



Child Labour in Mizoram: A Case Study

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Abstract

Child labour is a serious issue and the figure is alarming in the global context and in the context of our nation. The problem of child labour is much more complex than it seems to be. In the context of Mizoram which is an ethnic close knit society, all forms of works performed by children are not considered child labour as per the cultural practices. This can be because of deep association of this society with cultural practices and traditions where children working with elders are not an issue of compromising the child rights. In reality, officially no accurate figure of children who are engaged as employee or involved in one or other form of work throughout Mizoram are not available. Moreover, in-depth study of them has not been conducted so far that could create awareness among the people of the society and for taking measures by the state government. The present study was undertaken to have some close in-depth case observations of children who were engaged as labourers. Six children, three male and three female, under the age of fourteen were identified from their work places in rural and urban areas of Aizawl. The study revealed the socio-economic causes of child labour in the state.

Keywords: *Child Labour, Poverty, Social Causes, Educational Status, Educational Prospect.*

Introduction

Child labour is a global phenomenon, particularly in developing and under developed countries. Since the foundation of International Labour Organization ((ILO) in 1919, the protection of children has been embedded in the Preamble of ILO's Constitution. The ILO celebrated 100 years of advancing social justice this year on 12th June 2019. In the convention, it was reported that 152 million children were still in child labour all over the world. The ILO review edits achievement over the 100 years of its support to countries on tackling child labour and also looked forward towards the UN Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 set for an end to child labour in all its forms by 2025. The theme of ILO's 100 years celebration is *Children shouldn't work in fields, but on dreams.*

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Though, there is no universally acceptable definition of child labour, age is a universally accepted criterion. India's Census 2001 defines child labour as participation of a child less than 17 years of age in any economically productive activity with or without compensation, wages or profit. Keeping the Right to Education Act, 2009 in view which is meant for universalising elementary education for the children between the age group 6-14 years, in the present study child means who has not completed his fourteenth year of age. The children in this age group are in formative stage physically and mentally. Any kind of exploitation and oppression on them lead to child abuse.

Child labour continues to be a serious problem in our country though there are governmental acts, schemes, rules and regulations for protection of children's interest and end child labour. Access, retention and quality are the parameters which are emphasised at all levels of education. There is broad consensus that the single most effective way to check the flow of school age children into labour market is to extend and improve access to quality school education. The Constitution of India had made a provision under article 45 as a directive principle for free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen years within ten years of promulgation of the constitution. Free and compulsory education became a fundamental right with the 86th Constitutional Amendment in December 2002 resulting insertion of Article 21-A in part III of the constitution. Subsequently, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 was made on 26th August 2009 and became effective in all Indian states, except Jammu and Kashmir, with effect from 1st April 2010 confirming Article 21-A. This Act is a milestone in the history of Indian school education which would address the issues of child labour in our country. Besides, through articles 24, 39-e, and 39-f, the Constitution of India has made provisions to prevent child labour in our country.

The major national legislative and judicial developments for eradication of child labour in our country include The Factories Act, 1948, The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, The Mines Act, 1952, The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, Supreme Court Decision, 1996, and The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) of Children Act, 2000. Some of these acts have also been amended. After the enactment of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, a National Child Labour Policy was adopted in 1987. Government of India has initiated the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) in 1988 after two years of enactment of National Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986 to rehabilitate working children which is a 100% centrally funded scheme.

Causes and Consequences of Child Labour

For many reasons children join the labour force. Studies conducted in different parts of the country have revealed children working the main causes of child labour to be poverty, large family size, migration, illiteracy and ignorance, family break up, natural disasters, urbanization, unemployment of elders, addiction of parents, orphans and the like. Child labour refers to that type of works which are likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. Hazardous child labour is the work that is performed by children in dangerous and unhealthy conditions that can lead to a child being killed, injured, permanently disable, and

psychological damage. The worst forms of exploitation include slavery, trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Generally, child labourers suffer from long term health problems due to malnutrition, exposure to chemicals, abuse, injuries, exhaustion, and psychological harm. They may suffer from burns, respiratory issues, cancer, HIV/AIDS and may have sleep problems and behavioural problems. Some of them become addicted to consuming cigarettes, drugs, alcohol and other narcotic substances and also involve in criminal activities. Many have unwanted pregnancy and abortion, and even death. Such children are more prone to drop out from schools.

