

CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE

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Received: 08 Feb 2019

Accepted: 25 Feb 2019

Published: 28 Feb 2019

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to trace the beginning of agriculture or science of farming and its subsequent advancement and inclusion of activities like livestock, forestry, and fishery. Agriculture originated as sustenance activity and progressed to become an international business and is the most important sector of the economy in many developing countries. The main focus of this article is the origin of child labor, reasons for continuous child labor even as the world progressed and how international communities are dealing with the practice of child labor in current times. It also pauses to reflect on some of the serious impacts of heavy agricultural work on the child, the various forms of child employment, various studies done on international and indigenous child labor, ways and efforts to eradicate child labor and the way ahead. In India, most of the farmers are highly debt-ridden. To get rid of this debt they employ their own children to work on their fields which will save their labor charges and they do not have to pay for the education of their children. A government of India also gives various types of subsidies to farmers. Instead of these subsidies, if Investments are made in Agriculture, I think, that will provide great help to farmers and of course, may relieve children from working on fields.

KEYWORDS: *Origin of Child Labor, Education of Their Children, Highly Debt-Ridden*

INTRODUCTION

In a big city, two individuals, sitting in a warm room during winters, discussing about their promotions, while on the other hand, two farmers sitting in the field discussing about how to pay off huge loan they have taken for their land, although all their family members including children are working hard on the land.

This is a real situation. Some 60% of children are forced to work under hazardous conditions in Agriculture in different parts of India. Another part of the picture is that farmers are committing suicide because of their inability to meet their both ends and also to pay their debts. Unfortunately, India provides the home to largest number of Child Labor in the world. Child labor means the practice of engaging children in economic activity either by family or someone other than his family.

A tiny hand is expected to play with toys and after a certain age, with books and pencils but do all the children are so lucky to have the same. The answer is 'NO'. Not all the children are lucky to have the same; some of them have to start working at a very early age. Why it is happening so in India. For going into deep, let us have a brief history of Agriculture in India and how child labor started.

In India, a transition from hunting-gathering-fishing to initial agricultural activities is traced back to Chopani Mando in Belan Valley in the Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh from where the oldest burnt carbonized wild rice remains were discovered. With the discovery of agriculture, people began living a more settled life, growing food and domesticating animals and nomadic life transformed into settled life

At this stage of agriculture, everyone in the family and community was involved in agricultural activities, men, women, and children as also animals they domesticated. Agriculture was for the purpose of sustenance and the concept of paid labor did not exist. Working in one's own farmland was the most natural way of life.

Employment in agriculture began when landless farmers went to work on other fields and farms to earn their livelihood in the form of wages. They made no investment nor were they affected by losses when crops failed. Agricultural services were compensated in cash or kind. Agricultural activities initially were for sustenance and since formal education or other occupation like weaving and pottery making was not known, all members of the family including children worked fields for family and extended family and landowners. Child labor was part and parcel of life and the concept of child labor was unknown. Crops were rain, climate, and soil dependent and people soon mastered skills of growing good and abundant crops. Even when physical labor became replaced with equipment for rich agriculturalists many areas of agriculture still needed human effort. Children of poor families began to be employed with little or no pay by richer agriculturalists.

In rural areas of underdeveloped and developing countries, agriculture remains to be the main source of paid work. In Ethiopia and Uganda, where there are huge agricultural investments by foreign developed countries, labor in the agricultural sector is very high and as per world bank reports of 2016, in 2013 these countries contributed to 72 percent of agricultural labor. This is because of the huge availability of labor in these countries. The worst form of child labor is found in African and Asian countries not only for economic reasons but for cultural reasons as well. Often underdeveloped and developing countries are unable to invest in industrialization so reliance is placed on agriculture. The worst form of child labor is prevalent in Sudan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan.

