

The Paradox of Child Labor and Sociology: Issues and Perspectives

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Abstract

As society was constituted by unequals the possessed and dispossessed, the child who had to work to supplement or survive belonged to the dispossessed. The dispossessed economically depended on the owner of means of production lived always in want and deprivation. Such situation had existed in the past, perhaps in a most ruthless manner, and the conditionality of the existence and continuation was socio-politically sanctioned by that time. In-depth Anthropological study has acquired a great relevance to the present day problem emphasizing on, how community evaluates the risks associated with child labour. It is also most important to know the extent to which people are responsive to the various policies and programmes [27] of both Government and NGOs. The differences in the mental attitudes and outlooks regarding the causes for the existence of child labour in traditional societies and the modern societies are so important for the sociologists. Also the study demands a deep analysis of the broader framework of community norms regarding childhood as a life phase, the rights of children and the age and gender appropriateness for different types of work. This paper sheds light on how various social and cultural factors are embedded in the existence of child labour.

Keywords: Child Labor, Kinship, Practical Anthropology

1. Background of the Study

The shift from an agricultural and commercial society to an industrialized, one has been among one of the most important developments of modern times. It has modified many social relationships and broken others completely, as the members of an industrial society have been forced to adjust to the new way of life. Researchers have examined some of the aspects of social disorganization as they have affected first men and then women in industry. Industrialization has also made a serious impact upon the status and role of children. In many ways the latter are the most vulnerable of all when they leave the shelter of their homes and enter the factory, office, field or city street.

The specific study of children in Anthropology has a much-short history. Anthropologists have long pointed out the economic significance of children, their role in legitimating marriages and the implied economic contracts at marriage, which assign children to one lineage or another. They have looked at the ways adults have shaped children, both socially in order to make them full person within their communities and physically through the use of corporal punishment or thorough practice designed to teach them bravery or how to cope with pain or without pain [1]. They have implicitly acknowledged the importance of age, gender or position in the family, and discussed the ways in which a first born child deals with differently from the youngest child. Until recently however, children have been marginal

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to Anthropological theory, a backdrop to more mainstream concerns of kinship or political organization [2].

Anthropologists who are working on developmental programmes have produced adequate theories and research methodologies dealing with the processes of change that are vitally important to policy makers and administrators in charge of the welfare of the weaker sections of the society. These theories and research methodologies are potential tools to the planners in identifying the ongoing changes to understand better the community, which is prone to either resist or accept the change in the face of social and technological innovations. The study on child labour has taken considerable attention in recent times, everywhere in the world and in India also which accounts for a significant proportion of the world's child labour force. Most of these studies have attempted to give detailed description of the various manifestations of child labour. A few have attempted to understand the underlying forces that caused the persistence of child labour despite of its universal condemnation and the various legislative and administrative measures introduced by the Government to deal with the problem. While some have treated child labour as an evil to be eliminated, others have viewed it from the prospective of socio-economic significance of a society at a particular stage of transformation. They try to assert that the very persistence of child labour is an indicative of the crucial role that it plays and consequently it is. [3].

Holistic studies of small scale societies such as those pioneered by [4], Radcliffe-Brown [5] and Firth [6] inevitably acknowledged children and their role in the family, but paid little attention to their economic contributions, their agency or their own understanding of their lives. Since child labour is a socio-cultural and socioeconomic problem, Malinowski's concept of Practical Anthropology, i.e., use of Anthropological knowledge to probe into the problem and the stiffest remedial measures is very much useful. Generally Anthropologist's views on culture are an attribute of social life of man. Culture is inseparable from the human behavior. Culture and society are the centrally focused concepts of social and cultural Anthropology. Man being the central concept on which the Anthropological studies involve among, the major issues related to the child labour are also important subject matter of Anthropological studies. Many researchers have shown that of the child labour issue, the intensity of the problem is dependent upon various social and cultural factors. Since culture is an integrated functional unit of a society, Anthropologists try to find out the nature of the phenomenon, related with the child labour and how this problem is interlocked with the culture [7].

According to Foster [8], the Anthropological studies try to identify the social issues in the following ways: i) the logical reasoning of the society or the social philosophy of the problem, ii) social facts pertaining to the particular social issues, and iii) appropriate research techniques used to get original and reliable field data. Anthropologist generally uses participant observation and interview methods to get first hand information of the social problems. Field data obtained by using above-mentioned methodologies would be a highly useful document in encountering with this kind of social problems which cannot be eradicated by enacting legislations. Hence, it is highly desirable at this stage to study the conditions of child labourers in different urban settings especially after the globalization.

On the various works undertaken by the children, Nieuwenhuys [9] writes,

“The limits of current notions such as labour, gender, and exploitation in the analysis of this work particularly in the developing world, most of the work undertaken by the children has for a long time been explained away as socialization, education, training, and play. Anthropology has helped to disclose what age is used with gender as the justification for the value accorded to work. The low valuation of children's work translates not only in children's vulnerability in the labour market but, more importantly, in their exclusion from remunerated employment. Also the author argues that the current child labour policies did not recognize the children from the point of production value and reinforce paradoxically children's vulnerability to exploitation”.