Rationale of the Study

India is the second largest populous country in the world and has a huge contingency of children i.e. approximately thirty-five million. It is a country having a numerous diversity of people. Most of the children engaged in labour used to work under some short of compulsions. Despite of constitutional and legal provisions for prohibition of labour by children under fourteen years of age, it continues to be a serious problem.

Mizoram got its statehood in 1986. The development in education sector happened quite late as compared to other states. The state does not have any major development in industrial sector because of difficult geographical location and lack of mineral resources. The major occupation of people is agriculture which is not that productive for which many people are there below poverty line. The children engaged in labour are low paid and suffer from various health problems. As per the 2001 and 2011 Census data, the state had 26,265 and 2793 child labourers respectively. Besides the official data, the number may be more as it is difficult to identify who work largely in the unorganised sectors, within the family or in household-based units and become invisible. Since the criteria for selection of districts for implementation of NCLP is the high concentration of child labour in the district, none of the eight districts of Mizoram has been selected. There is lack of empirical studies on child labour. With the hope that more information on the life and education of such cases can be revealed, the investigators had conducted case studies where the information provided by the cases and self-narrations of the selected child-labourers have been mentioned followed by interpretations.

Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted with the key objective of conducting case studies on child labourers under the age of fourteen for revealing the causes of child labour in Mizoram and to examine the prospect of education of child labourers in Mizoram.

Methodology

Selection of the Cases: Though initially ten cases were identified and data were collected, finally six, three male and three female, child labourers were selected for analysis and interpretation basing upon their openness and nature of work.

Collection of Data: Semi-structured interview was used as the technique for data collection. The investigator visited the cases under study and interviewed them after establishing rapport. The information collected are organized and presented below with interpretation.

Case Descriptions: In description of the cases, anonymity has been maintained due to ethical considerations. The real identity of the cases are not exposed, instead, pseudo names have been used.

Case 1: Case Study of Puii

Puii is a thirteen and half year old girl living in Aizawl District. She is the eldest child in her family and has three sisters and two brothers. Family does not own a house and is living in rented house. Her parents are uneducated and their occupation is stone crushing on daily basis. They earn daily wages according to their work but the family income is very low. In spite of all the shortcomings, both the parents are struggling hard to educate their children and maintain the family. Puii was admitted in a local school at the age of 6 years. She was very weak in English, mathematics and science subjects and her parents were too poor to afford any private tuition for those difficult subjects. She used to attend household chores like cooking, washing, caring of her younger sisters and to support her parents. Presently, she is enrolled in class VII, but she is not regular in attending school as she is having more load of household works as she has grown into an adolescent. Subsequently, she is not finding any time to relax and concentrate on her education. She narrated - *“I think that I may not pursue very high education because I am the eldest child and I have to always help and support my parents and take care of my younger sisters and brothers, but, I wish to complete Graduation.”*

Puii was engaged as a part time labourer initially and she joined her parents when she attained the age of 10 years. Every Saturday and holidays she used to be busy in helping her parents at stone quarry for crushing stones. Due to lack of time, she could not concentrate on her studies for which her academic performance was very poor. Due to the deficiency in family income, she is trying to work more often. With her work in supporting to parents she is able to earn around Rs. 300/- per day. She shared - *I am working with my parents since last few years, when I was 10 years. There is a growing need of increasing family income and I have to support my parents. I am able to earn around Rs. 300/- per day if I work hard for whole day with my parents at the stone quarry”*

Further, the case informed that her family size is large in comparison to the family income. Recently, she suffered from infection as she narrated - *“When I was a child I was very healthy but when I started working with my parents in stone quarry, while crushing stones I developed coughing symptoms. Doctor said I have developed some sinus problem, and now I feel weak”.*

Interpretation

Poverty is the main factor which forced Puii to join the work force and deprived her from enjoying the childhood and is affecting her education. She had health problems because of her engagement in stone quarry. She is in need of proper medical attention to get relieved from her health problems. In spite of all the shortcomings, she has concern for her family, particularly the education of her siblings, and is aspiring to get her graduation degree. She did

not have any negative attitude towards her parents as she knows how hard they are working for the family.

