

## ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS IN THE ERADICATION OF CHILD LABOUR: A CASE STUDY IN KARNATAKA

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### Abstract

*Child labour, wherever it is practiced, is inhuman. It is a universal problem but its incidence is more in underdeveloped countries. The most important cause for this is poverty. Article 24 of the Indian Constitution prohibits employing children below the age of 14 years. Further, the Centre and the states have brought out laws and legislations from time to time, abolishing child labour. In spite of these prohibitive measures, the abuse of children in India is going on surreptitiously. Of late, many voluntary and non-governmental organisations have evinced interest in putting a halt to child labour. However, field experience shows that these organisations are finding it difficult to make any headway in the matter due to the nexus between the politicians, bureaucrats and the businessmen. The solution for this problem lies in both short and long term measures. In the short term, strong awareness should be created among the rural masses and also on those who employ children in their concerns. The long-term measures, among others, are providing free educational facilities, reduction in poverty and human resource development. The paper details the activities by ICDSS, a VO in Karnataka, towards the eradication of child labour.*

### Introduction

Child labour is a universal problem. But it is more pronounced in underdeveloped countries. In India, child labour prevails since ancient days

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in different forms. The children below 14 years of age are considered child labourers. The most common factor for child labour is poverty among the weaker sections of the society. Inadequate earnings of a family force young children to work and supplement family income. The other major factors that are responsible for child labour are meagre income from agriculture, lack of educational and health facilities, addiction to alcohol by the parents, exploitation, prejudice about the availability of employment and many more. Child labour primarily is of two types. One, working for self (households, fields and units) and second, working for others for a remuneration. Child labour is pervasive in all types of occupations. Most common sight of child labour is in agriculture, domestic works, cottage, tiny and small-scale industrial units, hotels and restaurants and in the service sector. The employers normally prefer children, as they are cheap, amenable and lured easily.

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) estimates show that in the age group of 5 – 14, there are 250 million child labourers in the world. Out of this, 120 million are in full time employment (Deccan Herald, 1997a). In India, the number of child workers is increasing over the years. According to the 1961 census there were 14.5 million child workers. In 1971 it declined to 10.7 million but rose to 13.6 million during the 1981 census. The tentative estimates of child labourers in India now, range between 18 to 60 million. Besides, different organisations which have estimated the extent of child labour in India, have given different figures. For instance, the National Sample Survey, 27<sup>th</sup> round places it at 17 million, of which 15.1 million are in rural and 1.9 million are in urban areas. The Operation Research Group, Baroda, has estimated child labour at 44 million in 1983. However, some argue that the above figures are conservative estimates. Anyway, all the estimates reveal the alarming proportions of child workers in India. The ILO's findings reveal that in absolute terms, the magnitude of child labour in India is the highest (ILO, 1988).

Visualising this in human practice, the framers of the Constitution prohibited child labour under Article 24. It states that, "No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment." (Government of India, 1986: 9). Article 39 under the directive principles of State Policy also states protection of children against any form of abuse (Government of India, 1986: 14). The Central government under the Factories Act, 1948 prohibits employing children below

14 years. The Mines Act, 1952, and the State Shops and Commercial Establishments Act also prohibit employing children. Again, the Central government passed in 1986, a Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act prohibiting child labour. The State governments are the appropriate agencies for enforcing these in majority of areas in which children work. Despite these laws and legislations child labour is on the increase. This is because of laxity in the implementation and loopholes in the Acts. The Supreme Court of India recently issued directions to the authorities for strict implementation of the Act, i.e. identification, release and rehabilitation of working children and to conduct survey of child labourers throughout the country (Deccan Herald, 1997b).

Of late, the concern for Indian child labour is manifested at the international level in different forms. Germany has stopped buying rugs and carpets from India on the ground that they are made by child labourers. Similarly, the United States has introduced a bill in its Senate for imposing trade sanctions on importing Indian carpets produced by child workers. This kind of trade restrictions by foreign countries may spread to other goods and services on the pretext of child labour. Ultimately, the country will be the loser: not only on moral grounds but also on the foreign exchange earnings.

