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## Child labour in global supply chains with specific reference to India

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### Abstract

Child labour remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue in many parts of the world, with its manifestations often hidden within the complex and opaque networks of global supply chains. India, with its vast population, diverse economy, and historical socioeconomic challenges, presents a particularly significant context for examining child labour within these intricate production systems. The phenomenon is not merely a by-product of poverty but is deeply interwoven with issues of inadequate education, weak governance, cultural norms, and the relentless pursuit of profit by multinational corporations. Global supply chains, characterized by their fragmented nature, subcontracting practices, and the pressure to reduce costs, create fertile ground for the exploitation of children, particularly in sectors where oversight is minimal and the labour force is largely informal. This essay will delve into the multifaceted problem of child labour in global supply chains, with a specific focus on India. It will explore the root causes, the sectors most affected, the impact on children, the role of global corporations and consumers, and the legal and policy frameworks in place, as well as their limitations. Finally, it will consider potential pathways and strategies for its eradication.

**Key words:** Child Labour, Global Supply Chains, India, Exploitation, Informal Sector

### Introduction

### Background

In India, the use of child labor has a lengthy history, dating back to the third century BC when Kautilya's Arthshastra made reference to child slaves engaged in household slavery.<sup>1</sup> Children frequently worked as apprentices under artisans during the Middle Ages, and this practice is still used in sectors like carpet weaving today. Children in agrarian communities learned agricultural skills from an early age by engaging in a variety of activities with their families. It was both necessary and normal to integrate into family and community life.

Early Indian stories tell us that in old Indian society, it was the responsibility of the king to ensure that every boy and girl received an education, while parents had the duty to enroll their kids in school. This education was provided to all children, whether they were from royal families or common backgrounds. The Guru, or wise teacher, guided this learning process, which focused on discipline and hard work. Strict rules were set up to manage the "hermitage," which was the name for the school. During their studies, children lived in the hermitage and were expected to help with daily tasks, assist in any work activities, and keep up with the

<sup>1</sup> International Journal of Development Research Vol. 08, Issue, 01, pp.18456-18458, January, 2018

CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE \*Dr. Satendra Kumar Singh Associate Professor, Sociology, Govt. College Vidisha (M.P.) India <https://www.journalijdr.com/sites/default/files/issue-pdf/11890.pdf>

demands of their learning. Schools did not charge any fees; instead, children contributed by working to maintain the school and keep it running.

Stories suggest that everyone was required to work. Rama (a human form of Vishnu) and his brothers spent time in a hermitage or ashram, took part in chores willingly, and followed the rules. Krishna, another incarnation of Vishnu, although from a royal family, left his home and lived in a hermitage for safety. He took on the role of a cowherd and performed his tasks diligently.<sup>2</sup>

Recognition of child labor as a separate part of the workforce has been part of India's laws since at least 1881. The Factories Act of 1881 established that children could start working at the age of seven, with a limit of nine hours of work each day.<sup>3</sup> This legislation also prohibited the practice of allowing child workers to be employed in two different factories in one day.

## Methodology

The research focuses on the global issue of prohibition of child labor and protection of children and in order to better understand it –this study focuses on the Indian legal system and its implementation, as well as some of the relevant international conventions dealing with the same problem.

The study uses the primary and secondary data for analyzing and understanding the core extracts of why the issue has not been yet abolished completely. The sources included are the statutes, books, case laws and articles from constitution of India. Also some international conventions which are UNICEF, ILO. The research has adopted the analytical and critical approach in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing legal mechanism and to identify the gaps in implementation.

## What is child labour?

Child labour refers to the employment of children in work that is harmful to their physical, mental, or emotional development and deprives them of their basic rights, including education, health, and a dignified childhood. It includes work that is exploitative, hazardous, or interferes with a child's schooling by forcing them to drop out or combine education with excessive labour. Under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, a child is defined as a person below 14 years of age, and their employment in most occupations is prohibited, while adolescents (14–18 years) are restricted from hazardous work. Similarly, the International Labour Organization defines child labour as work that is dangerous, exploitative, or detrimental to a child's overall development and well-being.