When the urban way of life set in, rural regions were almost completely neglected and when schools came up, they were located at great distances; schools were ill-equipped with untrained teachers with lack of knowledge and teaching skills. There was also no legal compulsion to go to school or social restriction pertaining to children working, as it is today. The mindset of the rural communities too would not change. Child labor became a way of life and accepted by all.

In many countries including India, child labor was and is still supported by parents and communities, mainly in rural areas, with culture and traditional attitudes having a huge impact.

In India, there are just too many people dependent on a farm-based livelihood, nearly half the population.

“Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat; it is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.” Amartya Sen argued, The Noble Laureate economist. (Poverty and Famines, 1981).

In India, there is an abundance of child labor. Each child labor has started working as labor due to one reason or the other.



Figure 1

Factors Influencing Child Labour

- Working in a family which is often unpaid labor. It saves expenses of the family which otherwise they would have paid to the hired labor. Sometimes their entry is also at a very early age (between 5-7 years).
- Parents themselves put their children into agriculture as they are unable to earn enough to meet their both ends.
- Working in other landowner's farm for self and family sustenance due to extreme poverty.
- Illiteracy of child's parents. A lack of awareness about the harmful effects of child labor.
- Child labor is preferred as they are cheap and pliable to the demands of the landlords.
- Not proper access to basic and meaningful quality education and skill training. In many villages still, primitive techniques are applied which leads to increase in the cost of production.
- Lack of livelihood options before children's need to contribute towards the meeting of family expenses.
- Early young age marriage also forces children to start working at an early age.
- To fulfill the expenses incurred on rites and rituals of the family and surrounding society.
- Drought and other natural disasters.
- In agriculture, no skilled training is required; whatever skill is required that is provided by parents to their children.
- Debt-ridden families compelled to send children to work in order to pay off debts and interest. Often even with arduous labor such families are unable to pay even the interest let alone repayment of the original loan. Continuous hard work by debt-ridden families including women and children over generations drove them to worse forms of poverty from which they could never recover.*
- Work in agriculture is largely unregulated. Industries such as Sugar, Cotton Industries do not make payment for

the raw material purchased from farmers in time. As a result, farmers are forced to take a loan from Money Lenders who charge intolerable rate of interest.

- Lack of Warehouses. Farmers are forced to sell crops at whatever prices are offered by the merchants as they have a place to store their crops.
- Lack of organized groups like unions makes agricultural workers more vulnerable to a variety of abuses, including sexual harassment.
- Agriculturist families fortunate not to be in extreme poverty often did not give much importance to education and instead engaged their children in fields in order to transfer knowledge and skills. In short, they prefer to pass on hands-on knowledge and skills to their children and did not feel the need for formal education in institutions.
- Lack of government involvement in setting up educational institutions in rural areas until recently. Even when schools were set up, other factors were not taken into consideration to facilitate children to attend them.
- Moreover the numbers of working hours required on agriculture are atrocious; as a result, children are left with negligible time for education.
- Lack of Planning. If in a particular year demand for a crop increases and supply is less, next year most of the farmers produce that crop only. As a result, supply increases, which lead to a fall in prices and farmers, do not get the full reward for their crops. Low income, go for loan, poverty, take help from their children, that vicious circle starts again.

The Factors that Continue to Encourage the Use of Child Labor

Participation of child labor in favorable conditions can be positive also like it:

- Working of children relieves severe poverty of their family even by contributing with a little amount.
- Since most of the farmers are poor, unable to pay outside workers, as such, they save money by employing their own children as they do not have to pay their children.
- Due to poverty, they still use their old primitive methods which require more physical work, unable to employ outsiders, so use their own children.
- Sometimes certain activities may help children to acquire important livelihood skills and thereby contribute to their family survival and food security.
- Working children can help their younger siblings by contributing towards their school fees and thus can get them educated.
- Besides relieving from severe poverty of their family, working by children can bring results in improvements to the quality of life not only for themselves but also for their family members.
- Other times, children get a feeling of self-confidence and feel proud of themselves by contributing towards the meeting of expenses of their family members.

