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Summary: Many instances related to child labour can be seen in big metropolitan cities. Many of these children possess education up to a certain level as well, but that is not sufficient in providing a bright future for them. It is important for policymakers to understand the real cause behind child labour and thereby taking steps in eradicating child labour and thus imparting education to create a better future for them.

Child Labour – At the gateways of Education for All¹

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“Child labour and poverty are inevitably bound together and if you continue to use the labour of children as the treatment for the social disease of poverty, you will have both poverty and child labour to the end of time.” -- Grace Abbott

Introduction

Right to Education has been recognized as a fundamental right by United Nations. With the *86th amendment of the Constitution of India*, Education was declared a fundamental right in India. The Right of children to Free and Compulsory Education Act came into force from April 1, 2010. The right guarantees every child in the age group 6-14 years, 8 years of elementary education in a class appropriate to his/her age in the vicinity of his/her neighbourhood. However, the country needs to go a long way in ensuring that this right is available to every child.

Kolkata Municipal Corporation (formerly Calcutta Municipal Corporation) was the first Municipal Corporation of India. Formed long ago in the year 1876, Kolkata Municipal Corporation takes pride in managing the city having a 10 million (resident and floating combined) population. KMC is responsible for supplying 350 MGD to 5 million people, clearing 4000 MT of solid waste per day, managing 136 clinics and 119 health units and running 268 primary educational schools with more than 40,000 students. In the last few years, KMC has brought about a phenomenal change in Kolkata by up gradation of basic

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infrastructure, revamping inefficient administrative processes and introducing some innovative strategies for improved delivery of citizen services.

One of the primary services rendered by Kolkata is providing education to all. Therefore schools are set up at every ward. The key activities of the department are:

- To extend primary education to poor children under the jurisdiction of KMC.
- To spread knowledge amongst children, irrespective of their caste, religion or community
- To arrange different programmes related to education.

This study was done therefore to take a glimpse of the current realities at the grass-root level in the realm of education at the KMC schools at Kolkata.

Background and Prior Research

It has been often argued that child labour comes at the expense of schooling, thereby creating a vicious cycle of poverty for children from poor families. Schooling comes into a direct competition with labour-intensive jobs for children, and such jobs mostly take precedence over education for the poor families. Psacharopoulos (1997) concluded that child labour leads to two years less schooling on average (using data for Bolivia and Venezuela). This suggests that child labour entails a large cost to children's future welfare.

Ravallion and Woodon have predicted in an empirical model that enrolment subsidy increases schooling, but its effect on child labour is ambiguous. However, this effect only accounts for a small proportion of the increase in school enrolment; the reduction in the incidence of child labour by boys (girls) represented about one quarter (eighth) of the increase in their school enrolment rate. Their study on the children sent to work in rural Bangladesh suggests that parents substitute other uses of their children's time, so as to secure the current income gain from access to the programme with modest impact on earnings from their children's work.

Considerable evidence has been produced to the effect that, in developing countries, improvement in the condition of adult workers results in the decline

of child labour, since parents can then 'afford' to take their children out of the labour force (Goldin, 1979; Horan and Hargis, 1991; Bonnet, 1993; Basu, 1999a; Ray, 1999). On the other hand, Basu (2000) has shown that in most developing countries unemployment benefits are non-existent; so it is likely that adults who are unemployed will send their children to work. So a minimum wage can result in a higher supply of child labour. This will typically cause an increase in child employment, which, in turn, will cause further losses in adult employment and further additions to the supply of child labour. The full impact of this multiplier-like process can be large. Also, Belletttini et al (2004) have satisfactorily shown that child labour is due either to firms' reluctance to innovate or to households' unwillingness to educate, or both.

Jafarey and Lahiri (2005) have examined two policy options for reducing child labour, 'food for education' and 'investment in education quality'. They concluded that, with an imperfectly elastic supply of credit, an increase in food subsidy is more effective in reducing child labour than an 'income-equivalent' increase in expenditures in education quality. They claimed that an earmarked increase (financed with foreign aid) in spending on school quality becomes more effective in reducing child labour as credit opportunities facing poor families improve in the sense of a greater elasticity of supply of credit. A policy of subsidizing food for education always reduces child labour with the concomitant availability of credit having an ambiguous influence on the effectiveness of this policy

Study

During March-June 2010, a study was conducted among employees and (child) labourers in various areas of Kolkata, West Bengal and Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India. The central aim was to understand the inherent ideologies and problems which constitute the root causes supporting child labour in the regions. The major emphasis was on understanding

- Presence, if any of child labour
- Types of jobs into which such children are involved as labourers
- Reasons which force the children to leave their education and getting initiated into work at a tender age

- Reasons which entice such employees into hiring these children as workers.

Many employers today agree that child labour is a serious issue in India. Most employers completely comprehend the ill-effects of child labour as well. But on the same hand, they express their helplessness in getting a solution to the issue. They also claim that they are as important to the child labourers as the child labourers are to them.

In order to understand their side of the story, we met few employers across various industries, which extensively hire child labourers for small routine jobs ranging from working as peon, bus conductors or household labourers, to factory work. Though the tasks expected from them were not dangerous physically, but the work consumed more than 8 hours of their daily life, notwithstanding the time spent on travelling and other miscellaneous (job related) activities. This in turn ensured that there is almost no time left even for night classes for such children, thereby creating a vicious cycle.

An employee on being asked about the incidents of child labour in his organization commented that he is fully aware of the evil effects of child labour, and he had even asked few of his workers to continue their education. He stated his helplessness saying that even if he doesn't give them job, others anyways would. "The best I can do is to give them a good pay, and that, trust me I give". He gives Rs. 2500/month to a labour (which he said was the maximum permissible wage he could afford). He further revealed that the younger workers were of the age group 14-18 years and had received a maximum education till 8th or 10th standard.

He informed us that during summer (holidays), students of the age group 11-13 come to work as temporary workers for 1-3 months. They do work like serving tea/water to other workers and customers. They work as long as they want and then leave on their own will without any intimation.

Talking to few child labourers also revealed many important facets of their life. Most of them work for the reason of money and family requirements. In fact on being asked why they not study, some of them said that they do not want to study further. The ones who are educated, even if till 10th standard, are not educated enough to get a decent employment or a promising future prospect, and hence many of them tend to be disillusioned from pursuing further studies.

Another child labourer who works as a maid at a household along with her mother is educated till standard IV. She revealed that the reason she works is because that her father was a drunkard and spends a large portion of her mother's income into quenching his thirst for drinks. Hence she is forced to work in order to support the family, despite her strong inclination towards learning and going to school.

Conclusion

The varied experiences and rationales behind children working as labourers as well as employers hiring them shows a clear gulf behind the action plans and needs of the society. The current policies may need a revision in order to identify such children and bring them back to mainstream education. The only way to make sure that India attains the status of a 100% educated state is surely not going to be a fast lane. But the policies need to be at hand before we can even dream of a brighter tomorrow.

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