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CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA

AUTHORED BY - TANYA SAHU

5th Year B.A LL.B Student at Banasthali Vidyapith

Abstract

Survival pushes kids into work, especially where poverty bites hard - India faces this sharply when household earnings don't stretch far. Joblessness spreads through low-income communities, leaving few options behind. As families expand fast, wages stay flat, pulling younger hands into labour just to afford food. Schools sit out of reach, sometimes too distant or ignored entirely. Parents may not see how learning today shields a child tomorrow, while early work wears down bodies and minds slowly. Missing classrooms become normal, almost invisible, even as futures shrink without notice.

Yet things are shifting now, driven by rising worldwide concern, hitting its peak. India's founding law clearly puts children's well-being ahead of profit, seeing safe childhoods as a core responsibility. For turning words into results, officials formed many groups meant to uncover why child labour persists and suggest real answers. In the end, most agree today's rules need more than quick patches; they should tackle deep hardship and broken schooling in equal measure to protect those coming after us.

Introduction

A kid skipping school to work gets called child labour. True enough. Yet messy too. Since it's not just sweatshops or risky tasks, think of kids earning cash, assisting relatives, sweeping stores, and cleaning houses. The law says under fourteen means no manual effort allowed, regardless of pressure or willingness. Feels rigid. Life, though, isn't always that clear.

A child stirs before sunrise. Not books on his mind, instead the weight of tools in his hand alongside his dad among the crops. Complaints stay locked inside him, silenced out of necessity, not strength. Pennies earned, barely enough, yet placed carefully into hands that need even less to feel relief. Here, far from debate halls, poverty stops being an idea. Grown-ups here do not pick this path because they want it; often, paths vanish behind them one by one.

Everywhere now, kids work. Across the world. Yet deeper shadows fall in places such as India, where vast numbers of young ones move quietly through jobs, shaping parts of daily trade. Odd truth. That phrase - child labour - usually stings, since it points to harshness: tasks robbing youth, school, and laughter too. In words shaped by Homer Floks, such effort blocks how a child grows, studies, and finds time to run.

Here lies the heartbreak. Kids should bloom as tomorrow's hope, bright sparks ready to grow. Yet so many miss out on being young altogether. Hardship moves fast, no pause for age. Starvation, lack of shelter, struggle, they grip tight from the start. Rural spots feel it deeper, where every day demands more just to stay afloat.

Child labour was there before, showing up in many shapes across history. Still, the heart of it never shifts. Young years gone too soon. Grown-up weight dropped on small shoulders. One hard truth - we're stuck without a clear reply.

And the tragedy is that. Children are viewed as society's "flowers," full of potential and the future. However, a lot of them never truly experience childhood. Hunger, poverty, and substandard living conditions don't wait. They seize control early. Particularly in rural areas, where living is already more difficult.

Therefore, it is true that child labour has always existed, albeit in different forms and at different times. However, the narrative doesn't change. A childhood lost. Forced adulthood. And a query that still lacks a straightforward response.

Characteristics of Child Labour

Kids working isn't a single issue. It takes different shapes. Clear at times. Other moments out of sight. Yet some signs appear nearly every time. Take low pay below legal limits or endless shifts for pennies, if anything. Harm follows close behind. Injuries. Stress. Sadness. Worst situations? They twist into something grim - kids trapped in slavery, moved against their will, chained by debts, made to work without choice. Honestly, just seeing it written feels heavy.

A kid, around twelve years old, sits hunched in a shadowed room, threading needle after needle through cloth. This isn't play - it's how they survive. While hands move fast with fabric, their seat at school stay empty. Missing class means missing lessons, textbooks, and laughter on the

field. Instead, there's only stitching, cutting, and folding. Often, kids get picked for jobs like these simply because wages sink lower and bosses face less pushback. The work suits those who pay for it. It harms those doing it.

Everywhere you look, kids are working. Most of them - about six out of ten - are on farms. Picture small hands harvesting cocoa in the Ivory Coast, dust-covered fields where Egyptian children pick cotton, rows of tea plants in Bangladesh bent under the weight of young backs. Seems ordinary? Wrong. Out there, the sun beats down hard, chemicals hang in the air, hunger gnaws, and clean water vanishes. Life bites. Bites deep.

A child swings a hammer at a stone before sunrise, just seven years old. Danger hides in every shovel full of dirt they move. Some crawl beneath the earth, shoulders bent under sacks too big for grown hands. A nine-year-old counts sticks of dynamite like school chalk. Hard to believe? Yet it unfolds each morning. Gold mines in Colombia chew up childhoods just as chrome pits do in Zimbabwe. Coal towns in Mongolia breathe dust mixed with small footprints.

