

**T**hroughout the ages and in all cultures children joined with their parents to work in the field, in the marketplace, and around the home as soon as they were old enough to perform simple tasks. The use of child labour was not regarded a social problem until the introduction of the factory system. Of late the employment of minors, especially in work that may interface into their education and harm their health has alarmed societies. The third world countries have faced wide criticism for supporting child labour but it has more or less prevailed. Child labour problems are not of course limited to developing nations. They occur wherever poverty exists even in Europe and the United States. Many of these children live in underdeveloped and developing countries. Their living conditions are poor and chances for education minimal.

The meager income they bring in however is necessary for the survival of their families. These families lack the basic necessities of life such as adequate food, enough clothing and shelter and clean drinking water. Child labour has assumed high proportions in Pakistan as well. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) last year estimated the number of Pakistani working children to be "realistically in the range of 10-12 million." At least half of these children are under the age of ten. Despite the government efforts and a recent series of laws prohibiting child labour and indentured servitude, children make up high portion of unskilled work force. Certain industries like carpet-making and brick-making are dependent upon them where children usually work with their parents. Few countries have done more to abolish or contain the practice than Pakistan, which has a government that favours and promotes workplace reforms and human rights initiatives vigorously. Given its relative prosperity, its constitutional prohibition against child la-

# Enigma of child labour

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bour, and its leaders' signature on every UN human and child rights convention, has shown the country's resolve to solve the problem. The workshops and small cottage factories in Pakistan do have children, mostly not as labourers but as apprentices and under training technicians. This informal institution has created great corps of skilled work force that has run the cottage industries, small workshops and vendor shops.

Unfortunately, such technicians grow up as semi-literate mechanics, which are very good at fixing a machine but can not invent or innovate because basic knowledge of science and its principles is missing. Despite its utility the previous governments in Pakistan have tried their utmost to eradicate this inhuman institution, perhaps because of worldwide criticism. Two laws meant to curb child labour, the first, The Employment of Children Act of 1991, prohibited the use of child labour in hazardous occupations and environments. The second, The Bonded Labour Act of 1992, abolished indentured servitude and the peshgi system. As progressive as these laws were, the government has tried to provide for their implementation and enforcement. Serious thought is being given to enhance the age limit of child labour from 14 to 18. The Non-governmental Organizations and courts have tried hard to inform the millions of working children and indentured servants that they were free and released from their debts. People however are of two minds on the subject. Speaking publicly, they deplore the practice and have nothing but pity for the children working in factories, in fields, and on the streets. While privately, they regard the practice as a distasteful but unavoidable

part of an emerging economy which time and prosperity will end. There is a common perception that westerners conveniently forget their own histories as they addressed slavery and child labour only after they became prosperous. Even now vested interests are working in the guise of curbing child labour but trying to harm the small industries of developing countries. Recently protests in certain European countries were arranged against the products of Pakistan, not due to any sympathy for the children of this country but to pave the way for the goods of other countries. Child labour is a complex subject.

While often harmful, it is not always so, especially where the alternative is deeper poverty for children and their families. Wrong steps for stamping it out can make matters worse, for example, if legislation is unevenly enforced and results in pushing children into worse situations. Solutions are needed to go beyond conventional thinking. For example, although improving primary education is the key, it is also critical to adapt schools (for example, their times and schedules) to accommodate poor children and increase real access by reducing the costs to families of having their children go to school.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates the number of working children aged between 5 and 14 years to be about 250 million in the developing countries, of whom at least 120 million are working full time. Of these, 61 percent are in Asia, 32 percent in Africa, and 7 percent in Latin America. Relatively few children work in developed countries. In general, child labour force participation rates are much higher in rural than in urban

areas, and three quarters of working children work in the family enterprise. Ninety percent of working children in rural areas are engaged in agricultural or similar activities, while their urban counterparts are found mainly in trade and services, with fewer in manufacturing and construction. Although urban street children have received considerable attention, far larger numbers are employed in agriculture and domestic services. The incidence of child labour has been falling on a global basis, but there are different trends across regions.

The proportion of children who work has been declining in Southeast Asia—given rising per capita incomes, the spread of basic education, and a reduction in family size—but rising in many countries in Africa. A number of approaches have been suggested to combat child labour. The major thrusts are: reducing poverty; educating children; providing support services for working children; raising public awareness; legislating and regulating child labour; and promoting elimination of abusive child labour through international measures. These approaches are, of course, not mutually exclusive and are adopted in various combinations in child labour reduction strategies. Child labour is a serious problem in a number of countries including Pakistan. It is primarily due to the conditions of poverty in which large segments of the population live and to a lack of access to quality education among the poor. Most countries have legislation governing the employment of children and are signatories to one or more international treaties on the subject, but enforcement is often lacking. In the longer run, programmes to alleviate poverty and improve education and human services are essential to reducing harmful child labour. Pakistan has now entered an era of economic stability that will allow us to expand our horizons and address social concerns.