

child labour News 5.6.02
A mixed curse

education combined; the disparity is expected to widen in years to come. Spending on education remains among the world's lowest. Only 37 per cent of Pakistan's 25 million school-age children complete primary school as compared with a world average of 79 per cent and a South Asian average of approximately 50 per cent. By the year 2000 less than a third of Pakistani children have attended school. The rest will enter the work force or become beggars.

Behind these statistics lurks an unpleasant truth: despite its modern views on warfare and industrialization, Pakistan remains a feudal society, committed to maintaining traditions that over the centuries have served its upper castes well. The lords —factory owners, exporters, financiers— reflexively oppose any reforms that might weaken their authority, lower their profit margins, or enfranchise the workers. "There is room for improvement in any society," the industrialist Imran Malik says. "But we feel that the present situation is acceptable the way it is. The government must not rush through reforms without first evaluating their impact on productivity and sales. Our position is that the government must avoid so-called humanitarian measures that harm our competitive advantages."

On those rare occasions when a reform does squeak through, the backlash is fierce. For example, when the legislature last year approved a modest tax on bricks to fund an education program, brick-kiln owners staged a ten-day nationwide protest and threatened to suspend production, crippling construction, until the tax was repealed.

Trade associations have used similar strong-arm tactics to fight minimum-wage legislation, occupational-safety regulations, and trade-union activity.

Pakistan has only now entered an era of economic stability that will allow us to expand our horizons and address social concerns. Just as we are catching up with the West in industrial development, so we are catching up in workplace and social reforms. We are accelerating the pace of reform and have resolved to create viable welfare and educational structures that will eradicate child labor in the foreseeable future."

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Foreseeable may be a long way off. At the moment the government seems more interested in outfitting her army than in reforming Pakistani society; the government has embarked on an ambitious military buildup that has already imperiled the region. Its first victims have been Pakistan's lower castes, the working poor who are accustomed to receiving little in the way of social services and must now make do with less.

In 1994 military spending was 240 per cent as high as spending on health and

"If employers would apply as much ingenuity to their manufacturing processes as they do to evading labor laws, we'd have no child-labour problem," says Najamuddin Najmi, the director general of the Workers Education Program, a government agency.

"There's little doubt that inexpensive child labour has fueled Pakistan's economic growth. Entire industries have relocated to Pakistan because of the abundance of cheap child labour and our lax labor laws. At the same time, child labour has hindered our industrial development, especially in the use of advanced technologies. Why should a manufacturer invest in labour-saving technology when labour-intensive mechanisms are so much cheaper? We are discovering more and more factories that have been redesigned and retooled so that only children can work there."

Child labour has been a mixed curse for all of southern Asia, expanding its industrial capacity while generating an unprecedented assortment of social problems. Not surprisingly, Pakistan's leaders are of two minds on the subject. Speaking officially, they deplore the practice and have nothing but pity for the roughly 11 million children working in factories, in fields, and on the streets. Speaking pragmatically, they regard the practice as a distasteful but unavoidable part of an emerging economy which time and prosperity will end. They are quick to take offense (and quicker to take the offensive) when human-rights activists suggest that they have ignored the problem.

"Westerners conveniently forget their own shameful histories when they come here," says Shabbir Jamal, an adviser to the Ministry of Labour. "Europeans addressed slavery and child labour only after they became prosperous.

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