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Mukherjee, Dipa

Department of Economics, Narasinha Dutt College

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## **Child Workers in India: An Overview of Macro Dimensions**

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**Dipa Mukherjee**

*Department of Economics  
Narasinha Dutt College  
Howrah – 711101  
West Bengal  
Email: medipa@rediffmail.com*

### ***Abstract***

*Child labour is in focus for last two decades as it robs children of the chance to enhance human capital. This paper examines the Indian situation using data from 50<sup>th</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> rounds of NSSO Surveys. Child Workers have declined from 9.1 million in 1993 to 5.8 million in 2004, declining by 0.04 percent per annum. Incidence of Child Labour is more in Rural areas, higher among 10-14 years age-group, and more prominent among Boys, and quite disparate across states. Another 30 million children in 2003-04, about 13 percent of total, are 'Nowhere Children'. Incidence of Domestic Duties and Nowhere Children are higher among girls. Poverty emerges to be necessary condition thereby preparing the breeding ground but not sufficient to drive the children to the labour market. Lack of Educational infrastructure is found to be very important in this respect. This includes not only the physical but also the human component, which is emerging to be more crucial. Poverty alleviation programmes must therefore be complemented by expansion of educational infrastructure for eradicating child labour.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the world child labour has been an area of lively debate for about a decade with many different viewpoint on the issue. However for the economic historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, child labour is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. It has been argued that child labour has been an integral part of western experience until the industrial revolution changed the nature of both work and workplace. This was followed by a clear distinction between adult (workers) and child along with gradual withdrawal of the latter from the labour force. Development economists also argue that such withdrawal was facilitated by substantial improvement in the socio-economic condition of the people in the industrial economies. By this argument child labour represents a stage in the development process through which economies must pass. However in recent times there has been a renewed attack on child labour citing grounds of physical, moral and psychological trauma for the children and loss of childhood. Such arguments have been stimulated by recent debates on human rights, human capital formation and international labour standards. It is argued that child labour exists in

developing countries because there are both demand for and supply of it. Faced with poverty, inequality, social norms, credit-land-labour market imperfections, high fertility and unpredictable employment scenario children are sent to work in most cases by their parents. The supplementary income of children raises their nutritional standards, enables their siblings to continue education and enhance their skill and future prospect of employment. On the other hand producers demand child labour because of substantially lower wages paid to children. Therefore child labour exists. The incidence of child labour is accepted either as an undesired reality or as an unavoidable necessity. In spite of various stringent labour laws the problem of child labour put forward a serious challenge to the development process in the underdeveloped economies. Asia is leading in this respect with 60 percent of child labour of the world followed by sub-Saharan Africa (23 percent). West Asia and Latin America together constitute eight percent and North Africa accounts for 6 percent of child labour of the world. Work participation rate among children is 19 percent in Asia, 16 percent in Latin America and 15 percent in North Africa. In sharp contrast to this, work participation rate of children in the developed countries is only 2 percent. Globalisation and liberalisation has increased the incidence of subcontracting substantially enhancing opportunity of utilisation of child labour.

The recent focus on human development and human capital formation along with the fact that substantial number of children works in hazardous and exploitative situation has led to policies to eradicate all forms of child labour - children engaged full-time in wage employment, children working part-time along with schooling and those contributing to family labour in domestic as well as economic activities. Moreover the recent globalisation trends have set in motion two contrasting forces. On one hand the developed countries are increasingly imposing restrictions on importable produced by child labour thereby putting pressure on local producers to stop employing children on the other hand the same global competitive forces are inducing the local competitors to cut down wage bill by employing women and children. In this paper we examine the Indian situation and try to assess whether the problem is declining in recent years.

