour supply of children is responding to the overall demand for labour in the economy and hence it is worthwhile considering what proportion of total workers are child workers. The enumerated child labour figures account for only 4 per cent of the total workforce. The shares of child workers in total working population are 3 per cent for boys and 5 per cent for girls. The girls contribute relatively more to the entire female workforce than is the case of boys among males.

The NSS provides employment status, sectoral distribution and other related information on all workers including children within the households covered in their sample survey. Of all the children working in India, more than 87 per cent inhabit rural areas. Bulk of this work pertains to agriculture related activities. Agricultural work undertaken by children is of self employed nature in 60 per cent of the cases, although unpaid work as helpers constitutes 48 per cent while 11 per cent of them are own account workers. A small marginal segment of children (less than one per cent) are reported as employers (NSS, 1999-2000).

Agricultural child labour employed as unpaid family members largely consist of the small and marginal land operating households. A majority of the marginalized sections, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, belong to the small and marginal land operating

households, either as owners or leased land operators. These economically poor households are often not in a position to hire working hands and therefore, prone to employ unpaid family members especially in peak labour demand periods. Women and children are pulled in to labour on agricultural activities during such seasons. Apart from the farm activities, they are also involved in numerous off-farm activities.

Casual child workers are noted in construction, services as well as in agriculture and related activities, to a lesser extent. In terms of specific sectors where child labour seems to be concentrated in rural areas apart from agriculture in which a major bulk of children are occupied, (at the two-digit national industrial classification (NIC) – 1998) they are also involved in manufacturing of tobacco products, textiles, wood and wood products; retail trade and repairing of personal and household goods; land transport and recreational, cultural and sporting activities.

Of all rural child workers, 12 per cent are involved in manufacturing activities. The proportion of working girls in the sector exceeds that of the male counterparts (Rustagi, 2002). A majority of the manufacturing workers (52 per cent) are unpaid family helpers in household enterprises. Even among the retail trade and repairing activities, children are involved as unpaid family workers. Boys exceed in proportion compared to that of girls as workers involved in trade, hotels, eateries and restaurants.

Prominent occupations wherein children are involved in hazardous labour activities such as beedi rolling, bangle making, mining and stone quarrying, brick kilns, carpet weaving, shoemaking, silk weaving, synthetic gemstones cutting and polishing, silver and so on have been studied to highlight the terms and conditions of the child workers (see for instance, Human Rights Watch, 1996; Burra, 1995; Sharma, et al., 2004). Children tend to be involved partly due to the traditional skill formation basis of such occupation, partly due to the indebtedness of the household they belong to and partly due to the changing form of labour use wherein home based activities have increased under contractual systems.

With the organisation of production increasingly becoming contractual, piece rate and homebased, work carried out facilitate use of all available labouring hands within a family or household. Children help their families in meeting the prefixed targets of production at no additional labour cost to the employer/contractor. With passage of time, soon these children in their turn take up work either as homebased contracts or are employed by the employer/contractor. The changing organisation of production, therefore, perpetuates and facilitates the use of child labour [Chandrasekhar (1997), Cain and Mazumdar (1980) among others].

Role of Family

In the context of child labour studies, the role of family and the exercise of power within its functioning, remains the least explored one. Even prior to bringing the State and other agents who employ the children of poor households, for whom, it may be the only resort for survival, comes the family authority and power wielders, who turn a blind eye, if not

consent, for such utilization of children in labour activities. Even in case of the out of school children and the low value ascribed to education for their offsprings, especially the girl child, the primary decision making authority vests with the household and the heads of the family to which the children belong. The choice between investment into education for the children and incurring costs as opposed to utilization of their labour and benefiting from current returns at the cost of their future betterment is fundamentally that of the parents and guardians of these children.

Therefore, children, who are in a situation, wherein it becomes mandatory or compulsory to work for the household, are akin to the category of forced labour (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Patnaik and Digwaney (eds), 1985). The factors that serve as coercive elements may defer somewhat in the moral domain of perceptions of different agents, however, the similarities cannot be overruled. Forced labour in the context of contractual, paid labour uses within market relationships involving employer-benefitter, contractor-middleman-agent and the person under compulsion, that is the employee-worker differs from the context of household utilization of family members who provide unpaid free labour, albeit under a different form of compulsion dictated by the social power-authority relations as practiced within household/family units.

A society that values children as free agents and future citizens ought not to make seemingly wrong choices in favour of the present while discounting their futures. Yet, this is what is experienced by many of the households at the cost of the children's development when they are made to work instead of going to school or playing around. Is it essential to train and involve little children into other cultural activities to inculcate relevant values and enhance their feelings of ownership and belongingness? Do work related contributions stand apart or is their no distinction possible? In other words, is it possible to involve children in activities thereby generating the feeling of belongingness in them even without necessarily making them labour for it?

Another issue in the context pertains to whether there exists a way in which children's development can be defined? The essentiality of education, although recognized, unless provided at certain quality levels, and sustained over the years of elementary and secondary education, can be questioned for their role in children's development and better future prospects for them. The basic link up of education with the children's job prospects as they grow up forms the basis for questioning and decreasing the impetus and significance of education in the perspective of both the parents and the children.

Low educational attainments, whether as an offshoot of inadequate supply, constraints to access, outright exclusion or perceptual biases, end up pushing the child into a quagmire of further poverty and bleak future prospects. The poor human capital development is a matter of grave concern and necessarily needs to be addressed by the state and society at large.

The various efforts towards elimination of child labour through setting up of bridge schools, efforts for mainstreaming children into formal schooling, ensuring their enrolment into schools and generating awareness about the legislative provisions against child labour

use are reflected in the studies undertaken (Sharma, et al., 2004; Mishra, 2000; Burra, 1995; GOI, 2005). For instance, Sharma, et al. (2004) in their study for assessing the impact of the social labeling programmes initiated to eliminate child labour exploitation in carpet production highlighted the elements of welfare and rehabilitation as a positive outcome. The study finds legislative measures to be the most effective provisions for elimination of child labour. Other targeted programmes have the visible effect of reducing hired child labourers while increasing employment of family child labour. Thus, even where the child labour markets respond to initiatives against employment of children, this can be truly effective only if other agents and decision makers within the family feel equally strongly opposed to putting children to work. Only a cohesive and convinced approach against use of child labour can work for their elimination.

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