ILO<sup>4</sup> defined the term child labour as *“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.*

*It refers to work that:*

- *is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or*
- *interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.”*

<sup>2</sup> CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA: SOME HISTORICAL FACTS Veula J. Rodes, Alabny State College  
<https://www.columbusstate.edu/archives/docs/gah/1990/101-107.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> International Environmental Law Research Centre, EVOLUTION OF THE LAW ON CHILD LABOR IN INDIA Usha Ramanathan Published in Hugh D. Hindman ed., The World of Child Labor – An Historical and Regional Survey (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2009), p. 783 <https://ielrc.org/content/a0905.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/topics/child-labour/what-child-labour>

## The Multifaceted Roots of Child Labour in India

The persistence of child labour in India is a complex issue stemming from a confluence of socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic factors. At its core, poverty acts as a primary driver. Families living in destitution often view child labour not as exploitation but as a necessity for survival, contributing essential income or saving on education expenses. The lack of access to quality and affordable education exacerbates this cycle. When schools are distant, overcrowded, or offer a curriculum that appears irrelevant to immediate survival needs, parents are less inclined to send their children, seeing immediate labour as a more pragmatic choice. This is further compounded by social norms that, in certain communities, have historically accepted or even encouraged children to contribute to household income or learn traditional trades from a young age. While these traditions may have once served a different purpose, in the context of globalized production, they can be easily exploited. Furthermore, deep-seated social inequalities, including caste discrimination and gender bias, can limit opportunities for marginalized children, making them more vulnerable to exploitation in the labour market. The informal nature of a significant portion of the Indian economy also plays a crucial role. Many small and medium-sized enterprises, which form critical nodes in larger supply chains, operate with little regulation and oversight, making them ideal conduits for employing cheap, exploitable child labour. The demand for low-cost goods from international markets can create immense pressure on these businesses to cut costs, and child labour becomes a readily available, albeit unethical, solution.

## The Role of Global Corporations and Consumers

Global corporations, as the ultimate beneficiaries of the products emerging from these supply chains, bear significant responsibility for the prevalence of child labour. The relentless drive for cost reduction and the increasing complexity of supply chains, often involving multiple tiers of subcontractors in different countries, create a system where oversight can be easily bypassed.

Many multinational corporations have been involved in child labor practices inside their supply chains. Nestle, for example, was sued in the United States in 2016 for allegedly employing Child labor in the chocolate supply chain in West Africa. H&M was accused in 2020 of utilizing Forced labor, including child labor, in its supply chain in China's Xinjiang area, resulting in a Boycotts and store closures in China. Apple admitted in 2013 that it used child labor in its supply chain. Chain has pledged to improve working conditions in China. Primark, Nike25, and Samsung. Unilever, Gap, Cargill, and Walmart are among the other corporations that have suffered similar problems. allegations and promised to look into the matter and improve supplier monitoring. These cases emphasize the importance of strong monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to maintain labor rights.<sup>5</sup>

## Sectors of Concern within India's Supply Chains

Child labour in India is not confined to a single sector; rather, it permeates numerous industries that are often integral to global supply chains. The carpet and textile industries, particularly in regions like Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, have historically been notorious for child labour. Children's small hands are often deemed ideal for intricate knotting and weaving, allowing them to work in cramped conditions for long hours with minimal pay. Similarly, the brick kilns scattered across the country, producing building materials for infrastructure projects and urban development, frequently employ entire families, including young children, who are made to carry bricks, mix mortar, and tend to the fires. The informal garment manufacturing sector, supplying to both domestic and international markets, is another significant area of concern. Children are often found engaged in stitching, embroidery, and finishing processes in sweatshops operating under deplorable conditions. The fireworks industry, especially in Tamil Nadu, known for its vibrant Diwali celebrations and significant export market, also relies on child labour for tasks such as filling shells and attaching wicks, which can be dangerous and require fine motor skills. Agriculture, while often considered a family occupation, also sees widespread child labour, with children involved in planting, weeding, harvesting, and tending to livestock, often forgoing schooling. Beyond these, children can also be found in the production of handmade paper, matchboxes, and even in artisanal crafts that eventually find