- By the time they become complete farmers, they can contribute to the inter-generation transfer of technical skill whatever they learn through their experience.
- It brings a feeling of self-esteem in children.
- The most recent cause is migration from Rural to Urban areas by farmers. This leaves his wife and children at home and to work in their fields. As a result, children, to help their mother start working in their fields. This is also one of the reasons for child labor.
- In many countries including India, child labor was and still supported by parents and communities, mainly in rural areas with culture and traditional attitudes, having a **huge impact** as:
- Although, poverty was the main reason for child employment during early agriculture periods. However, in today's scenario the micro level child labor does not eliminate poverty but extends poverty for longer periods of time for the family.
- At macro levels, it affects foreign direct investment that takes advantage of the low cost of labor in developing countries to keep prices of products low in international markets. Prices become low and competitive in international markets due to low paid child labor because it reduces the cost of production.
- Child labor not only affects the education of children but also damage their health and personal development.
- Children are paid below the minimum level of wages i.e they are not paid according to their services.
- These children suffer from many diseases and complications throughout their entire childhood. (Time which they should have spent on education and playing games which would have made them healthy).
- Started working at a very young age, deprives them of productive employment opportunities especially in modernized agriculture in the later stage of their life.
- There is a risk to their life from chemicals, Pesticides,(Used in fields) field sanitation and high or low temperature (due to changes in weather as they have to work in the early hours of the day).
- Children are fatigued due to high demanding physical work which demands long working hours.
- Children are unpaid family workers. Their work is not recognized.
- It may lead to an increase in the rate of child trafficking. Kidnapped children will be used for working on farms and other allied activities. And they are less costly as they are paid very less wages rather a negligible amount, given less food and can be made to work for long hours. (This has actually happened in India). During 2016, 54723 children were kidnapped.
- Children are made to work to do everything from sowing to cutting of crops by working for long hours at low wages and hazardous working conditions.
- It sometimes leads to Bonded Child labor. Employment of a child against a debt or take the loan for some social obligation (farmers in India do take a loan for fulfilling their social obligation such as on marriage, on death) by the family of the child.

- Since children have to work for long hours, they are deprived of education and formal training opportunities which would have prepared them for a better future.

Even though we live now in a civilized society it is regrettable that the practice of child labor until continues. In India, crops are rain, climate and soil dependent.

When there is no rain or flood has spoiled the crops, a farmer is forced to borrow money to feed his family. Or sometimes, for fulfilling social obligations, he has to take loans.

In India, a huge amount of loans have been taken by farmers. As a result, most of the farmers are debt-ridden. A survey conducted by NSSO on 'All India Debt and Investment Survey' had found out that 35% of cultivators were indebted as on 30th June 2012 while in 2015-16 it has increased to 47% in 2015-16. They work hard on their fields to increase so that they can pay back their loans. But In spite of their hard work they are not able to get rid of their loans. They employ their children either on their own farms or on other forms. Even the number of suicides among farmers has increased. Another important feature is that they borrow money from Non-Institutional sources. About 28% of the loan was taken from such sources. The tedious paperwork such as demand for collateral security, lengthy process for sanction of loan forces farmers to borrow from Money Lenders and their relatives. These non-institutional sources charge a high rate of interest which farmers are not able to pay back.

This is one of the reasons for the increase in the number of suicides by farmers. Over 12,000 suicides were reported in the agricultural sector every year since 2013. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau cited that 36,332 people 'self-employed persons in farming/agriculture committed suicide between 2014 and 2016. After the death of the father, his wife and children have to work in the fields as they have no other source of income.

Between the age of 5-18, India has a whopping 33 Million child laborers. Child labor is prominent in rural India- 80% of working children live in India's villages, where most of them work in Agriculture (According to the International Labor Organization's World Report on child labor 2015)

While the law states clearly that no child under the age of 14 will indulge in any kind of labor, there is a big 'but' in the way that hinders this rule. The law has exempted children under 14 if they are "helping" their families.

