



Child Labour in India: A Comprehensible Legal Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the complex issue of child labour in India, exploring its multifaceted nature within the socio-economic and cultural context. It critically analyzes the legal frameworks, primarily the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, assessing their efficacy, enforcement mechanisms, and inherent challenges. The extent of the problem is examined across sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and services, emphasizing the intricate roots tied to poverty, limited educational opportunities, and societal norms. Despite commendable legal efforts, challenges in enforcement persist due to resource constraints, informal economy complexities, and societal attitudes. The blog highlights Government initiatives like the National Child Labour Project and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches beyond legal measures. The conclusion underscores the necessity of collaborative, sustained efforts involving various stakeholders to address the deep-seated issues perpetuating child labour and pave the way for a brighter, exploitation-free future for India's children.

KEY WORDS

Child labour, Poverty Alleviation, Legal Framework, Challenges, National Child Labour Project, Child Protection Scheme.

INTRODUCTION

The term "child labour" is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential

and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. Within the intricate societal landscape of India, the specter of child labour looms as a deeply ingrained concern that defies facile resolution. Despite the concerted efforts of legislative initiatives aimed at its eradication, this issue perseveres, woven into the fabric of socio-economic structures and cultural nuances. The urgency of addressing child labour extends beyond the mere existence of laws; it demands an unwavering commitment to unravel the complexities surrounding its prevalence.

This blog embarks on a journey to dissect the layers of child labour in India, acknowledging that its persistence requires sustained attention and holistic comprehension. We delve into the lived experiences of children forced into labor, probing the myriad factors that perpetuate this cycle of exploitation. By examining the socio-economic underpinnings, cultural influences, and systemic challenges, we aim to unravel the roots of this pervasive social malaise.

At the heart of our exploration lie the legal frameworks designed to curtail and eliminate child labour. We scrutinize these laws, probing their efficacy, enforcement mechanisms, and potential loopholes. Through a discerning analysis, we seek to offer readers a nuanced understanding of the legislative landscape and its impact on the ground.

In the pursuit of a comprehensive examination, we do not merely stop at delineating the problem; instead, we pivot towards potential solutions. By spotlighting successful interventions, grassroots initiatives, and international collaborations, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how best to address and surmount the challenge of child labour in India. This blog endeavors to be a beacon of awareness, fostering a collective responsibility to dismantle the chains that bind children to exploitative labor practices and usher in a future where every child can enjoy their right to a childhood unmarred by the shadows of forced labor.

The Extent of the Issue

The Extent of the Issue: Understanding the Depth of Child Labour in India, a nation of vast diversity and complexity, confronts a deeply troubling reality – a substantial number of children engaged in labour across diverse sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services. To comprehend the true extent of this issue, it is imperative to unravel the multifaceted layers that contribute to the prevalence of child labour, thereby forming a distressing cycle of exploitation that persists across various regions of the country.

1. **Agriculture:** One significant arena where child labour is prevalent is agriculture, the backbone of India's economy. In many rural areas, children find themselves toiling in the fields, performing arduous tasks that compromise their well-being and curtail their educational opportunities. The interplay of economic necessity and societal expectations often compels families to involve their children in agricultural work, perpetuating a cycle of generational exploitation.
2. **Manufacturing:** The manufacturing sector, integral to India's economic growth, is another domain marked by the troubling presence of child labour. From small-scale industries to larger production units, children are often found engaged in hazardous tasks, subjecting them to adverse health conditions and depriving them of their right to a normal childhood. Economic constraints, coupled with the unregulated nature of certain manufacturing units, contribute to the continued exploitation of child labour in this sector.
3. **Services:** Child labour extends its reach into the services sector, encompassing activities such as domestic work, roadside vending, and petty jobs. The invisibility of these roles often conceals the harsh conditions under which children work, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Limited regulatory frameworks for informal employment further exacerbate the challenges of addressing child labour in the services sector.
4. **Complex Roots:** The roots of child labour in India are intricate, intertwining various factors that perpetuate the cycle of exploitation:

- A. **Poverty:** Poverty emerges as a primary driver, forcing families to rely on the economic contributions of their children for survival. In many cases, parents face the grim choice between sending their children to work or succumbing to the pangs of hunger. Breaking the cycle of child labour necessitates a comprehensive approach addressing poverty at its core.
- B. **Limited Educational Opportunities:** A dearth of educational opportunities amplifies the prevalence of child labour. Insufficient infrastructure, inadequate schools, and the inability of families to afford education create barriers that hinder children from accessing their fundamental right to learn. Bridging the educational divide is imperative for disrupting the cycle of child labour.
- C. **Societal Factors:** Deep-seated societal norms and expectations play a pivotal role in perpetuating child labour. Norms that normalize child work, coupled with caste and gender biases, further complicate efforts to eradicate this practice. Shifting societal attitudes is crucial for dismantling the ingrained acceptance of child labour in certain communities.

Legal Framework

India has implemented a comprehensive legal framework to combat child labour and ensure the protection and well-being of children. The focal points of these efforts are the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.

1. Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986

The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, stands as a linchpin in India's legal arsenal against child exploitation, delineating a comprehensive framework to safeguard the nation's youth. This pivotal legislation meticulously addresses various facets of child labor, emphasizing both prohibition and regulation.

The Act's unequivocal stance is on the outright prohibition of the employment of children below the age of 14 in designated hazardous occupations and processes. This prohibition reflects a fundamental acknowledgment of the vulnerability of young minds and bodies to the perils inherent in certain types of work. By establishing clear boundaries, the legislation aims to shield children from the physical and psychological hazards associated with these occupations, ensuring their safety and well-being.

In addition to the outright prohibition, the Act intricately regulates the working conditions for children engaged in non-hazardous occupations.¹ It delineates permissible working hours and mandates rest intervals, recognizing the delicate balance needed to allow children to contribute to non-exploitative work while safeguarding their right to education, leisure, and a childhood unburdened by excessive labor. This regulatory framework seeks to strike a harmonious equilibrium, acknowledging the need for age-appropriate contributions to certain activities without compromising the essence of childhood.

A notable feature introduced by the Act is the issuance of certificates for adolescents aged 14 to 18 years engaged in specific occupations. This certification mechanism aims to ensure that adolescents involved in permissible work are not subjected to exploitation or denied their right to education. The issuance of certificates involves a careful assessment of the nature of work, working conditions, and adherence to the prescribed regulations. This nuanced approach recognizes the evolving capacities of adolescents and endeavors to balance their participation in the workforce with their overall development and well-being.

While the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, establishes a solid legal foundation, its efficacy lies in the enforcement mechanisms and public awareness. The act's implementation requires a concerted effort from Governmental bodies, non-Governmental organizations, and society at large to create an environment where children are shielded from exploitation, and their rights to education and a dignified childhood are upheld. An in-depth exploration of the act's application on the ground is essential for a comprehensive understanding of its impact and the identification of areas for continuous improvement in the ongoing fight against child labor in India.

2. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, stands as a landmark legislation in India, heralding a transformative approach to education and emphasizing the foundational right of every child to receive free and compulsory education. This act is a cornerstone in the nation's commitment to building a society where education is not a privilege but a fundamental entitlement for all children aged 6 to 14 years.²

At its core, this legislation guarantees the right to education, breaking down barriers that might impede children's access to learning. By mandating free and compulsory education for a defined age group, the act seeks to eliminate disparities and ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to embark on the journey of learning. This commitment goes beyond rhetoric, reinforcing the belief that education is not just a means to empower individuals but a catalyst for societal progress.

However, the significance of the Right to Education Act extends beyond mere access; it champions the cause of quality education. The act recognizes that education is not just about filling classrooms but about creating an environment where learning is meaningful, relevant, and transformative. It emphasizes the imperative to provide education that goes beyond the quantitative metric of enrollment numbers and delves into the qualitative realm of effective teaching, comprehensive curriculum, and a conducive learning environment.

One of the act's key objectives is to integrate all out-of-school children into the formal education system. This proactive stance addresses the root causes of exclusion, whether they be economic, social, or cultural. By seeking to bring every child into the fold of formal education, the legislation envisions a society where the transformative power of education reaches the farthest corners, empowering communities and fostering a culture of learning.