Case 2: Case Study of Sangi

Thirteen year old girl Sangi is the eldest child of the family living in Aizawl district. She had lost her father recently in 2017 in a road accident and her mother is working in stone crushing on daily basis. Sangi has two sisters and one brother who are pursuing their studies.. Her father was driving taxi, but after his death, her mother was the only person to earn for the family. Her mother is working hard to educate all her children. When the father was alive, the family was not having any serious financial problem and the parents were able to take proper care of all the children. Sangi shared that, at times, she feels insecure after the death of her father. She finds difficulty in adjustment in school. She feels that she is being subjected to bullying by her schoolmates. On a very shy note she narrated - *“I am not able to make good friends now as some comment on my family. I can do nothing about this but have to constantly face this. I wish my father would have been there to solve my problem.”*

Sangi was admitted in the school at the age of 6 years and she was an average student in her class. She is presently studying in local school in class VII and has apprehension for her academic performance. She told - *“As I am moving to higher classes, I am facing difficulty in understanding science and mathematics subjects. These subjects are very hard and I am not getting any help from any tutor. I think I cannot study it on my own.”*

As the eldest child of the family, Sangi has to do domestic works like cooking, washing, caring of her younger siblings and guiding them in their studies. Though she was average in studies, at present, she is not able to give time to her studies and apprehending about her success. She narrated - *“I may not have a chance to continue my education, although I want to continue education because of high expectations from my teachers.”*

Sangi is engaged as a part time labourer since her father passed away. She has joined with her mother when she was 12 years and hopes to finish her school education at least. She also reported some health problems after she started working in stone quarry. She revealed - *“If we work whole day crushing stones to fill a tin bucket full to its top, we can only earn Rs. 20 per tin which is very negligible in return of time and energy we spend.”*

Interpretation

Due to loss of father, Sangi has a struggling life so far. She feels insecure at school and her present status creates difficulties to make friends and constantly trouble her in coping up in school. She has difficulties in Science and Mathematics subjects. She got some health problems after she started working in stone quarry.

Case 3: Case Study of Kimi

Thirteen years old Kimi is the only girl child in her family. She is the eldest child and has three brothers. Her family lives in a village. Her parents are uneducated and agriculture is the source of income of the family. The family practices jhum cultivation to support their

everyday life. Unfortunately, her father is an alcohol addict and he spends a lot of money on his habit. Consequently, he did not take proper care of his children. Further, her mother had medical problems of allergy and thyroid abnormality for which she requires treatment. Besides, she cannot perform household chores. The elderly children in the family help their parents in agriculture. When the children are free, they work outside to earn in order to support the family. Kimi was admitted in the school at the age of 6 years but now she is a drop out of class VII. As a student, Kimi was an average student and language subjects were her favourite. However, due to the family situation she was compelled to drop out. As the only girl child in the family, she has to do domestic works like cooking, washing etc. when she used to be at home. Due to the addiction of her father to alcohol, there used to be break of peace at her home about which she narrated - *“Our home environment is not supportive for our studies and my father does not care about us. We are living difficult life and to support my siblings, I have to earn.”*

Kimi left her family and village to work as a domestic helper at Aizawl city. At her work place, she takes care of her employer’s children and also doing household works full time. In her words - *“The main reason why I engaged myself as a servant is poverty. Poverty compelled me to work as domestic servant without attending school.”*