## II. REVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

Child Labour has been in the focus of Development economics from quite a long time (see ILO (2002) for an annotated bibliography). There has been substantive number of studies on Child Labour internationally. Theoretical and empirical studies on Child Labour seek answers to three basic questions: (a) *What causes child labour*; (b) *What are the effects of child labour on human development*; and, (c) *How different policies affect magnitude and forms of child labour*. However, these three are interrelated among themselves up to a large extent. Most of the theoretical studies explain reasons behind existence of child labour, their impact on the economy, and how different policies are supposed to influence child-work decisions. The pioneering work in this regard was by Basu and Van (1998). Other important studies include Lieten and Ben (2001), Grootaert and Kanbur (1995), Anker (2000), Bhalotra (2000), Basu (1999), Galli (2001), Jafarey and Lahiri (2002), Rammohan (2000), Rosati and Deb (2002) among others. Empirical studies on Child Labour, apart from determining the trends/magnitude of child labour, also tests the validity of several theoretical postulates that have been forwarded regarding causes, impacts and policy sensitiveness of child labour. These include Ashagrie (1993), Grootaert and Patrinos (1999), Bhalotra and Heady (2003), Beegle et al. (2003a, 2003b), Goldin and Katz (2003), Edmonds (2004a, 2004b), Bourguignon et al. (2003), Weiner (1991), Ravallion and Wodon (2000), Addison et al. (1997), Ray (2000a, 2000b). Empirical Studies in Indian Context include those by Chaudhuri and Wilson (2000), Ray (2000c), Cigno and Rosati (2000), Burra (1995), Mishra (2000), Chandrashekkar (1997), Weiner (1991), Majumdar (2001), and Reddy (2000). In most of these studies, the focus has been on children '*working*' as wage earners, i.e. those who are in the labour market. However, this underestimates the contribution of the children, especially that of the girl-child, in the economy (and society) by *not* considering both economic and non-economic domestic duties performed by children. These duties are by no means negligible as *Nowhere Children* (those neither in labour market nor in school) are considerably more in developing countries than the number of child workers.

### **III. METHODOLOGY AND DATABASE**

The study use secondary level data pertaining to 50<sup>th</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> rounds of the Employment and Unemployment surveys by NSSO.

In this paper child labour is defined as the children in the age group of 5-14 years who are either self employed or are wage workers. Here usual principal status is considered. According to NSS in India, the economic activity status of persons is captured in terms of usual status or current status approach. A person is considered to be employed in the usual status category if he or she had pursued gainful economic activity for a relatively longer time span in the immediately preceding year (365 days) prior to the date of survey. This is known as the *Usual Principal Status*. If a person had spent relatively shorter time span in the preceding one year prior to the NSSO survey then this is considered as *Usual Subsidiary Activity Status*. Primarily usual principal activity status is used in this study. Using unit level records the children are grouped into different categories viz *Self Employed* (working in own account enterprises), *Wage Workers*, *Performing Domestic Duties* and *Nowhere Children* who are neither going to school nor working. The children working in *Own Account Enterprises* and those engaged in *Wage Employment* together constitute the *Child Labourers*. A state level analysis is also carried on separately for rural & urban sectors and for the boys and the girls.

### **IV. EXTENT OF CHILD LABOUR - MAGNITUDE AND TRENDS**

#### **1. Extent & Magnitude of Child Labour**

Extent of Child Labour in India has been quite substantial. According to 1993 NSSO data, there were 186 million children in the 5-14 age group (Table 1). Of these, 9.1 million were reported as working according to Usual Principal Status. Thus, incidence of *Child Labour*' in 1993 was about 4.9 per cent (Table 2).

**Table 1**  
**Different Categories Of Children in India (in million)**

Categories	Rural			Urban			Total		
	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004
<b>Total Workers</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>5.8</b>
Engaged in OAE	4.8	5.1	3.1	0.5	0.5	0.4	5.2	5.6	3.5
Wage workers	3.2	3.4	1.7	0.7	0.7	0.5	3.9	4.1	2.3
Domestic duties	7.0	5.6	5.0	1.1	1.0	0.8	8.2	6.7	5.9
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>40.0</b>	<b>25.5</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>29.5</b>
Attending Edu Institute	91.3	121.3	140.6	36.4	43.8	43.9	127.8	165.0	184.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>142.0</b>	<b>175.7</b>	<b>176.4</b>	<b>43.7</b>	<b>52.3</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>185.7</b>	<b>228.0</b>	<b>226.6</b>

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSSO (1995), NSSO (2001), and NSSO (2006).