<sup>5</sup> INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES [ISSN 2581-5369] Volume 7 | Issue 4 2024 © 2024  
International Journal of Law Management & Humanities, The Impact of Global Supply Chains on Child Labor Practices PARINITA SEHRAWAT1 AND KARTIKEYA CHAUDHARY2 <https://ijlmh.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Impact-of-Global-Supply-Chains-on-Child-Labor-Practices.pdf>

their way into global markets, often through multiple layers of intermediaries that obscure the origin of the goods and the conditions under which they are produced.

## The Devastating Impact on Children

The consequences of child labour for the physical, mental, and social development of children are profound and long-lasting. Physically, children engaged in labour are exposed to hazardous environments, dangerous tools,<sup>6</sup> and physically demanding tasks that can lead to injuries, chronic health problems, and stunted growth. In the brick kilns, for instance, children inhale coal dust and suffer burns; in the textile mills, they endure eye strain and respiratory issues<sup>7</sup> from lint-filled air. The repetitive motions in weaving or stitching can cause deformities. Mentally and emotionally, child labour robs children of their childhood, extinguishing their sense of play and learning. The constant pressure, abuse, and lack of adequate rest can lead to psychological distress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the experience of exploitation and hardship can erode their self-esteem and sense of agency. Educationally, child labour is a direct impediment to schooling. Children who work are often unable to attend school, or if they do, their fatigue and lack of concentration hinder their learning, perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy and poverty.<sup>9</sup> This educational deprivation significantly limits their future prospects, trapping them in a life of low-wage, precarious employment. Socially, child labourers are often isolated from their peers and communities, missing out on crucial social development opportunities. The long hours and arduous work prevent them from engaging in recreational activities or developing healthy social relationships, further entrenching their vulnerability.

## Legal Frameworks and Their Limitations

India has a robust legal framework aimed at eradicating child labour, including the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986<sup>10</sup>, which has been amended over time to strengthen its provisions. The Act prohibits the employment of children below a certain age in specific hazardous occupations and processes and regulates the working conditions for children in non-hazardous occupations. India has also ratified key International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>11</sup> conventions on child labour. Despite these legal provisions, their effective implementation and enforcement remain a significant challenge. The vastness of the country, the sheer number of unregistered informal sector units, and the limited resources available for labour inspections contribute to widespread non-compliance. Corruption can also undermine enforcement efforts. Furthermore, the distinction between permissible child work and prohibited child labour can be blurry, leading to loopholes. The socioeconomic conditions that drive families to send their children to work often overwhelm the punitive measures of the law.

The focus has also been shifting towards rehabilitation and education, with initiatives like the National Child Labour Project (NCLP)<sup>12</sup>, which aims to mainstream child labourers into formal schooling. However, the scale of the problem often outstrips the capacity of these rehabilitation programs. The global nature of supply chains also presents a challenge, as national laws are often insufficient to address the cross-border flow of goods produced through child labour.

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF What is child labour? <https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-labour>

<sup>7</sup> OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

<sup>8</sup> **Children** Author: [Pallavi Jadhav](#) Published on February 2, 2025 <https://www.cry.org/blog/understanding-the-psychological-impact-of-child-labour/>

<sup>9</sup> How does child labour affect children? A case study from India <https://www.worldvision.com.au/docs/default-source/school-resources/how-does-child-labour-affect-children---india-case-study-worksheet.pdf?sfvrsn=2&srltid=AfmBOop3QOZvQacffiXr34rLI0iyXwnO3sJnXU6bsM9bBI2fjFkVwX>

<sup>10</sup> History of Legislation Relating to Child Labor in India

<sup>11</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, 24-July-2017 15:23 IST, ILO Fundamental Conventions - India ratified six out of the eight core/fundamental International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=168889&reg=3&lang=2>

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Labour & Employment, National child labour project scheme <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1849795&reg=3&lang=2>