## Welfare Measures for Children

Realising that the problem cannot be solved through legislations and labour department, the Central and the State governments have launched a large number of welfare schemes for child labourers and girl children. One of the schemes launched recently is the 'National Child Labour Project Society', which envisages the establishment of special schools for child labourers in different districts. It also envisages supply of uniforms and incentives to the families of child labourers. The Central government on October 2, 1997, introduced another scheme for girl child, which envisages free education, nutrition and health care facilities for girls belonging to poor families born after 15 August 1997. Further, a provision of one time grant of Rs.500 for each girl in the families below the poverty line has been made.

Though these schemes have been launched with good intention, the question that haunts is whether they would succeed in their objectives. The experience of the working of anti-poverty schemes in the country is one of their poor performances. Therefore, the new schemes meant for girl child and child

labourers may also meet the same fate. The important reasons for the failure of government sponsored anti-poverty programs are bureaucratic control, lethargy, lack of dedication and non-involvement of voluntary and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Wherever VOs and NGOs are involved in the implementation of such programmes, there has been a good success. This suggests that there is a need for involving VOs/NGOs in large scale in the eradication of child labour and in enhancing the success of child related welfare programs. However, one has to be more cautious in selecting the genuine VOs/NGOs who have good track of service record.

## Objectives of the study

With the above background, this paper makes an attempt to sketch the role of a voluntary organisation (VO) in the eradication of child labour. For this purpose 'India Community Development Service Society' (ICDSS), engaged actively in the child related issues in Magadi Taluk of Bangalore Rural District, was selected. The broad objectives of the paper are to discuss:

- a) the structural and functional status of the VO
- b) the factors that led to taking up the cause of child labour
- c) the role played in the field, and
- d) problems and prospects

It is a descriptive study. Based on the discussions held with the functionaries of the VO, analysis has been carried out and findings are presented in the paper. Before going into the above, a brief background of the district where the selected VO is operating, is presented here.

The district of Bangalore was bifurcated into Bangalore Urban and Bangalore Rural districts in the year 1986. Bangalore Rural district comprises eight taluks. These taluks are situated around the Bangalore City. Some of the taluks namely, Hoskote, Doddaballapur, Ramanagara are developed ones and some other taluks namely, Magadi, Devanahalli, Channapatna are backward (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 1995). Agriculture is the predominant occupation in all these taluks. However, sericulture has become a remunerative occupation for large number of families in recent years. Consequent to the development of sericulture, a large number of silk reeling and twisting units have come up in almost all the taluks. The landless and the poor send their children to work in these units. In Bangalore Rural district, it is estimated that there are about 48,634 child labourers working in different occupations (Census of India, 1991). Out of the eight taluks in the district, Magadi accounts for the largest number of child labourers, followed by Ramanagara, Doddaballapur and Kanakapura.

## I. ICDSS: Structure and Functional Status

The ICDSS is a registered voluntary organisation established in the year 1983 having its headquarters in Bangalore. The idea of establishing this organisation came from a person who was residing in the state of Kerala. The general objective of this organisation is to work in rural areas and to work for the exploited. It may be tribals, *dalits* (*harijans*, scheduled castes) or child labourers. In the course of this, they organise the oppressed and the exploited to get their due share, develop leadership qualities among the working groups, conduct need based training programs, non-formal night schools, etc.

The ICDSS is a small organisation. In the initial years it had only 2 to 3 volunteers working, without expecting any monetary benefit. During 1990 another five volunteers joined the organisation. Besides, it encouraged some persons in the selected villages to be its volunteers. Thus, currently there are 17 village volunteers working and helping this organisation in different villages.

The financial base of the organisation is not strong. Initially it has worked on its own, with the contributions from the volunteers and people in the villages. Later, a German funding agency, namely, the 'Terre Des Homes' (TDH) made a three-year contract with this organisation and financed its activities. At present a Dutch agency is providing funds to the VO as the earlier financing agency's contract expired. Beside, efforts have been made to get financial assistance from 'CAPART'. Owing to financial problems, it could not pursue the issues in a larger scale.

## II. Factors Responsible for taking up the Cause of Child Labour

When the State government declared elections to the *panchayat raj* institutions in 1987, this VO adopted a few villages in Channapatna *taluk* for awareness build up among the voters. The aspects covered included the right to vote, voting power, contents of *Panchayat Raj Act*, etc. They found good response for this program. During 1990s, a water tank was taken up for rehabilitation in Magadi *taluk* and they facilitated the formation of a water management committee. In the above programmes it had involved people in various stages of work.