**Table 2**  
**Share of Different Categories Of Children in India (%)**

Categories	Rural			Urban			Total		
	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004
<b>Total Workers</b>	5.63	4.84	2.72	2.74	2.30	1.80	4.90	4.26	2.56
Engaged in OAE	3.38	2.90	1.76	1.14	0.96	0.80	2.80	2.46	1.54
Wage workers	2.25	1.94	0.96	1.60	1.34	1.00	2.10	1.80	1.02
Domestic duties	4.93	3.19	2.83	2.52	1.91	1.59	4.42	2.94	2.60
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	<b>24.86</b>	<b>22.77</b>	<b>14.46</b>	<b>11.21</b>	<b>11.85</b>	<b>8.17</b>	<b>21.65</b>	<b>20.26</b>	<b>13.02</b>
Attending Edu Institute	64.30	69.04	79.71	83.30	83.75	87.45	68.82	72.37	81.42

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSSO (1995), NSSO (2001), and NSSO (2006).

If we look at disaggregated data, we find that incidence of Child Labour was more in Rural areas where 5.6 per cent of children were working in 1993, compared to 2.7 per cent in the Urban areas. In 2004 these figures were 2.7 and 1.8 per cent respectively. Incidence of Child Labour is also more prominent among Boys compared to Girls, though the incidence of *Engaged in Domestic Duties* and *Nowhere Children* are higher among girls (Table 3). Thus, most of the working children (88 per cent) were concentrated in the rural areas and the rest in the urban areas.

**Table 3**  
**Gender-wise Share of Different Categories of children in India 1993 - 2004**

Categories	Boys			Girls		
	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004
<b>Total Workers</b>	5.2	4.2	2.8	4.7	4.3	2.2
Engaged in OAE	3.0	2.3	1.6	2.7	2.6	1.4
Wage workers	2.2	1.9	1.2	2.0	1.7	0.8
Domestic duties	0.6	0.6	0.5	8.8	5.6	5.0
Disabled	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>13.8</b>
Attending Edu Institute	74.9	76.7	84.0	61.8	67.5	78.8

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSSO (1995), NSSO (2001), and NSSO (2006).

## 2. Trends and Rates of Decline

The endeavour of the Indian socio-economic policymakers has been to eradicate child labour completely and bring all children to school. This has been reflected in various programmes of the State in recent times. As a result, there has been a continuous decline in the magnitude & incidence of child labour in India over the 1993-2004 period whereby child workforce has declined from 9.1 million to 5.8 million, i.e from 5 per cent to 2.6 per cent, declining at the rate of 0.04 per cent per annum (Table 4).

Table 4  
**Growth Rates of Different Categories Of Children (% pa)**

Categories	Rural			Urban			Total		
	1993-99	1999-04	1993-04	1993-99	1999-04	1993-04	1993-99	1999-04	1993-04
<b>Total Workers</b>	0.01	-0.11	-0.05	0.00	-0.06	-0.03	0.01	-0.10	-0.04
<b>Engaged in OAE</b>	0.01	-0.09	-0.04	0.00	-0.04	-0.02	0.01	-0.09	-0.04
<b>Wage workers</b>	0.01	-0.13	-0.06	0.00	-0.07	-0.03	0.01	-0.11	-0.05
<b>Domestic duties</b>	-0.04	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02	-0.04	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
<b>Disabled</b>	0.00	0.06	0.03	0.00	0.32	0.13	0.00	0.18	0.08
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	0.02	-0.09	-0.03	0.04	-0.08	-0.02	0.02	-0.09	-0.03
<b>Attending Edu Institute</b>	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.03
<b>Total</b>	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.03	-0.01	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.02

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSSO (1995), NSSO (2001), and NSSO (2006).

This declining trend had been more pronounced in the rural areas (-0.05 percent p.a.) compared to the urban areas where this negative growth rate is much lower (-0.03). Consequently, the rural share in child work force is declining (88 per cent to 83 per cent) whereas the urban share has gone up (13 per cent to 16 per cent). The reduction in gainful economic activities of children is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas, which is reflected in substantial rise in enrolment of children in rural schools.

This is evident from the fact that children attending educational institutes are growing at a faster rate (0.04 percent) in the rural areas compared to that in the urban areas (0.02 percent). Urban India however, appears to have reached a stage wherein further reduction in children's work participation is hard to come by owing to higher demand for such menial jobs and also due to sustained inflow of rural children flocking to urban areas in search of gainful employment due to acute distress experienced in rural areas.