An in-depth analysis of all these problems is of vital Anthropological significance in the changing social system in the country today. The present study is a unique effort and aims at analyzing the basic issues involved in the problem and at exploring various avenues for further anthropological investigations, economic studies and understanding the problem through inter-disciplinary studies. Social and cultural concept on child labour has become a more debatable issue of recent time. Culture has its own definition on the term child and child labour and it differs greatly across the society. Culture has fixed some functions, which have to be performed by the children in their early ages for their effective socialization in the future. This process of socialization and the cultural objectives to which they are supposed to respond are clearly interdependent with the structural economic system within which the process of socialization occurs.

Weiner [10] in his study has revealed how economy, socialization and the role of parents like cultural objectives cause child labour. According to him “the values by

which the activities of children are judged and the nature of socialization process, the process of socialization and the cultural objectives to which it responds, are clearly inter-dependent with the structural economic system within which socialization occurs". The nature of child's socialization is associated with the class position of his parents. The effect of prevailing domestic organizations, the system of kinship and marriage are also important points as these clearly influence the development of child activities through their set of rights and obligations. Further he states the independent effect of socio-cultural variables is the attribution of sex roles among children in a family system. Cultural factors have independent effects with respect to both family structures and sex roles. So the parents perceive the role of children as associated with the values attached to the children by them, with the image of future.

The use of child labour is a characteristic of transitional societies, which enfold multi-class-based social structure, and complexes of traditional and pre-capitalist production relation operating under the rein of the dominant bourgeois ideology and mode of exploitation. This holds true as Kristoffeland [11] writes "Indian society wherein, multi-class social structures exist and a complex of traditional and pre-capitalist production relations are operative in an articulated capitalist mode of production and exploitation, despite its having a number of legislative and administrative measurements to curb the use and abuse of child labour".

Childhood concept varies in different societies and largely depends on cultural practice. Some of the studies have shown that a childhood concept is largely influenced by the contract between children and the parents. Mead [12] has opined that, 'with childhood and human rights, the paradox is social construction verses relativism'. However, Bissell [13] writes that the childhood issue is a much more subtle one. This concept of childhood grows out of the experiences in a particular culture or communities, for particular groups of children, in particular sets of circumstances. Neither are these views claim for cultural relativism, nor an attempt to turn a blind eye to the horrors which children experience all over the globe. She continues saying "the problem is how to articulate a standard or divergent standards for the beginning of a moral and ethical reflection on cultural practices that takes into account but does not privilege our own *cultural presuppositions*". In the third world countries interpretation of the childhood concept is largely based on the economic contribution of the children to the family [14].

Lieten [15] has pointed out that how socialization process of children has reached today's most badly

organized exploitations of the children. He writes, in ancient societies, the difference in the daily occupation between adults and children was gradual. Children were socialized by learning the skills, customs, so that by the time they passed through the *rite de passage*, they had become fully accomplished adults. The transition into modern industrial society changed all this for at least two basic reasons:

He further writes "the institution of formal education turned child hood into a distinct phase of life and the work done by the children changed their characters from family employment to the sale of labour power, usually at grossly exploitative terms".

Marx [16] says due to poverty 'parental authority' is misused. In this context he said "It was not the misuse of parental authority that created the capitalistic exploitation... children's labour but on the contrary, it was the capitalist mode of exploitations which by sweeping away the economic basis of parental authority, made its exercise degenerated into a mischievous misuse of power." There are many who view the problem in this way and like it with exploitative capitalist mode of production and working of capitalist system. Marx further opines that "Child labour more truly mirrors the character of the society and polity, including the nature of transition, than any other set of indications". Thus, the exploitative capitalist order perpetuates the problem.

Burra [17] says that in a culturally bounded society like India, tradition plays a vital role on both family structure and sex roles of every child. However, not poverty alone keeps the children out of school, but various forms of social discrimination also play a vital role. For example, gender inequality which is more common in a society irrespective of caste, religion and class reflects the social norms against the education of children (Nieuwenhuys [9]). Due to the concentration of wealth, age-old power, high level of education and rational thinking among the upper caste people have made domination on low caste group. Hence, child labour can be seen more among low class people or weaker sections of the society. In a society like ours sending children to school largely depend on cultural context of the family and basically that decisions will be taken at household level. However, such decisions are not separated from other crucial aspects of household decision making nor are they purely household based (Mendelievich and Elia [18]). They reflect the norms and values of the wider community within which the household is located and the social and economic possibilities, which local contexts offer to different categories of households. Some explanation of poverty has focused on the level of economic development within

a given society as the prime cause of child labour. Others have focused on the presumed inferior personnel or cultural traits of the poor. Still others have interpreted poverty as the result of societal conditions that permit or encourage economic deprivation for some societal members.

