

Child Labour, Reality, Challenges and Policies— A Case Study in Dibrugarh Town, (Assam)

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Encarta Encyclopaedia (2009), “child labour as a designation was formerly applied to the practice of employing young children in factories”¹. In the contemporary societies, this designation is used to denote the employment of minors generally, especially in work that may interfere with their education or endanger their health, or harm them physically, mentally, and morally. However, those who are interested in research of this kind should bear in mind that there is no universally accepted definition of “child labour”. Child labour includes both paid and unpaid work. It exists in many forms, such as: domestic, agricultural, industrial work, slavery and forced labour, recruitment for armed conflict, prostitution and use for other illicit activities such as drug trafficking, etc.

Throughout the ages and in all cultures children joined with their parents to work in the fields, in the marketplace, and around the home as soon as they were old enough to perform simple tasks. Wikipedia (2009) assert that the use of child labour was not regarded a social problem until the introduction of the factory system and the advent of universal schooling was accompanied by the emergence of the concepts of workers’ and children’s rights. This issue has long been viewed with indifference, but in the last decade the situation has changed dramatically. Child labour has been attracting growing attention and has emerged as the single most important source of child exploitation and abuse in the world today². It is considered as one of the worst examples of human rights violation.

Guiding Questions: This study aims at answering the following main questions. On the basis of these questions I raised several questions to informants in the course of interviewing and focus group discussions.

1. Why do children work?
2. What are the negative and positive impacts of child labour on the working children?

General Objective: The main intention of the study is to assess child labour in the informal sector in the case of Dibrugarh localities together with its causes, impacts, challenges, and the perceptions toward ‘child labour’. In order to realize this general objective, the study focuses on the following specific objectives.

2. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The study has the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the causes for the involvement of children in the labour market;
2. To describe the social, economic, health, educational and psychological impacts of child labour on the working children;
3. To assess the challenges and abusive practices that these working children face.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The “labour market” discourse focuses on legal measures meant to limit children’s participation in the labour market. According to this perspective considers work and schooling as incompatible and insists that children should not be allowed to work until they have finished their basic education.³

The “human capital” discourse aims to equip children with educational skills presumably able to increase their labour standards later in adulthood. According to this perspective, child labour is seen as the result of underdevelopment and defined as work and/or working conditions that undermine development of health status, knowledge and skills that children will require to contribute in adult life to both national economic development and their own prosperity.⁴

The “social responsibility” discourse sees child labour as a consequence of “social exclusion” which prevents children from benefiting from society’s protection. According to this

approach, the problem of child labour is explained as the result of social breakdown of family, community or nation.⁵

The “*children-centered*” discourse is given by CRC (Convention on the Rights of Children) and focuses on children’s own views on work. Some put it organizations with this perspective assess children’s work according to the effects it has on children, so that child labour is defined as work that is harmful to them.

4. METHODOLOGY

Primary data collection method was the main technique that I employed to gather information from the working children and other concerned individuals in the study areas. To ensure the contribution of this study, I have collected first hand information through the following techniques from children and different members of the society. Purposive and Stratified sampling method is applied is used to conduct the study.

Structured (In-Depth) Interview: To obtain more detail and meaningful answers on sensitive and personal topics, I, undertook in-depth interviews with a total of 35 working children in the town, who have been identified working in the study areas. Participants in the in-depth interview were from both sexes, employed and self employed working children.

Unstructured (Informal) Interview: I undertook unstructured interview methodology with 35 informants to supplement the information gathered from structured or the in-depth interview. A good number of respondents for this unstructured interview were child labourers from different categories and modes of employment, two employers, and four individuals who came from the society

Significance of the Study: The findings of the research highlight the problems facing child labourers in Dibrugarh town. This has ethical implications because accurate information on the circumstances under which such people engage in work, the conditions of their current work and the impact of their work will help governments (i.e. both Federal and Regional Governments), nongovernmental organizations and civil societies to adopt strategies that can mitigate the problem of children in difficult situations, such as child labourers.⁶ Understanding the causes, trends and consequences of child labour will help in planning intervention strategies aimed at preventing or at least minimizing the harsh effects of child labour and the number of children in the informal sector and other economic areas of child labour exploitation. Above all, this research will add to the limited knowledge in general. And as much as possible it will provide an anthropological insight into child labour and its health, social, economic, educational and psychological impacts on the working children.