Its major activity during this period was to highlight the existence of tribal caste people and their problems in Magadi *taluk*. The State government hitherto was of the view that there were no tribals in Bangalore Rural district. However, this organisation took up the issue and found tribal households in a village.

Those tribals were called 'Eerulli Das' (*Kadu Pujari*). For those tribals, it conducted meetings during night times to explain their origin, forest rights, special program for tribals like the 'Integrated Tribal Development Programme' (ITDP). The next step included formation of a *taluk* level association of the community called 'Magadi Taluk Girijan Sangha'. This association in turn has been linked to the district and state level associations. These developments made the state government to recognise them as tribals. The above activities were carried out with the cost borne by the volunteers themselves.

After the success in the above, it took up the problems of *dalits* (Scheduled Castes) in the same *taluk*. In the first instance, it adopted 10 villages and helped the *dalits* to form an association to fight against the atrocities and oppressions. Special emphasis was also given to form women's 'self help groups' (SHGs) and through this, the people imbibed thrift and credit management and children's education. While working for the betterment of tribals and *dalits* in Magadi *taluk*, they came across small children going for work in the silk reeling and twisting factories in the town. They then thought of emancipation of these children from the clutches of employers. Their role in this regard is brought out in the following paragraphs.

### III. Role in the Eradication of Child Labour

#### a) *The System and Working Conditions*

With a view to releasing child labourers from the clutches of the employers, the VO's first act was to collect information on various aspects relating to the conditions of the families of the child workers, employers, working conditions, etc. According to its estimate there are more than 1000 silk twisting/reeling units in and around the Magadi town. The owners of these units mainly belong to Devanga, Vokkaliga and Muslim communities. More than 10,000 children are estimated to be working in these units. Out of this, 60 per cent are girl children. Each unit employs an average of 20 to 25 children. These children commute daily by buses from different villages and the distance ranges from 15 to 20 k.m. Some of them have to walk a distance of 2-3 k.m. from their villages to catch the bus. The age of children ranges between 5 and 15 years. The children are normally from the landless poor SC/ST and Muslim families. There are cases, where 4 to 6 working children belong to a single family. The parents of these children are paid an advance, amounts ranging from Rs. 2,000 to Rs.20,000, by the employers. This binds the children to work in the units till this advance is returned to the owners or deducted from the child's earnings. The difference between these labourers and the bonded labour is that in the former case, they return to their homes after a day's work whereas in the latter, they live in the employer's house. No wages are given in the first

three months. This is treated as apprenticeship and skill learning period. The wages are calculated on the basis of number of hours worked. It varies from 25 paise to Rs.2 per hour. Normally the experienced will get more. The payment will be made weekly and the amount to each child ranges from Rs.80 to Rs.100. The normal working hours are from 7.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. The work place will always be congested with machines. There will not be proper air and light. There is sharp sound of machines. The children are prone to diseases specially boils on the skin. The female labourers are the most sufferers. They have to undergo not only disorder in their periods but also social stigma attached as they travel from a far off place and in the night. The employers serve no food to the workers. The children have to bring food from their homes.

#### *b) The Field Action*

After collecting all the above information, the VO evolved various strategies to release them from the clutches of employers. The strategies adopted related to, firstly, building rapport with the children and their parents, second, to seek the help of state labour department, next, to convince the factory owners of their mistake in employing the children, and later, to put political pressure, and finally legal recourse.

For the success of any movement, it is essential in the first place to build rapport with the target group. The ICDSS had done the same in the beginning. First, they started 10 non- formal education centres in different villages. Through this they could extract clues from the children about the nature of their work and conditions. It revealed that the children had no interest to work but their parents forced them to render labour due to extreme poverty. The majority of the parents knew that they were committing crime but they were not in a position to repay the advance money taken from the owners for the release of their children.

There is a labour department at the state level, which looks after various aspects of the factory sector. Mainly, it has to check whether the factories have obtained licenses and are registered in the industry department; whether labour laws have been followed, etc. At the *taluk* level, there will be one labour inspector. This officer has to visit factories periodically and inspect them. The officer in turn has to report to the district level office about the above information. The state level labour department headed by a Commissioner has to consolidate the information sent by district level offices and take suitable action wherever required. Unfortunately, in the study region, the labour inspector sent the

reports to the higher level office stating that there was no child labour in the area. This VO took up the issue with the Labour Commissioner, Bangalore, during 1997-98. The Labour Commissioner who had not believed in the existence of child labour, visited the *taluk* and inspected a sample of three silk reeling factories and found children working there. However, he could not do anything in the matter and escaped saying that they were not hazardous units.