She is not satisfied with her present work as the job is of low dignity and also has adverse effects on her health. Regarding her job she narrated - *“It affects my health because I have to do a lot of household chores besides taking care of children; I feel tired very often and some time have back pain, and I feel uncomfortable as my working hours are very long.”*

Kimi expressed that she would have continued her education but she had to earn to support her family. She has almost lost her touch with studies and yearns to go back to school. She misses her school and wants to get back there regarding which she exclaimed - *“I miss my school; that was a good time and place where I had friends. If there is any way, I want to return to my school.”*

Interpretation

Due to poverty, bad habit of the father, illness of the mother and to support the education of her brothers, Kimi had dropped out from the school and is engaged as domestic helper. Due to work pressure, she has got some health problems. She is recalling her sweet experiences at school and missing her friends. She has the desire to pursue education.

Case 4: Case Study of Thanga

Thanga, 13 year old boy, is found working in an automobile work shop. When he was only of 9 years old, his parents got divorced. Initially, he was taken care of by his mother but subsequently, her mother got remarried. Thanga’s father was working as a lower division clerk in one government office, but, he always spent money on gambling, extra-marital relations and did not care about his family. His mother is uneducated and was earning by vending vegetables to support herself and her son. They were living in a rented house in an isolated area of Aizawl city. Thanga was admitted to the school at the age of 6 years and he

was a much disciplined student. After remarriage of her mother he has dropped out of school at class VI. He narrated - *“I would have continued my education but, there was no one to provide support to me. Sometimes, I feel pity on myself as I failed to continue my education like my friends.”*

He has been working in the automobile workshop on daily since one year. He receives an amount of Rs 2500 /- per month and, at times, receives some bonus from his employer.

He narrated – *“I get very tired after every day’s work and get no time for anything else. I do not like my present work because there used to be lots of customers every day and my employer scolds me if my work is not up to the satisfaction of the customers.”* He further expressed - *“My ambition was to be a government servant, but as of now, I have no scope to fulfil my aspiration. I always consider that this work would not help me in my future prospect.”*

Though Thanga was a healthy boy during his childhood, he often suffers from back pain and headache. There is no medical support in his place of work in case of emergency and he used to get himself checked up in the hospital at his own expenses. The doctors have suggested him not to continue his present work, but he has to continue until he gets another job.

Interpretation

Thanga has dropped out mainly due to divorce of parents and remarriage of his mother. To maintain himself he has joined as a full time worker in an automobile workshop. His aspirations and dreams could not be fulfilled and he did not see any future prospect working at his present work. Besides, he also hesitates continuing at his present work place because it was affecting his health and his employer used to scold him when customers are not satisfied with his work.

Case 5: Case Study of Kima

The thirteen year old eldest son in the family Kima has two sisters and two brothers and their grandparents in a joint family. His father is a watchman in one of government office and this is their main sources of income. Their standard of living is very low due to big family size and lack of adequate income. They do not have their own house and are living in a rented house. Unfortunately, one of his brother got bone marrow cancer and the family spent a lot of money for his treatment and that has created financial hardship. His mother is also sick may be because she delivered many children at young age. He narrated - *“As we are a big family, my father’s income is not adequate to support our education, we have to take care of our grandparents, and we spent a lot of money for my brother’s treatment.”*

Like other children, Kima was admitted in the school at the age of 6 years. However, he dropped out at class VI due to the family problems. As the eldest child among the siblings in his family, he has to do a lot of works such as taking care of his siblings, performing household works etc. He did not have sufficient time to study at his home. Further, his family

could not support his education due to lack of income. He expressed - *“I am still interested to continue my education, if given a chance with non-formal education as a part-timer, but to support my family, I have to work whatever job I get.”*

He has been working at a construction site since last two years. His nature of work comprises of doing cement work and carrying heavy loads to his age. It is due to this work that he is now a school dropout. He joined his present job when he attained the age of 11 years and he receives an amount of Rs 3000 /- per month. In his words - *“I am very tired due to my present work as this job is very tough and harmful to my physical development.”*

Interpretation

The case study of Kima revealed that due to poverty he has dropped out from school and joined full time job at construction work to supplement his family income. Though his health condition was good before joining the work, he is getting shoulder pain which may be due to the effect of his present work. He used to get very tired and dislike his present work because his job is very tough and harmful to his physical development. He is interested to continue his education if he is given a chance through non-formal education as he is compelled to do some job to supplement the income of the family.