Naidu [7] further endeavoured to focus light on various social and cultural factors influencing the existence of child labour. He observed that “Child labour largely depends upon normative attitudes towards children in society, the culturally determined roles and functions of children, the values by which the activities of children are judged and the nature of socialization process. In industrialized countries, there is general disapproval of participation of school age children in the formal labour force. The participation of children in housework is approved by parents at least. In many countries, participation in various types of economic activities from an early age is considered as an essential part of socialization. The prevailing modes of domestic organizations and system of kinship and marriage also affect child labour. What children must do is influenced by what the system of kinship considers the rights and obligations of children. In many places, the delegation of aspects of parental roles, and the institutionalized practice of fostering of children by non-parental kin, involves widespread transfers of the obligation to train and maintain children and the right to enjoy the services of the young. Such practices may involve an element of apprenticeship and specialist training”.

Mishra [19] based on his study, has revealed that in a transitional society, the case of child labour is also regarded as an economic practice because of the persistence of tradition-bound occupations and occupational immobility. But this society is also not free from the influence of modern science and technology development existing in the modern world and the use of child labour is also regarded as a social evil. If this society has a democratic form of government, the use of child labour as a social evil gets more currency there. Hence, the practice of child labour, exists simultaneously both as an economic practice and as a social evil in a transitional society. The use of child labour, in-fact, regarded as a social evil because of the abuse of child labour on a large scale.

It is generally proved that family farming makes the greatest use of child labour in the context of unpaid family assistants. Blechred [20] has observed, “it is not so much the child who is exploited by the common social system was the whole family. The factors like cultural, social and economic situation of the family obviously have repercussion on the child or at least remain integrated in a social context that is in principal protection”. Bhargava [21] has

an opinion that children are also engaged in traditional craftworks of the family. The intricate rules governing the existing market for the craft works produced by the children also makes possible exploitation and abuses. In case of family production, there will be no wage or other kind of benefits to the children as they are parts of the economic activities of their family. Such kind of labour force is found in almost all kinds of traditional and advanced societies engaged in forming arts and crafts. Rosen [22] in his study has observed that gradual evaluation of child labour is due to class consequences. While writing on the existence of child labour in country like India, he observes that child labour becomes visible after attaining the civilization. Immediately after the civilization, workers started to acquire skills in their respective professions and gradually it led to the formation of caste system in India. This caste system is responsible for the creation of haves and have-nots among the people (rich and poor). Due to this, a new working for class has emerged not only in India but also in the world in general, that is the child labourers.

Analyzing the effects of the caste system in India in the context of child labour, Oliver [23] adds that the compartmentalization of groups of people on the basis of a caste hierarchy with a well-defined traditional occupational role for each of the caste group has resulted in social inequalities. The upper class took more advantages of education, urbanization and industrialization. Among the lower caste groups, because of their economic dependency upon the upper caste groups, child labour is more prevalent among the weaker sections of the society. Razwath [24] has explained how cultural factor leads to perpetuating child labour. According to her, socio cultural factors including the abdominal caste system, ethnic and gender discrimination are responsible for the perpetuation of the source of child labour. Factors such as poverty, unemployment and illiteracy no wonder are responsible for the social situation and more than 70% of child labourers belong to lower castes and tribes.

In case of India the problem of female child labour is deeply intertwined with caste, class and gender factors. Female child labourers are a clear manifestation of a depressed structural problem. The tender aged girl child labourers are victims of a vicious triangle of oppression related to caste, class and gender. The intense globalization of recent years has only aggravated the problem further. As long as masses continue to be marginalized and pushed to the walls, the girl child labourers is bound to see an unending proliferation in this country. Majority of the girl children are working as domestic servants. These children are preferred for household work, as housewives

feel secure. Most of these domestic servants are either from the upper castes and only few of them are backward castes. Preference for upper caste in domestic work is mainly because of the fact that housewives and elders are conservative and hesitate to hire children belonging to backward caste as domestic servant owing to prevalent social taboos.

Nayer [25] examines the extent of the problem and the working conditions of the children. She writes, 'the lower position of girls in the society under-value girl child labour compared to the male child labour'. Besides occupational hazards, girl children are vulnerable to sexual abuses both at the places of employment and at home when they are left to themselves. Since poverty is the main cause of child labour, girls from poor background, confront severe exploitation along with other traditional social disadvantages. Further, she has expressed that "a microscopic analysis of child labour demonstrates that the concept of child labour is sex specific and not only is there the sex specificity in occupations, but there are also differences in the ramifications for girls and boys". Girl child labourers have to pay a heavier price than their male counterparts.

2. Conclusion

More Anthropological research would be desired to reveal why some of the poor family spends considerable amount of money on education and why not some of the financially sound family would not? Also it would be very interesting to find out why many households give more priority to the income from the child's work and less weightage to the child's schooling than the social optimum? Until getting answer to the above cited questions, the only way before the State is to improve the living conditions of families depending on the wages of their children. Moreover, income-increasing incentives need to be combined with schooling incentives, especially for girls, in order to increase household well-being and children's human capital attainment. Since social and cultural background of the family plays a vital role in taking household decision to send their children to work, all anti child labour and poverty eradication programmes should emphasize on the following four aspects: value, norms and social solidarity of the community, integrative forces in the people's life, minimum and maximum resistance to modern innovations in their culture and recognizing vital linkages in people's cultural fabrics.

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