One of the most disturbing fact is that apart from these child workers there are huge number of children who are neither working nor going to school and hence are included in the



category of ‘*Nowhere Children*’. Though this category of children are showing a declining trend over the decade, the figure is as high as 30 million in 2003-04, constituting about 13 percent of the total children in 5-14 age group. The incidence of *Nowhere Children* is much higher in the rural areas compared to the urban areas, as both educational infrastructure and job opportunities are better in the latter.

The share of children in the category of *Attending School* is rising and those in all other categories of either gainful economic activities or involvement in domestic duties are declining. This no doubt is a positive sign. But when we compare between males and females, substantial discrimination is observed. Among all the children attending school 45.6 percent are female. More striking is the fact that ninety percent of the children doing domestic duties are female. Thus they have to sacrifice their education and look after the household to send their male siblings to school.

The hierarchy of the states regarding the incidence of child labour has remained fairly sticky over all the three periods. This is revealed by positive and highly significant rank correlation coefficients between incidence of child labour across the three time periods (Table 5).

Table - 5  
**Rank Correlation between Incidence  
of Child Labour over time**

	1999	2004
1993	0.81**	0.89**
1999		0.81**

*Note:* \*\* indicates significant at 1% level.

*Source:* Author’s calculation.

## V. POSSIBLE CORRELATES

It has already been mentioned that current literature speaks of Income, or lack of it, as the determining factor of Child Labour, with poorer families sending children to work more frequently. The present database also reveals that as we move along from lower to higher living standard as indicated by MPCE class, the incidence of child labour and nowhere children gradually diminishes while that of school attendance increases (Table 6).

**Table 6**  
**Proportion of Children in Different Activities across MPCE Groups – 2004-05**

<i>Status</i>	<i>Rural</i>					<i>Urban</i>				
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>
<b>Working Children</b>	3.3	2.8	2.7	2.0	1.6	4.7	4.1	2.2	1.7	0.6
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	22.6	14.8	10.6	7.3	3.7	22.3	17.2	9.1	7.0	1.7
<b>Attending Edu Institute</b>	70.0	79.1	83.6	88.9	93.5	69.0	75.3	86.3	89.6	97.1

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSSO (2006).

*Note:* A – Bottom 20% of MPCE level; B – 21-40% of MPCE level; B – 41-60% of MPCE level; B – 61-80% of MPCE level; B – Top 20% of MPCE level;

Thus poverty do appear to be associated with high incidence of child labour and this is not surprising since poor families are left with no other alternative but to send their children to work so that they can accumulate the minimum income required for their subsistence. But is poverty sufficient to push children into the labour market? To examine this hypothesis a correlation analysis was undertaken with states as observations (Table 7). Incidence of Poverty was found to have significantly negative correlation with incidence of school attendance and significantly positive correlation with the incidence of no-where children for all the three time periods.

**Table - 7**  
**Correlation of Children's Status with Incidence of Poverty**

<i>Proportion of Children</i>	<i>Poverty<sup>a</sup></i>		
	<b>1993</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>
School Going	-0.62*	-0.64**	-0.68**
Child Labour	0.09	-	0.18
Nowhere Children	0.66**	0.66**	0.65**

*Note:* \*\* indicates significant at 1% level, \* indicates significant at 10% level, coefficients with significance level above 20% are not reported. a – Percentage of people below poverty line

However the correlation between poverty and incidence of child labour is found to be insignificant throughout. It therefore emerges that poverty creates the breeding ground for child labour, as the poor children are often not sent to school, but is not sufficient to push them into labour market. Perhaps, whether poverty will lead to high incidence of child labour depends on other complementary factors, and in absence of such factors poverty leads to high incidence of no-where children who neither go to school nor work.

One of such complementary factors may be absence of educational infrastructure. Negative correlation between incidence of child labour and spatial spread of primary schools (measured

by number of primary schools per thousand square km) indicating that incidence of child labour is higher in regions with low density of schools validates this hypothesis (Table 8).