The success of the Right to Education Act hinges on the effective implementation of its provisions, including infrastructure development, teacher training, and community engagement. It calls for a holistic approach that not only opens the doors of schools to children but ensures that these doors lead to a fulfilling educational experience. An in-depth exploration of the act's impact on the ground is essential to gauge its effectiveness, identify challenges, and pave the way for continuous improvement in the pursuit of providing quality education to every child in India.

Constitutional Provisions³

Article	Title	Description
21A	Right to Education	The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years in such manner as the State, by law, may determine.
24	Prohibition of Employment of Children's in Factories	No child below the age fourteen years shall be employed in work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment.
39	The state shall in Particular direct its policy towards securing	That the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength

Challenges and Enforcement

Despite the existence of robust legislative measures aimed at eradicating child labour, a myriad of challenges hampers the effective implementation and enforcement of these laws in India. The complexity of these challenges underscores the persistent struggle to eliminate child labour entirely, despite the legal framework in place.

Limited resources stand out as a formidable obstacle in the path towards eradicating child labour. The allocation of financial and human resources to adequately address the issue is often insufficient, hindering the ability of enforcement agencies to conduct comprehensive and sustained efforts. This scarcity of resources impacts the outreach and efficacy of awareness campaigns, the enforcement of regulations, and the provision of support services for affected children and their families.

The pervasive nature of the informal economy poses another significant challenge. Child labour is often deeply embedded in informal sectors where regulations are harder to enforce. The clandestine and unregulated nature of many businesses makes it difficult for authorities to monitor and ensure compliance with child labour laws. This perpetuates a cycle of exploitation, as children continue to be engaged in work within the shadows of an unregulated economy.

Deficiencies in monitoring and reporting mechanisms further compound the issue. Inadequate systems for tracking and reporting instances of child labour make it challenging to gather accurate data on the scale of the problem. This lack of comprehensive data impedes the formulation of targeted interventions and undermines the ability to assess the impact of existing measures. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms is crucial for creating a more accurate picture of the prevalence of child labour and for tailoring responses to specific regions or industries where the issue is most acute.

Additionally, societal attitudes and cultural norms that may tolerate or normalize child labour contribute to the persistence of the problem. Addressing these deep-seated attitudes requires multifaceted efforts, including community engagement, awareness campaigns, and education initiatives to shift perspectives on the acceptability of child labour.

In light of these challenges, it becomes imperative to adopt a holistic approach that addresses not only the legal aspects but also the socio-economic factors contributing to child labour. Strengthening enforcement capabilities, allocating adequate resources, improving monitoring systems, and fostering a cultural shift towards rejecting child labour are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to overcome the persistent challenges in eradicating child labour in India.

Government Initiatives

Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the issue, the Indian Government has undertaken several initiatives to combat child labour, reflecting a holistic approach that extends beyond legal enforcement. Two prominent initiatives, the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), exemplify the nation's commitment to addressing the root causes of child labour while providing rehabilitation and education opportunities.

The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) stands as a cornerstone in the Government's strategy to eliminate child labour. This initiative focuses on the rehabilitation of child labourers, recognizing that rescuing children from hazardous work is only the initial step. The NCLP involves the creation of special schools and rehabilitation centers, providing rescued children with access to education, vocational training, and essential support services. By offering a comprehensive rehabilitation framework, the project aims to break the cycle of poverty and exploitation, fostering the holistic development of children and reintegrating them into mainstream society.

Complementing the NCLP, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) takes a broader approach to child welfare. This scheme encompasses a range of interventions aimed at ensuring the overall well-being of children, including protection from abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Within the context of combatting child labour, the ICPS emphasizes preventive measures, community-based interventions, and awareness campaigns. By addressing the underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to child labour, the scheme strives to create an environment where children are protected, educated, and provided with opportunities for a brighter future.

These initiatives collectively recognize that the eradication of child labour requires a multi-pronged strategy. Legal enforcement alone is insufficient; rehabilitation, education, and awareness play pivotal roles in breaking the cycle of exploitation. By investing in these comprehensive programs, the Indian Government aims not only to rescue children from hazardous work but also to empower them with the tools and knowledge necessary for a sustainable and dignified future.