Literature Review: In the context of child labour, under ILO Convention No. 138 Concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, 1973, a child is a person who is below the general limit of fifteen years or in special circumstances fourteen years (ILO Convention No. 138, 1973). The Convention, however, sets the minimum age for hazardous work at eighteen years (Ibid, Article 3(1)). In the convention a minimum age of twelve or thirteen is set for the purpose of light work (Ibid, Article 7). Likewise, the latest ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999, Article 2) defines a child to be a person who is below the age of eighteen years. In some communities, age may not be an adequate ground for explaining “childhood”.⁷ One major difficulty with respect to the understanding of “child labour” is its definition (ILO/EAMAT, 1995:75). This is because of the fact that, the concept of child labour is notoriously hard to define and culturally bounded (Pantea, 2007: 7). Consequently, it may be understood differently in different cultures (White, 1999 as cited in Pantea, 2007). Generally, the concept is not as easy and direct as it may come into view. Therefore, answering the question “what is child labour?” is vital (ILO/EAMAT, 1995: 75) not only to explain the issue of “child labour” but also to formulate intervention policies that would mitigate the problem. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 1998a), on one hand, considers child labour to be “simply the single most important source of child exploitation and child abuse in the world today”.⁸ On the other hand, Anti-Slavery International¹, USDOL (2002: 7), and Rogers and Swinnerton (2002:4) suggest that some types of work make useful contribution to a child’s development. Work can help children to learn about responsibility and develop particular skills that will benefit them, their families and the rest of the society. This kind of argument is important for my study in order to consider the pros and cons of child labour. For instance, the UN (as cited by Nkurlu, 2000:1) defines child labour as “all forms of economic exploitation, any work that is likely to be hazardous or interfere with the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development”. Furthermore, in its recent global estimates of child labour, the ILO/IPEC (2002:32) defines child labour as consisting of *all children under 15 years of age who are economically active excluding (i) those who are under 5 years old and (ii) those between 12-14 years old who spend less than 14 hours a week on their jobs, unless their activities or occupations are hazardous by nature or circumstance. Added to this are 15-17 years old children in the worst forms of child labour.*

Anti-slavery International¹ and UNICEF (1999:24) claims that child labour is exploitative if it involves any of the following:

- Full-time work at too early an age;
- many hours spent working;
- Work that exerts undue physical, social or psychological stress;

- Work and life on the street in bad conditions;
- Inadequate pay;
- Too much responsibility,
- Work that hampers access to education;
- Work that undermines children's dignity and self-esteem, such as slavery or bonded labour and sexual exploitation;
- Work that is detrimental to full social and psychological development

Child labour is a special vehicle of transforming the child and adopting it to the environment, a mechanism of socializing the child. The socialization process of children may to some extent differ from culture to culture and from one part of the country to the other. Though it is difficult to classify the diversified economic activities of children, several literatures on the subject often categorize children's work into: *domestic work*—which is the most prevalent form of child labour. Working children in this category usually perform tasks which are traditionally left for women. As a result of this, the majority of domestic child workers is female. Another exploitative aspect of child labor is related to the inability of the working children to develop their innate capacities and skills. Another exploitative aspect of child labor is related to the inability of the working children to develop their innate capacities and skills. In India, a large number of girls are engaged in activities such as collection of firewood in rural areas, rag-picking in urban areas, and household work. These are not considered to be economic activities, and none of the national laws in force provide any social or economic protection to this group. The report prepared by Human Rights Watch titled "*The small hands of slavery: bonded child labor in India*" (2003) thus summarizes numerous cases of debt bondage in India as a real manifestation of modern-day slavery:

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From my study, the following reasons are responsible for child labour in the study area, which is also very common in all the places.

- a) **Poverty:** Poverty as a major cause of child labour is exhaustively discussed by different studies on the subject.⁹ We have found that poverty is major reason for the engagement of children in productive activities in the informal sector. Most of my informants came from poor families. As a result of their parents' terrible economic background, children are forced to perform difficult tasks at their early age to supplement their parents' marginal income. Work is necessary for these children in order to satisfy their basic needs, particularly food. Children should go to the nearby street to get food or cash. Their parents are not usually in a position to feed them. So, they have to work.

- b) **Parental Unemployment:** Though it is not a serious cause of child labour in the study areas, there are some parents who send their children to work to compensate their unemployment. As one of my informants, Mussie (a 14 years old boy), told me, his father is out of job for the last two years.¹⁰ Due to the lack of employment opportunities of the parents, children of such are bound to work for their livelihood.
- c) **Migration:** Migration takes place in various forms throughout the world such as rural-rural, rural urban, urban-rural and urban-urban and are caused by such factors as natural calamity, conflict, "development, pastorals or trade".¹¹ Migration is found to be one of the main causes of child labour in the study areas. Hence, search of land, land dispute, conflict and the subsequent blood feud in rural areas caused rural-urban migration of innocent children.
- d) **The Education System:** As many studies indicate, the education system per se has its own contribution to the prevalence of child labour.¹² It is obvious that child education plays a vital role to build up the personality of a child and the political, social and economic aspects of a nation as a whole. Before the change in the education system, children had the chance to combine work and education and thus they were working for less than seven hours in a day.
- e) **Family Disintegration:** The role of family is primarily the socializing and rearing of children. Children need love and affection from their parents, and parents have the responsibility to shape the behaviour of children when they grow up in a family. But the disintegration of family, the children become alone and helpless so they started working to get their regular food.
- f) **Child Trafficking:** Trafficking involves transporting people away from the communities in which they live, by the threat or use of violence, deception, or coercion so they can be exploited as forced or enslaved workers for sex or labour. When children are trafficked, no violence, deception or coercion needs to be involved; it is merely the act of transporting them into exploitative work which constitutes trafficking.