Table 8  
**Association of Children's Status with Educational Variables**

<i>Proportion of Children</i>	<i>Primary Schools Availability<sup>a</sup></i>			<i>Teachers per school – 2004</i>		<i>Pupil-Teacher Ratio - 2004</i>	
	<i>1993</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Upper Primary</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Upper Primary</i>
<b>Child Labour</b>	-0.30	-0.27	-0.36*	-0.59**	-0.25	0.08	0.25
<b>Nowhere Children</b>	-0.21	-0.10	0.10	-0.49**	-0.43	0.67**	0.54*

*Note:* \*\* indicates significant at 1% level, \* indicates significant at 10% level; a – Primary Schools per 1000 Square KM.

Another emerging idea in this regard is that apart from physical infrastructure (viz. lack of school buildings etc.) the human component, namely availability of teachers, is also crucial in determining the status of the children. To test this hypothesis a correlation analysis was carried on between different measures of availability of teachers and status of the children. It is found that incidence of both child labour and no-where children decreases with increase in availability of teachers. Number of teachers per primary school is found to have significant negative correlation with quantum of both child labour and no-where children. Moreover a significant positive association exists between Pupil-teacher ratio in both primary and upper primary schools and the magnitude of no-where children. Thus it is evident that availability of teachers encourages the students to continue education and hence can be used as a tool to combat the vices of both child labour and no-where children. Given that in a vast expanse of regions in our country Teacher-minute per student per day is about one minute only, one can easily understand the need to increase intake of teachers for a meaningful educational expansion.

It is a common belief that demand side factors like availability of job opportunities at the local level also play a crucial role in ensuring that a child is sent to work. But how far that is true is a matter of further enquiry.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is evident that incidence of Child Labour is decreasing in India over the recent past. However, still 40 million children are out of school of which 6 million are working outside home. Major problem is the presence of a large mass of *Nowhere Children*, who are neither working nor going to school.

If we look at the plausible determining factors, poverty emerges to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for thriving of child labour. While poverty is instrumental in keeping the children out of school, it does not necessarily drive them into the labour market. It is only the presence of other complementary factors like lack of educational infrastructure that appears to play a much more crucial role in pushing children to work. The physical component of educational infrastructure is no doubt important in this respect but the humane factor is emerging to be more important.

What do the results imply for policies to eradicate child labour?

It has sometimes been argued that economic expansion itself will take care of the problem of child labour and if economic growth can be fostered we need not stick to the stringent labour laws to prevent the children from working. But the impact of economic expansion on incidence of child labour is the result of two different forces. On one hand this expansionary trend leads to a reduction in the supply of child labour as per capita income rises and on the other hand it often boosts up demand for child labour as an outcome of the growth process itself. Also, of the two components of child labour, self employment is believed to be a supply driven phenomenon, while wage employment is more a demand driven one. The net impact would depend on the relative magnitude of the two forces on these two components. In any case, sending children to school or work is a micro level decision taken by households and economic expansion at the aggregate macroeconomic level may not necessarily trickle down to reduce child labour, especially if the returns of growth are not equitably distributed. A targeted approach with the BPL families at the focus would be more effective and generation of income through various employment-propagating programmes like MGNREGS would be extremely helpful.

Educational infrastructure is also observed to play a very important role in this regard and therefore spatial expansion of educational infrastructure with more emphasis on elementary education would be very useful in eradicating child labour. An emerging idea regarding educational infrastructure is that at the aggregate level we have to some extent overcome the stage where there was acute shortage of physical infrastructure viz. lack of school buildings

etc. It is believed that now the bottleneck arises mainly in terms of the human component, namely availability of teachers. The main task therefore is to ensure that the schools are adequately staffed and teachers have ample time to take care of individual students. This will also make learning enjoyable and attract & retain young children in schools. The nature of working of the schools also needs to be revamped as informal institutions started under different schemes of Sarva Shiksha Mission (SSM) are often found to be highly effective in bringing out of school children under the umbrella of education. It is quite interesting that proportion of children attending educational institutes in subsidiary status is increasing over time and can be attributed to SSM. Perhaps the non-conventional schooling hours and informal system of teaching have suited them whereby they can attend classes even after finishing their assigned duties. Such an approach will fulfil the promise of right to education of children without compromising on their broader right to (earn and) live.

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