**Exigency to end child labour**

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Anti-Child Labour Day being observed around the world on June 12 and is meant to evoke a greater realisation and a firm resolve to save children from the tragic loss of their childhood. The day, not only has a more vibrant theme to assert Universal Social Protection but also a special significance as it just follows the séance of the Fifth Global Conference on Child Labour and the International Labour Organisation, held last month at Durban. They agreed to enhance the commitment and endeavours to eliminate this curse but rising armed conflicts, environmental apocalypse and ensuing food and employment fiascos, threaten to reverse years of progress. The exigency to end child labour is imperative as about 160 million children around the world—72 million in Africa and 62 million in Asia and the Pacific—are still trapped in this tribulation. About 8.4 million of them have been drawn in during the last four years while nine million more may be dragged by the severe economic impact caused by Covid19.

Even in Pakistan, over 12 million—or one out of every five children—is involved in some form of child labour. Their number, unfortunately, has not only increased over the years but even the median age of the kids forced to labour as per some estimates of the Pakistan’s Human Rights Commission, also decreased, drawing in more tender age souls. About half of the eleven million children working in the 1990s, for instance, were under ten years of age but it dropped to under eight in 1994 and fell still further to under seven workers in 1996. The age in some industries like the carpet weaving, was even lower. As per UNICEF figures in 1996, half to one million children between the ages of four to fourteen were employed in them.

Brick kilns engaging about 4.5 million children are yet another grueling concern. The list in fact, ranges from forced domestic toil to textiles, footwear, furnaces, foundries and fireworks. They are also involvement in begging, child trafficking, sexual exploitation, and plying and as an oblivious and unwilling tool, in various illicit and hasardous pursuits. The cost to the children of this drudgery is evidently far more tragic as they are deprived of not merely the bliss and charm of their childhood but also the avenues of their education, proper training, sports, social interaction and hence the growth, bounty and the bloom of their real talent and potential. Longer hours, isolation from family and friends affect their dignity, physical, mental and social development. They can also suffer from severe physical and psychological impairment, respiratory, endemic diseases and even fatalities. Some of these scars can be even more traumatic with cyclical afflictions. Their ordeal besides being a personal loss to them, is also a great collective loss and setback to the country being continuously deprived of the contribution from the talent and ingenuity of millions of its minds.

Coming to the causes of this curse, it is primarily pushed by poverty and the lack of a real effective national will. The children are forced to supplement the family income and resources. This is more common in developing countries like Pakistan as even the parents being illiterate and low skilled, miss the proper employment and income. Poverty, in turn, also prevents proper education and grooming for the children because the state allocation for education has been persistently too abysmal. Even a proper motivation for education, skill and enterprise may be lacking in many families and localities because of their environment and traditions. Access to low paid unskilled slots thus becomes rather more attractive for them. Overpopulation and early marriages with many kids also force the elder siblings to fend for their families.

The strategy to swamp this scourge lies in countering its causative factors and swift and strong national resolve to alter the attitudes and implement strict and effective regulations for its eradication. Proper awareness and concern about children’s rights to be treated and nurtured as a national asset, shielded from the cruel, unethical and illegal labour practices, must be created. Free and compulsory quality education, at least up to the secondary stage must be mandated for every kid. Raising the standards and quality of work, products and processes of the factories, would also move them to mature trained expertise, groomed at the requisite skill and vocational institutions. Financial stimuli can help the poor vulnerable families to spare their children for proper education and skill acquisition.

All such efforts and strategies have to be backed by the relevant legislative stipulations. Child labour is incompatible with our Constitution that mandates free compulsory education of every child. This stricture of schooling, sports and home work obviously can hardly spare a child for labour. But unfortunately, just like the flagrant disregard to this constitutional obligation, the subsequent legislations, rules and implementation have also been quite patchy and fragmented. Pakistan ratified several ILO conventions but the bill on a National Commission on this is still pending. The first Employment Act of 1991, prohibited the child labour in hazardous occupations, the second in 1992 outlawed the indentured servitude and Peshgi. An amendment in 2020, banned the domestic while and the Sustainable Development Goal claims to end the worst forms of this labour by 2025. A comprehensive legislation and strident steps, clearly are still awaited.

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