## Pathways to Eradication

Combating child labour in global supply chains requires a multi-pronged and collaborative approach involving governments, corporations, civil society organizations, and consumers. Strengthening enforcement of existing laws and increasing the number of labor inspectors are crucial first steps for national governments. Investing in accessible and quality education for all children, making it a viable and attractive alternative to work, is paramount. This includes improving school infrastructure, providing mid-day meals<sup>13</sup>, and making curricula relevant to future employment opportunities. Corporations must move beyond superficial audits and implement robust due diligence mechanisms throughout their supply chains. This involves greater transparency, mapping their entire supply chain, and working collaboratively with suppliers to improve working conditions and provide remediation and rehabilitation<sup>14</sup> for exploited children.

Promoting fair wages<sup>15</sup> and ensuring decent working conditions for adult workers can reduce the economic pressure on families to send their children to work.

Civil society organizations play a vital role in advocating for children's rights<sup>16</sup>, raising awareness, and providing support services to vulnerable children and families. Consumer awareness campaigns and the promotion of ethical sourcing certifications can empower consumers to make responsible purchasing decisions. International cooperation is also essential, with developed nations holding their corporations accountable for the practices within their global supply chains and supporting developing nations in their efforts to combat child labour.

Ultimately, eradicating child labour is not just a legal or economic imperative; it is a moral one, a commitment to ensuring that every child has the right to a childhood, education, and a future free from exploitation. After her father's passing, Pragnya, a 16-year-old girl from Karnataka, was compelled to work as a child laborer. Nevertheless, Pragnya was re-enrolled in school with the aid of CRY's project partners, and her mother was given an MNREGA job card, which enabled her to earn enough money to maintain the family without having to work in the fields or rely on Pragnya's help. Pragnya now excels in her academics and motivates others in her neighbourhood to place a high value on education. Her narrative illustrates how any kid may flourish with the correct help.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.education.gov.in/en/mid-day-meal>

<sup>14</sup> Judicial View on Child labour <https://blog.ipleaders.in/judicial-view-on-child-labour/>

M.C. Mehta vs State Of Tamil Nadu And Others on 10 December, 1996

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Bench: [Kuldip Singh](#), [B.L. Hansaria](#), [S.B. Majmudar](#)

<sup>15</sup> Bandhua Mukti Morcha vs. Union of India, 1984 (3 SCC 161) [https://pr.adb.org/resource/bandhua-mukti-morcha-vs-union-india-1984-3-scc-161?utm\\_source](https://pr.adb.org/resource/bandhua-mukti-morcha-vs-union-india-1984-3-scc-161?utm_source)

<sup>16</sup> People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India [https://www.law.cornell.edu/gender-justice/resource/people%2527s\\_union\\_for\\_democratic\\_rights\\_v\\_union\\_of\\_india?utm\\_source](https://www.law.cornell.edu/gender-justice/resource/people%2527s_union_for_democratic_rights_v_union_of_india?utm_source)

<sup>17</sup> Children **Author: [Pallavi Jadhav](#)** Published on February 2, 2025 <https://www.cry.org/blog/understanding-the-psychological-impact-of-child-labour/>

## Conclusion

Child labour in global supply chains, particularly in the Indian context, represents a deeply complex and persistent challenge. It is a multifaceted issue driven by a potent mix of poverty, inadequate education, social inequalities, and the economic pressures inherent in globalized production. While India has enacted legislation and initiated programs to address child labour, the effectiveness of these measures is often hampered by implementation gaps, resource constraints, and the sheer scale of the problem. The devastating impact on children's physical, mental, and educational development perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Global corporations and consumers, as key stakeholders in these supply chains, have both the responsibility and the capacity to drive change. Moving forward, a concerted and collaborative effort is needed, encompassing strengthened legal enforcement, increased investment in quality education, greater corporate accountability through robust due diligence and supply chain transparency, and empowered consumer choices. Only through a holistic and sustained commitment from all actors involved can the chains of child exploitation be broken, ensuring a brighter and more equitable future for the millions of children affected.