Children themselves do not want to work but they have to work for the survival of their family and themselves. Children dedicate their lives their childhood and youth hoping for a bright future for themselves and their family, but alas they do not get back as per their expectations or get a very little reward. They dedicate their lives for a better future but get nothing.

A study of the socio-economic conditions of five hundred child workers in the age group of 7 to 14 years from nine villages in three districts of West Bengal revealed that 79 percent of the children were boys and mostly an eldest child of families. Out of this number, 65 percent were part-time workers out of which 54 percent were unpaid helpers and the rest were paid wages as low as 5 or 6 rupees per day. 70 percent of fathers and 90 percent of mothers were illiterate. 33 percent of children did not attend school at all and 37 percent discontinued studies due to poverty. They suffered malnutrition and lived in 'kaccha' houses using open fields for sanitation.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8077032>).

SUGGESTIONS

Since the main cause of child labor is Poverty and poverty is caused due to low productivity, as agriculture is more dependent on Natural sources. And because of this, a large sum is borrowed by farmers. So, loans should not be provided in the form of Cash but rather farmers should be provided High Yielding Seeds, Fertilizers and latest Machines in the form of loans. Today there is much more diversity, advanced skills, and art used in agriculture. They should be taught the latest technology which they can apply in their fields. Not only about technology, but they should also be taught the techniques like which and when different types of crops should be produced if required they should be given classroom training also. Moreover, when most of the work is done through Machines, less labor will be required to work on land. As a result, there will be no need for child labor.

For higher GDP growth, policymakers ignore two vital facts- Farm growth can cut poverty twice as fast as industrial growth and 1% increase in farm output raises industrial output by 0.5% and National Income by 0.7%. But due to low spends in agriculture, farm growth hobbled at 2.4% or so during 2002-07. There is a need to increase productivity in farms falls in yields can be made good by high investments in farms.

The real problem still remains the same: too many subsidies but too less investments. If one looks at the overall public expenditure on agriculture, one fourth is spent in investments and three-fourth goes into subsidies.

At the same time attention should be paid to the Marketing of the agricultural products also. Farmers should directly deal with agricultural merchants. Of course, a minimum price should be fixed by the Government below which the price should not be allowed to go. This will help farmers to earn enough and they do not need to send their children as 'Child Labor'.

There is one more problem with which, the farming community is grappling with a problem of plenty, due to high production prices of crops come down. The government should look into this problem also.

With the introduction of new agricultural biochemical and mechanical technology which calls for skilled labor, it is hoped there will be lesser need for child labor in agriculture paving opportunities for children's education.

Parents should be taught that the right form of work for their children is going to School. In case some of the children are not interested in studies, then they should be taught about the techniques especially the latest advanced methods of farming of Agriculture. This will help them in becoming Good Farmers.

Rules passed for saving children from working in fields should be strictly followed; there should not be any "Buts".

The recent political scenario in India involves agrarian crisis and farmer protest over the huge debts that they are unable to pay off, some quoting demonetization and a contributing factor. The debt stress is leading to a large number of farmer suicides. It is clear that given the options farmers will be too happy to work in other sectors. We therefore, need to create an agriculture scenario where viability is given a boost and farmers concerns addressed and given greater weight age and skills and scientific farming developed further if we want agricultural development which is essential to humanity and life sustenance. Education in agricultural engineering should be strongly promoted. Ours is a country with a rich

agricultural land, perfect agricultural climate all year round and thick dense forest and with great possibilities for agriculture to flourish and be global players in food, farming, and floriculture.

Table 1: Total Agriculture Credit Disbursement (Rs) (Crores)

Years	Amount of Loan
2015-16	9,15,509.92
2016-17	10,657,55.67
2017-18	11,685,02.84

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