The next step ICDSS took was to take up the issue with the owners themselves. For this, the organisation sought the help of other organisations such as 'Samasty' and 'Campaign Against Child Labour' (CACL). To fight with the owners, an 'Anti Child Labour Action Committee' was formed. It consisted of writers, members from youth clubs, and parents of child workers. The first thing this committee did was to serve notices to the factory owners to relieve the child workers immediately without any condition. It sought compensation for the families and asked them not to create any problem to the children and their parents and to put up 'no child labour' board in front of their units. The approach adopted was one of non-violence. To this, the factory owners ganged up and their defunct association was revived. They did not agree to the conditions put by the action committee and in turn they forwarded the condition that the parents of child workers should return the advance money taken in exchange for their release. Not only this, they inflated the advance amount paid to the parents. They also threatened the volunteers of serious consequences. Thus, the problems remained unsolved.

After these efforts, the organisation conducted various meetings in the town inviting local politicians. The local MLA was invited to a meeting and he attended it. But being a clever person he did not commit to anything. The problem was brought to the notice of the Councillors of the local Town *Panchayat*. They also kept silent since a few of them were the owners of the units. Then the matter was brought to the notice of State Labour Minister and there it has fallen on deaf ears.

The final weapon used was seeking legal remedy. The CACL filed a public interest litigation case against factory owners in the Karnataka High Court. After the initial hearings the court sought evidences from the petitioners. While collecting evidences, it came to the notice that the factory owners had no licence and the factory had not been registered under the Factory Act. That means they were illegally established. Secondly, power connection was secured illegally from the Karnataka Electricity Board. It showed the nexus between the politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. The factory owners had no other option but relieve child workers. Thus, 128 child workers have been relieved and rehabilitated and presently they are going to schools.



#### IV. Problems and Prospects

As observed above, a large number of problems come in the way of eradication of child labour. It is very difficult to convince the parents who are addicted to alcohol. Though factory owners are ready to relieve the children from their work, they should be given back the advance money taken by the parents of children. The labour department, supposed to be the watchdog of industrial relations specially the welfare of the workers and implementing the labour laws and laws relating to child labour, has become lethargic and hand in gloves with the employers. The local municipal Councillors, many of whom are the owners of silk factories, are against the movement for eradication of child labour. Politicians who should help the poor and support the strict implementation of laws are least bothered. And finally, the entire community response is not encouraging.

The prospects for eradicating child labour lies in making elementary schooling compulsory and free, and implementing it with genuine zeal. High priority should be given to human resource development. The women folk should join and fight together for the emancipation of child labour as has happened in Andhra Pradesh some seven years ago, over the issue of effecting prohibition. Legal Acts and Legislations should be tightened without giving room for loopholes. Before this, the problems of poverty, unemployment and under-employment should be tackled effectively.

A task force at the *taluk* level should be established. It should consist of parents of child labourers, ex-child labourers, members of youth clubs, teachers, representatives of local NGOs, *panchayat* members and labour inspector. If any case of child labour is found, it should be brought to the notice of the local *gram panchayat* and the same should be discussed in the *grama sabha* meetings. A final decision in this regard should be taken in the *panchayat* meeting and the same should be reported in the ensuing *grama sabha* meeting.

It should be made compulsory on the part of factory owners to put up 'no child labour' board in front of their units. They should not hesitate to allow if anybody intends to check whether children are employed in the units. If a few units display such boards, it will have a psychological bearing on other owners of the units and gradually they too will change their attitude towards child labour.

Public awareness campaigns should be organised in every village on a large scale, focusing the mental and physical torture of child workers.

Just like rehabilitation of bonded labourers, child labourers should be rehabilitated and sent to formal and non-formal schools. The parents of rehabilitated child labourers should be given preference under anti-poverty programmes.

As revealed above, certain VOs have been doing good work in different areas. However, the involvement of VOs/NGOs in the eradication of child labour is limited. It is high time that the government and the funding agencies encouraged such agencies in large number, so that, child labour is eradicated at the earliest.

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