While these initiatives represent significant strides, their effectiveness relies on sustained commitment, resource allocation, and continual evaluation. Ongoing efforts to refine and expand these programs will be essential in addressing the intricate challenges associated with child labour and realizing the vision of a society where every child is free from exploitation and able to pursue their full potential.

As per Census 2011, the total child population in India in the age group (5-14) years is 259.6 million. Of these, 10.1 million are working, either as ‘main worker’ or as ‘marginal worker’. In addition, more than 42.7 million children in India are out of school. However, the good news is that the incidence of child labour has decreased in India by 2.6 million between 2001 and 2011.⁴ However, the decline was more visible in rural areas, while the number of child workers has increased in urban areas, indicating the growing demand for child workers in menial jobs. Child labour has different ramifications in both rural and urban India.

Year	Percentage of working children (5-14)			Total number of working children (5-14) (in millions)		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
2011	5.9	2.1	5.0	11.4	1.3	12.7
2001	4.3	2.9	3.9	8.1	2.0	10.1

(Source: Census 2001 and 2011)⁵

Distribution of working children by type of work in 2011:

Area of work	Percentage	Numbers (in millions)
Cultivators	26.0	2.63
Agricultural labourers	32.9	3.33
Household industry workers	5.2	0.52
Other workers	35.8	3.62

(Source: Census 2011)⁶

Uttar Pradesh (21.5%), Bihar (10.7%), Rajasthan (8.4%), Maharashtra(7.2%), and Madhya Pradesh(6.9%), constitute nearly 55% of total working children in India.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the state of child labour in India illuminates the pivotal role that legal frameworks play in addressing this deeply rooted and multifaceted issue. While legislative measures such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, form the backbone of the nation’s response, it becomes evident that a multi-faceted and sustained approach is imperative for meaningful change.

Legal frameworks serve as crucial instruments in setting standards, delineating prohibited practices, and establishing the foundation for enforcement. However, the complexity of child labour necessitates a broader lens that extends beyond mere legal compliance. Education emerges as a linchpin in this comprehensive strategy, as it not only acts as a preventive measure but also as a transformative force capable of breaking the generational cycle of poverty that often underpins child labour.

Efforts to combat child labour must align with poverty alleviation initiatives, recognizing the intimate link between economic vulnerability and child exploitation. Poverty forces families into situations where children

become economic contributors, perpetuating a cycle of deprivation. Therefore, holistic interventions that address economic disparities and provide social safety nets are indispensable components of a sustained strategy.

Societal awareness represents another crucial facet of the approach. Shifting cultural norms and attitudes that may tolerate or normalize child labour requires a concerted effort in education and advocacy. By fostering awareness at the community level and engaging with key stakeholders, including parents, employers, and local leaders, it becomes possible to challenge the acceptance of child labour and garner support for alternative pathways, such as education and skill development.

A collaborative effort involving Government bodies, non-Governmental organizations, the private sector, and communities is essential for the success of such a comprehensive approach. This collaboration should extend to the implementation and monitoring of existing laws, the design and execution of education and poverty alleviation programs, and the dissemination of awareness campaigns. A united front against child labour is more likely to yield sustainable results, dismantling the structural foundations that enable its persistence.

In conclusion, only through a collaborative, multi-pronged, and sustained effort that goes beyond legislation can India hope to create a lasting impact on eradicating child labour. Such an approach aims not just to rescue children from exploitative situations but to address the root causes that perpetuate this social malaise. By investing in education, poverty alleviation, and societal awareness, India can pave the way for a brighter and more equitable future for its children, breaking the chains of exploitation and providing them with the opportunities they deserve.

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5. The Constitution of India-Central Law Publication Bare Act, 2023
6. The term 'child labour' and 'working children' have different connotations, but both the terms are used interchangeably on account of limitations of the available datasets.
7. 'Other workers': Workers other than cultivators, agricultural labourers or workers in household industries
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Footnotes

1. The term 'child labour' and 'working children' have different connotations, but both the terms are used interchangeably on account of limitations of the available datasets.
2. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009,

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Abbreviation

1. The National Child Labour Project (c) (NCLP)
2. Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS),