A closer look at India reveals a pattern spotted by the **HAQ Centre for Child Rights**¹: children from Scheduled Tribes, Muslim families, Scheduled Castes, and OBC groups often face higher rates of work instead of school. What lies behind this? Not just one cause. Laws exist, yet they're rarely enforced. Government systems run slowly, if they respond at all. Meanwhile, businesses find an advantage here - lower pay keeps their costs down, pushing wages lower across the board. It follows basic market logic. Just harder to swallow when real lives are shaped by it.

Hard times run deeper than most see. When families lose their homes to big new projects, everything shifts. Jobs disappear, sometimes for good. Farmers take extreme steps under pressure that no one talks about enough. Medical care gets harder to afford each year. Tensions grow, then explode. These forces pull kids from classrooms straight into labour. Girls face this more often. Some never leave the house at all - just clean, cook, and carry water inside four walls. Unseen. Working without notice.

Somewhere, without noise, determination fades too. Rules sit on paper. Yet action crawls

¹ <https://share.google/OGhKnoXBO1nxIKHYD> | Working to Promote and Protect the Rights of All Children | HAQ Centre for Child Rights (HAQCRC)

behind. The loop drags on. Little hands are busy at jobs. Young years vanishing like smoke. While eyes stay fixed, mostly silent.

Causes of Child Labour

Poverty kicks off the chain. That single fact shapes lives in ways some never see coming. The International Labour Organisation points straight at it. Not as a side note, but the core reason. Kids work because homes need money, not desire. A quarter to nearly half of what families earn can come from children. Picture that weight on small shoulders. A tiny kid, weighed down by something way too heavy. Harsch², then Edmonds, and later Pavcnik - each found nearly the same thing. Not one nation but many. Yet always the outcome lines up.

A single coin from small hands can shift the weight at home. Picture a household tucked between hills, where work does not come easily. One parent scrapes by on patchy wages. So does the other. When school stops making sense, the boy takes up space behind a counter or under the hot sun rows. Earnings are thin, true. Still, they stretch what little there is. The kitchen stays busy. That makes things hard - does the kid go to school, yet dinner still needs cooking? Never simple. Not even close.

Here's another cause: options are missing. Seems basic, yet matters deeply. Kids end up working since there's truly no other path open. Getting to school might mean walking miles, paying costs families can't handle, or facing classrooms that barely teach. Most kids working today live far from cities, scattered across villages. Where learning should happen, buildings often do not exist. When one does stand nearby, grown-ups may see lessons as weak - teachers untrained, rooms empty. That makes them wonder why send anyone at all. Earning skills feels more real than sitting quietly.

Culture shows up next. True, what folks believe plays a role. Some communities hold that labour shapes who you become. Learning trades young is seen as normal there. Across tiny shops run by families or jobs without contracts, kids often step into the roles their parents held before them. Wrong? They do not see it that way at all. Life simply goes on like this. For girls, though, things tilt further downhill. School slips away, treated as unimportant. They land in kitchens and courtyards, working out of sight. Silence follows their steps. No one names what

² <https://share.google/rcCh4NWL8NIs9Hak6> Conceptual and Descriptive Study of Child Labour

they give.

Beyond individual factors, wider economic forces play a role. In nations such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, research by **Biggeri and Mehrotra**³uncovered patterns. What stood out became clear after time - child work existed long before now. Around for generations, it persists despite shifts in society. Still, today's economies keep feeding it. What people want plays a role. Jobs without contracts often rely on low wages. Cheap work opens doors, especially for kids. Outdated tools, slow industries, strict hiring rules - these pile up. That reality pushes more young people into labour.

Now consider the little everyday motives. More money matters to households. Firms look to spend less on workers. Kids get picked now and then since they follow orders more easily, speak up less, and cause fewer headaches. Odd thinking. Yet it happens.

A kid shows up first, growing older quicker than childhood allows. What brings this about? Not any single reason stands alone. Pulling threads reveals poverty's grip, yes. But also habits passed down through the years. Rules meant to protect often bend, sometimes break. Systems built long ago still shape today's limits. Together - though never neatly - they weave a picture no one planned. At the centre, always, breathes that child.

Child Labour Issues in India

A kid too young to be working wipes down a counter at dawn. Everywhere you look, children move through jobs meant for adults. One little girl carries bricks, her back bent under the weight she should never have to feel. Because money comes from any job that pays, families accept it. These boys miss school while others their age play. Their time was stolen by work done out of need. Lives shaped before they get to choose.

Out of reach, education often vanishes. Like smoke. Without it, days repeat - no shift, barely a change. Rules exist, sure. Written down, bold letters. Yet truthfully, how many actually stick to them? A few at best.