Case 6: Case Study of Liana

Thirteen years old Liana is the only child in his family whose parents passed away in a road accident when he was only 10 years old. Since then he has been looked after by his grandmother who is also old. The family does not have own house and living in a rented house in south corner of the Aizawl city. He is selling tobacco and its products for income along with his grandmother. He was admitted in the school at the age of 6 years but his grandmother could not afford his school expenditure after the death of his parents, and the school environment was not friendly to him as sometimes he used to be bullied by his friends. He narrated - *“I am one of the most unfortunate persons in this world, because I have lost my parents very early, and I could not continue my education for which I was interested. I had to leave the school at Class VI, while most of my friends are pursuing education supported by their families.”*

His grandmother is engaged by the agent in selling of tobacco and its products every day and he helps her. He used to earn Rs 20/- if he could sell a dozen of cigarette packets. In his words - *“I am engaged fulltime with my grandmother and we are selling tobacco and its products around the city every day. I wish to pursue education, but my grandmother has become old now and she cannot work for the whole day. So, if I do not help her, we will not be able to pay even the rent of the house and cannot survive.”*

He further expressed - *“I was a very healthy boy during my childhood, but when I started selling tobacco and its products, I feel, I am suffering from coughing and allergic problems.”*

Interpretation

The case of Liana reveals that he has dropped out from school and is engaged in selling tobacco and its products along with his grandmother for their survival. It is because he lost both his parents at the age of 10 and there is no other person to look after them. He is interested to continue his education, but he has no way out. He was found ignorant of the fact that selling of tobacco in Mizoram is prohibited. Besides, he thought that he had no choice other than his present work which is dangerous to his health causing cough and allergy problems.

Conclusion

In all the six cases, poverty is found to be the main factor, which forced the children to be engaged in labour and deprived them from enjoying the basic human rights including right to education. Besides, accidents, large family size, family break up, and addiction to bad habits by the adult members are the other causes. Engagement in labour has badly affected their health. The children are not happy with their nature of work and also, in some cases, at their work places and want to get themselves relieved but they find helpless. All dropout cases are interested to pursue education, if given a chance, but in non-formal mode as they are not in a position to give up the works which is badly required for their own survival and to support their dependants. It was closely observed that the Mizo families have very strong emotional attachment and the eldest children, irrespective of their age and gender, take the responsibility of the family if any accident happens in the family. Under such conditions, children are found to be more prone to become victims to condition of child labour. Subjects like science, mathematics and English are difficult to children and as such require more efforts from children in higher classes and often this has been pointed out by them to be a reason of their underperformance in school. The children feel that they need guidance in these subjects.

The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) is not in operation in Mizoram because of the fact that the problem is not yet acute. Before the problem becomes acute, it is desired that the issues related to child labour in the state should be addressed. Child labour is not uniform, it is local specific. Education can improve the lot of exploited child labourers. Mizoram has ideal system of education at all levels, more particularly at school levels in terms of access and teacher pupil ratio. Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme is in operation in the state. It is said that *feeding a child at school is such a simple thing – but it works miracles*. But, simply having provisions are not enough. The provisions need to be implemented in true spirit. Effective monitoring and supervision is essential. It is said that *prevention is better than cure*. Child labour can never be a measure for eradication of poverty rather it will perpetuate poverty. The Mizoram Child Protection Society needs to conduct survey and to rescue the child labourers and to rehabilitate them. It is required for establishment of special schools and vocational institutions in the state. “*Child in Pain is No Gain*” “*Small Hands Can Handle a Pen Better*” “*Let Children be Children, Not Child Labourers*”. These quotes should be reflected by all and suitable measures should be taken.

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