

**T**HE droopy faces of the children of Thar shows no sign of a smile. This leads one to wonder why the smile has disappeared and sorrows have overshadowed joy? Is there any difference between children of other parts of country and those of Tharparkar?

The silence that comes as a response to these questions has all the answers in itself. What is the reality? The children of Thar are spending the precious moments of their lives in taking care of animals and doing other kinds of work to earn a living for their families. As their fingers are delicate and small, so they are supposed to be good at carpet weaving. Like millions of children around the world, many children in Thar work to help their families survive and to pay off their parents' debt. A number of children, like an asset, are actually mortgaged by the parents. Most of these children work just to provide two square meals for their families.

Under the hot sun, the little angels look after the herd and fetch water from deep wells. In the late evenings, they collect wood from the jungle and take home the load on their head, despite the risk of being bitten by deadly snakes found commonly in Thar. They all are paid in kind rather than in cash. Most of these children are unable to attend school due to poverty and debt. Their parents cannot afford to pay for their education and survive without their

# Loss of innocence

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*Child  
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economic support. In other words, the children are live asset, like animals, who are sold to the landlord, money-lender and contractor to secure basic necessities.

In Tharparkar district, that lies in the southern part of Sindh, the survival of the

When there is little rainfall and little is left to eat, the families have no alternative but to seek out loans. However, they are unable to pay the interest on the loan on regular basis. They are, then, forced to pledge their labour to compensate the

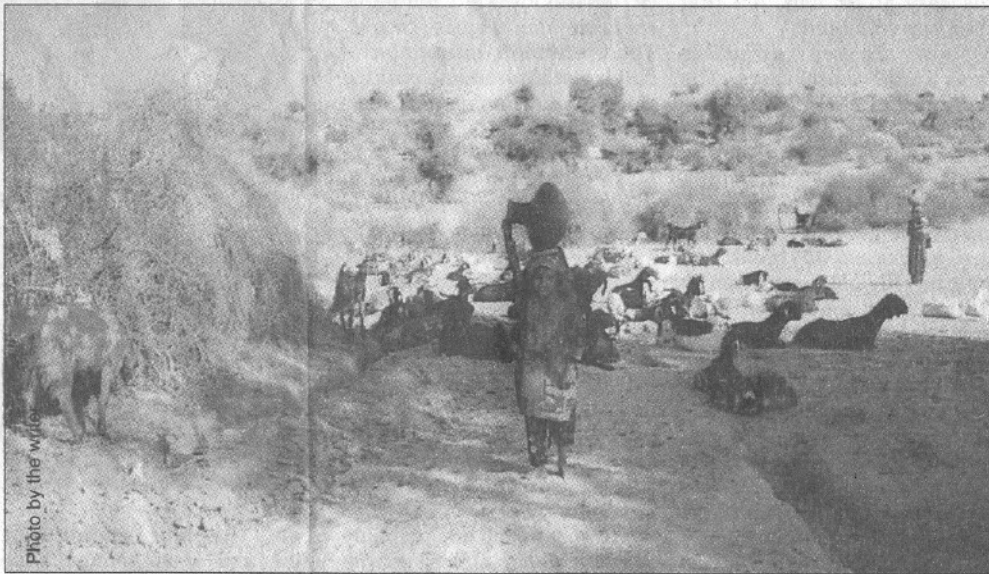
employed in household chores, 15 per cent engaged in other types of work, such as looking after the animals and working in garages. Only 34 per cent of the children were noted to be free from any type of work.

In order to pay off debts or simply to pay interest on debts, families send their children to work on the car-

in different ways by their employers. Many children pick up wrong habits at the workplace, such as smoking. Little do they realize its harmful effects.

Their parents often do not give them the upbringing and training that they should. The girl-child in Thar is the most neglected member of a family. The birth of a girl usually is an unceremonious event. She has always been ignored when it comes to love, health and nutrition care. Like other backward areas of Pakistan, the Thari girl has to stay within the house and is not allowed to go to school. The interesting and surprising fact is that a girl is given less food to eat and less time to play than a boy. The popular belief is that as girls don't work outside the house and only do household chores, they don't need much food to eat. The fact is that there is not enough food for anyone there and many children suffer from night blindness.

The overall scenario in Thar, particularly as regards to the children there, is not appealing. Banning children from all kinds of work is not recommended, as the economic conditions demand that they too earn some money for their families. However, their working conditions should be improved and their rights safeguarded. They need to have access to education in order to have a brighter future, and live with dignity and respect in society.



**Heavy loads on little heads**

locals depends on the usually scanty rainfall that occurs between the months of July and September. The economic status of the population can best be defined as poor. Due to the poverty, over 80 per cent of population seeks loan from different sources.

interest payment. An NGO in Tharparkar conducted a research on child labour in the carpet weaving sector there. According to the report, 12 per cent of the children of Tharparkar were engaged in carpet-weaving. Some 39 per cent were found

pet looms. Due to the poor facilities of ventilation, light and seating arrangements, children are suffering from different diseases, such as fever, eye ailments, cough, body ache, fever and tuberculosis. Many of these working children are also abused