

Issues & Ideas

When Childhood Is Denied

By Bruce Stokes

■ Child labor traps millions of young Indians, despite a law declaring such labor illegal.

■ Some Indian families are using child servants as a sign of their economic status.

NEW DELHI—The sweet-smiling young boy wearing a knit cap and rag wool sweater seemed small for his age. But then, he had lived a harder life than most 12-year-olds. Raised on the streets in rural India, he was sold by his aunt to a banker in Delhi at age 8 to work as a servant. For four years the youngster was on call 18 hours a day, scrubbing pots and cleaning house, one of the tens of thousands of Indian children now working as domestics, the new face of child labor in the country.

“The growing Indian middle class has brought this disaster to the lives of the nation’s children,” said Kailash Satyarthi, chairman of India’s Global March Against Child Labor. As soon as they can afford them, Indian families want to acquire servants as a sign of their newfound status. And the cheapest and most docile workers available are boys and girls.

This particular child, whose identity was withheld to protect his privacy, is free now, liberated by one of Satyarthi’s raid-and-rescue teams. The boy lives with three dozen other former child laborers in a community on the outskirts of India’s capital. Here they receive schooling and counseling until they can be reunited with their families. And they are protected by armed guards because their former masters often try to snatch them back.

Like millions of migrants before him, this boy has no desire to return to his village. Despite the hardships he has endured, he loves the city. And, typical of children his age, he dreams. He wants to be a pilot when he grows up, although he has had only six months of education.

As unrealistic as his dream may be, it is better than the nightmare of child labor that still traps millions of other young Indians, notwithstanding a 2006

law making it illegal to employ anyone under the age of 14.

The recent decision by Primark, a low-cost British retailer, to drop three of its Indian suppliers because they subcontracted embroidery work to local firms using child labor is a harsh reminder that India still has more working children than any other country.

Another slight, dark-haired 12-year-old boy, also being sheltered at the ashram, knows the horrors of embroidery work all too well. For the last three years he embroidered suits and saris, working 16-hour days, six-and-a-half days a week alongside two dozen other children ages 8 to 16 in a New Delhi factory. He slept at his workbench. He says he was regularly beaten when his embroidery did not satisfy the owner.

“In time,” the boy recalled, “my father came to the factory and asked that I be sent home. But the factory owner refused. He said, ‘He has been eating a lot, and you have to pay for his sleeping arrangement, so I won’t send him home.’” Eventually, Satyarthi’s team liberated this boy, too. The family was given 1,500 rupees, about \$35, for the boy’s three years of work. (The legal minimum wage in Delhi is 4,000 rupees a month for an eight-hour day, according to Manish Sharma, manager of the ashram.)

These boys are two of millions of child laborers around the world. The exact number is probably unknowable; it depends on the definition of childhood and the definition of work.

“Childhood is an evolving concept,” Satyarthi said. The legal working age varies from country to country. Moreover, when it comes to farmwork and family handicraft businesses, experts differ over where to draw the line between exploitive labor and the practice of having children simply help out.

In 2004, the International Labor Or-

■ Young and Docile



AP/MAHESH KUMARA

■ Child laborers working at a makeshift iron burner in Hyderabad, India. Worldwide, an estimated 218 million children are laborers.

ganization guesstimated that there were 218 million child laborers worldwide, seven in 10 of them working in agriculture. That figure was down 11 percent from 2000.

The Indian government admitted to 12.7 million child laborers in 2001, an increase of about 1 million in a decade. Child-labor opponents contend that the true total is more than double that figure.

In part, the increase and the discrepancy reflect the prevalence of domestic servitude, which is on the rise as Indian incomes improve. The 2001 government study estimated that the country

about its economic necessity and social benefits.

Myth 1: The prevalence of child labor is an unfortunate consequence of poverty. Sri Lanka has a per capita income of \$4,100, and 15 percent of its children work. India has a per capita income of \$2,700, but only 6 percent of Indian children are economically active. Poor societies don't have to have child labor.

Myth 2: Children need to work to support their families. Indian surveys show that parents send their children to work believing that it will help sustain the family. But it's a bad bargain. Studies by the International Labor Organization

100 days a year," Satyarthi said. So, many children may be taking jobs from their own parents. Despite the recent decline in child labor in India's carpet industry because of better enforcement of labor laws, and the consequent increase in labor costs, carpet exports are up and the jobs are being filled by able-bodied adults. Countries can have more jobs without employing more children.

Myth 4: Children are better suited for some work than adults. This "nimble fingers" argument is widely believed. But an ILO study of more than 2,000 weavers found that children were no more likely than adults to have the dexterity to tie the finest carpet knots. Employers just pay them less.

Myth 5: Child labor is a valuable part of early-childhood education. Studies in Brazil demonstrate that entering the workforce before age 13 can lower adult lifetime earnings as much as 17 percent. Children learn best at a desk, not at a loom.

Clearly, the eradication of child labor need not await the eradication of poverty. Brazil has shown the way. For more than a decade, the government has paid parents a small stipend—\$4.50 a month per child—to send their kids to school rather than to work. More than 1 million children now participate in the program.

The ILO estimates that it would cost \$38 billion a year for 20 years to eliminate child labor worldwide. Washington has already contributed more than \$20 million to an Indian program to save children from the most-hazardous industries. More such investments are justified: Studies show that the economic benefits outweigh the costs by nearly 6-to-1.

In Europe and the United States, eliminating poverty did not end child labor. What made the difference was activists pressuring governments to enforce the law and to create educational opportunities for all children. That same struggle is now taking place in India. History suggests that outside pressure and financial aid can help.

"Child labor is a denial of childhood," Satyarthi said. "It's the denial of their future participation in the economy. This must end. And it is non-negotiable." ■

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■ A Different Approach



AP PHOTO/SILVIA ZOUJERDO

■ In Brazil, the government pays parents a small stipend to send their kids to school rather than to work.

had 185,000 domestic child workers. Activists claim that the number is much higher, noting that domestic child labor is particularly hard to document. These children work privately one and two to a household, not publicly by the dozens in factories. Many are quite young. A recent study in the southern city of Chennai found that one-quarter of child domestics began working before they were 9. More than 80 percent were girls.

"The law is being flouted behind every other door," Satyarthi said.

Such child labor persists, in part, because of widespread misperceptions

have found that children earn about one-fifth of what adults are paid for the same work, so a child's contribution to a household is minimal at best. Moreover, premature work denies children the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to earn decent incomes as adults, undermining their ability to care for their parents in their old age. Sending one's child to work is both economically irrational and shortsighted.

Myth 3: Curbing child labor hurts employment. "Almost all children who work belong to those families where the parents can't find jobs for more than