6. CONDITIONS OF CHILD LABOURERS

Educational Status of Child: The study reveals that child labourer are commonly uneducated and dropout children due to different reasons.

Table 1: Educational level of sample group

Educational Level	No. of Child
Illiterate	46
Lower Primary	16
Upper Primary	8

Source: Field Study

Gender Distribution of Child: The study shows that the numbers of girl child are found to be more in the study, Most of them are found working as a housemaid.

Table 2: Gender classification of the sample group

Male	Female
28	32

Source: Field Study

Living Conditions: Many of my informants are living and working either with their parents, relatives or with non-relatives such as employers, “guardians”, etc. These working children in both my research sites are leading a desperate life. Working children who are living far away from their parents and work and live on the street lead a desperate life. The bad status of their living is reflected by the place where they rest to the type of food they eat. Child labourers in both research sites are taking leftovers or breads from nearby restaurants and cafes to meet their nutritional need. Most of these nearby restaurants and cafes give leftovers for children only when they perform a sort of tasks such as supplying tap water in times of water shortage, dump garbage or waste matters, and serve as messengers. As far as their place of rest is concerned, some self-employed children live in group by renting a small room and some others, like child porters, are sleeping either on veranda or renting rooms for a night.

Table 3: Economic profile of sample group

Types of Work	Duration of Work	Working Hours	Payment
Housemaid	7 a.m. to 11/12 p.m	17/18 hours	700- 1200
Taxi boys	5/6 a.m. to 9 p.m	15 hours	1000- 1200
Shoe shiners	6 a.m. to 6 p.m	13 hours	700- 1000
Workshop apprentices	8 a.m. to 5/6 p.m.	9 hours	1000- 1200
Street vendors	6 a.m. to 8 p.m.	14 hours	800- 1000
Garage apprentices	8 a.m. to 6/7 p.m.	11 hours	1000- 1300
Scrap metal collectors			600/ 700
Hotel Boy	7am to 9/10 p. M		1000- 1200

Source: Case Study

Working and Economic Conditions: As we have seen from the above discussion and table, children in the informal sector are working for long hours at their early age. They use their immature physical and mental stamina for long hours to produce something useful either to support their family or meet their basic needs. Moreover, they do not have time to play and interact with their age mates and friends; especially employed child labourers couldn't get enough time for rest and to have their food.

Health: Some of these occupations are health threatening. Thus, it is safe to say that children in the study areas are

exposed to different kind of health problems because of either the difficulty of the tasks they perform or the living and working conditions they experience. Besides working children who have direct contact with cars like garage apprentices, car cleaners and (taxi boys), and scrap iron collectors and tree cutters face with minor and rarely serious wounds or injuries. These have a serious impact on their overall physical growth. The working environments in most cases are unsafe.¹³

Psychological Impact: The involvement of children in productive works can have negative impacts on the psycho-social growth of children, when it becomes arduous and exploitative or alienated them from their family. If the child is assigned to work for too long hours, he/she does not have the chance to play and to interact with his/ her peer group; their social and psychological development can be gravely hampered.¹⁴ They miss out their families love and affection. Most of them are trafficked at their early age and thus they do not know anything about family love and affection at all.

Positive Impacts: There are children in the study areas who value their work as means to reach at the level of self-reliance. In this respect, self-employed children are the one to be mentioned. Furthermore, working children who engaged in productive activities to supplement their family's meagre income developed good sense of responsibility especially for their younger siblings. The other most important contribution of work to children is that it helps them learn the skill of that particular business. And it enables them to be more interacting or sociable with so many people and working peers.

Suggestions and Conclusion: The problems of child labour cannot be solved immediately, it will take time and government, family and different NGOs should give importance regarding this issue. Problems of poverty and employment of the people should be given priority so that parents will not send their children for work. Moreover attitude of the people should be changed regarding child labour and sympathy and minimum facilities should be provided since the problems cannot be solved instantly. Awareness should be created regarding education, better health and human right among the child labourer and among the family especially to the poor who send their child for work. Although there are some positive aspects child labour is a threat to the human right. It creates lots of socio- economic problems and it is a sign of backwardness of economic and social scenario of a nation.

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