Folks shout to outlaw it completely. True enough. Yet afterward? Without recovery programs,

³ Child Labour in Industrial Outworker Households in India, Mario Biggeri, Santosh Mehrotra and Ratna Sudarshan

without help, children face worse hardship. Money struggles play a major role - still, not everything. Low-cost workers carry the same weight.

One way or another, things won't change unless support grows stronger. School without cost, actual aid instead of only laws. Without that shift, well, history keeps repeating itself.

Laws against Child Work in India

Way back when - 1881 - the idea of protecting kids at work quietly showed up. Not out of kindness, really. Britain pushed the first Factory Act mostly to help itself. Children under seven were finally kept out of factories. Workdays got shorter. A few days off appeared now and then. It wasn't perfect by far. Truth is, it barely scratched the surface. Yet somehow, a start had been made.

Step by step, new rules appeared. Not all at once. Each fitting somehow, like parts clicking into place. The Children (Pledging of Labour) Act came into effect in 1933. After that, the Employment of Children Act followed four years later. After that came the heavyweights - Factories Act 1948, then Mines Act 1952, one after another. Seems endless? Truth is, it kind of was.

A child stands inside a noisy workshop. Rules claim to guard his days. Yet truth hides behind paper promises. Often, those words fail. Not every time - but close.

Out in the world, others had a say too. Ideas slipped in from ILO guidelines, quietly shaping choices. Many of those concepts found their way into Indian law. Paper by paper, it builds up - a solid frame on display. Every gap seems filled at first glance.

Out of nowhere, a real shift arrived. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act appeared in 1986. Not small news. This rule blocked kids under fourteen from dangerous work. Named jobs. Included tasks. Set limits on hours and safety when children work legally. Punishments followed if broken. Felt firm at the time.

Truth is, though. Efforts to enforce can fall short now and then. Rules are on paper, yet carrying them out often wobbles.

Years passed before anyone tried changing it. The 2012 update aimed higher - no kids under eighteen allowed near dangerous jobs. Seemed like progress. Still, passing a rule doesn't mean it sticks.

True, India has plenty of laws on paper. A solid setup exists. Yet that's only half the picture. Without real-world practice... rules stay trapped in documents. Seen. Never felt.

Judicial Steps on Child Labor Issues

That year, 1996, the Supreme Court stepped in. A case named **MC Mehta versus State of Tamil Nadu**⁴, official sounding, yes. Yet beneath the legal words, actual children were trapped in hardship. The judges made clear: start by locating these young ones. Carry out an accurate count. Since so many stay unseen, slipping through gaps, unrecorded.

Start by pulling kids out of dangerous jobs. Right away. School should be next. Sounds straightforward. Doing it? Not so much.

Fine involved. Anyone hiring kids must hand over twenty thousand rupees for each one caught working. This sum lands in a help-focused pool. Positive move, sure. Yet the truth is, payments happen - but not every time.

Not just focused on punishment, the court looked at home life too. A wise choice. Offer a job to an adult tied to the child. When that fails, the government steps in with ₹5,000. Without money coming in, kids often return to labour. That pattern runs deep... hard to stop.

Here's another thing. When a kid works in a safe job, the time spent shouldn't go beyond six hours daily. Besides that, schooling must take up at least two hours. Oddly enough, the boss covers school costs. Seems balanced somehow.

Funny how paper trails grew thick with promises. Courts saw filings, reports stacking up like old mail. Yet what actually changed out there stayed unclear. Seasons turned, paperwork piled higher. Truth is, results never quite matched the claims.

⁴ AIR 1997 SUPREME COURT 699

Out of nowhere appeared the National Child Labour Policy in 1987. A broad blueprint it was. More than rules, actually - meant to shift how things grew. Aimed at homes first, then lack, and next learning. Almost like tending a garden from the roots up. Sounded right when written down.

Picture a kid pulled from labour, now seated in a makeshift classroom - meals served, cash provided, lessons creeping forward. This is the core of the NCLP program, launched back in 1988. Across thousands of centres, hundreds of thousands have passed through its doors. Yet gaps remain wide; plenty still slip beyond reach.

True, judges stepped in. The state made moves too. Action has been taken. Yet the issue holds tight. It refuses to loosen its grip. Rules talk loudly. Plans make claims. Still, without shifts where it matters most... kids keep working. Without a sound.

Conclusion

Because poverty drives this issue, simply cracking down isn't enough. Officials at the state level lead efforts, carrying out routine checks and surprise visits to uncover wrongdoing. Tougher laws are being applied, yet support systems move alongside them. Help for affected kids takes centre stage, paired with moves to boost household incomes. Action happens on multiple fronts, not just punishment but also long-term care. Progress depends less on rules than on lifting families. Steps aimed at detection - toward lasting change behind the scenes. Real difference shows where aid meets accountability