

THE PROBLEM OF CHILD LABOUR AND LACK OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ACCORDING TO late J.P.Naik, India's foremost scholar of education, "the goal of universal primary education remains as elusive as ever before" though 44 years have passed since the Indian Constitution was adopted. According to the Government of India in 1979 there were 42 million children between the ages of 6 and 14 or 32 percent of the age group - who were not in school. The 1981 Census reported that 82.2 million of India's 158.8 million children, ages 6 to 14, did not attend school. The low school attendance figures account for India's low literacy rate. In 1981 only 41.4 percent of India's population above the age of 5 was literate.

Official figures of child labour also give a very depressing scenario of the government's inability to deal with the problem. In 1983 17.4 million Indian children below the age of 15 were in the labour force. A large number of children are employed in agriculture though many are engaged in industrial employment also. In carpet making 9 percent of labour force is children, in brassware 25 percent in *bidi*, glass, bangles - 33 percent and in matches 42 percent and of those employed in plantations, 8 per cent are children.

The Governments all over the world have minimised induction of children into labour force and have made it obligatory that they should attend schools. The underlined philosophy is that employers should not be permitted to employ child labour and that parents, no matter how poor, should not be allowed to keep their children out of school.

Modern states regard education as a legal duty, not merely a right. Compulsory primary education is the policy instrument by which the State effectively removes children from the labour force. The state thus stands as the

ultimate guardian of children protecting them against both parents and would be employers.

According to Myron Weiner this is not the view held in India. Primary education in India is not compulsory, nor is child labour illegal. The result is that less than half of India's children between the ages six and fourteen-82.2 million - are not in school. They stay at home to care for cattle, tend younger children, collect firewood, and work in the fields. They find employment in cottage industries, tea stalls, restaurants, or as household workers in middle class homes. They become prostitutes or live as street children, begging or picking rags and bottles from trash for resale. Many are bonded labourers, tending cattle and working as agricultural labourers for local landowners. "The government should not force poor parents to send their children to school when it cannot provide employment for all adults. Children are an economic asset to the poor. The income they bring in and the work they do may be small, but parents close to subsistence need their help", according to a senior government official.

India is one of the significant exceptions to the global trend toward the removal of children from the labour force and establishment of compulsory universal primary school education. India is the largest single producer of the world's illiterates.

According to Weiner, Indians reject compulsory education, arguing that, (i) primary schools do not properly train children of the poor to work; (ii) children of the poor should work rather than attend schools that prepare them for "service" or white-collar occupations; (iii) education of the poor would lead to increased unemployment and social and political disorder; (iv) children of the lower classes should learn to work with their hands rather than with their heads (skills more readily acquired by early entry into the labour force than by attending schools); (v) school dropouts and child labour

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are a consequence, not a cause, of poverty; and (vi) parents, not the state, should be the ultimate guardians of children. Rhetoric notwithstanding, India's policy makers have not regarded mass education as essential to its modernisation. They have instead put resources into elite government schools, state-aided private schools, and higher education in an effort to create an educated class that is equal to those in the West capable of creating and managing a modern enclave economy. It follows that the abolition of child labour and establishment of compulsory education must await a significant improvement in the well-being of the poor. According to this argument as employment and income increase it will no longer be necessary for the poor to send their children to work and the benefits of education would be easily available. It is also said that changes in technology will eventually reduce the demand for unskilled child labour and only then will parents send their children to school to acquire education without need to find employment.

According to a knowledgeable expert, these societal - centered explanations do not stand up against historical and comparative evidence. There is historical and comparative evidence to suggest that the major obstacles to achievement of universal primary education and the abolition of child labour are not the level of industrialists, per capita income and socio-economic conditions of the families. The main reason is the attitudes of the, (i) Government officials, (ii) politicians, (iii) religious figures and (iv) influential middle class, toward child labour and primary school education.

Reform in this direction is most needed and is of compelling necessity. These reforms can take place only if there is a change in the way in which policy makers and those who influence them think about the problem. Child labour must give way to universal primary education which is a basic human right in any civilised society.