

Rehabilitating the Child Labour

It is believed that there are more children under the age of fourteen years in India than the entire population of the United States. Children under fourteen constitute around 3.6 per cent of the total labour force in India. Of these, nine out of every ten work for their own family enterprises in the countryside. Nearly 85 per cent are supposed to be engaged in traditional agricultural activities. Less than 9 per cent work in manufacturing, services and repair workshops. Only about 0.8 per cent work in factories.

Child labour is usually a natural consequence of a poor country afflicted by the sundry problems of underdevelopment. Government of India in cooperation with other state governments has been trying very hard for the eradication of child labour. The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) is one of the important government interventions towards the realisation of this goal. Needless to say, the project has made significant difference in this regard.

Thousands of child labourers have been rescued and rehabilitated through the special schools run under the Project. These special schools run specially designed bridge courses so that these children can be suitably mainstreamed through consequent admission to formal schools. These children not only learn the three 'Rs' in the special schools, but also get some vocational training in the area of their choice. The children receive a monthly stipend of Rs 150 per month apart from getting regular nutritional and medical support.

Run by NGOs or local self-government bodies, these schools have been doing reasonably well towards realisation of the Project objectives. Hundreds of thousands of children have been mainstreamed, but still there remains a lot which needs to be done to extirpate the malaise of child labour from our society for good.

The practical experience in running the Project and the special schools across the country has brought forth many issues which need to be considered, if at all we wish to make a serious dent to this problem.

First thing which baffles one is the age cap of 14 for identifying the child labour. After all, what is the criterion whereby we need to confine our identification of child labour till

the age of 14 only, something which is accepted internationally? Do we mean to say that the moment a child becomes 14, he ceases to deserve state attention and care? This is more so when we know that such a child deserves better nurturing to compensate for the poor family background and upbringing he has been getting.

If we stop state support at 14 only, then it is very much likely that the child would relapse to his previous fate. Stopping state support and care at 14 means that the child labourers shall always remain so and would never get out of the morass of an unflattering living standard. Hence, one believes and proposes that the age bar for the identification of the child labour be raised to 18. Consequently, all the relevant government support including monthly stipend, medical care and nutritional support should also continue until the child reaches the age of 18.

As per the extant norms, the stipend is supposed to be stopped once the child is mainstreamed into a formal school. That being the case, there remains no incentive for mainstreaming of the children as they or their parents don't wish to lose the financial benefit, hence children's academic performance gets negatively affected. So, one feels that the stipend should be continued even after the child is mainstreamed into the formal education system and the same should be continued till he or she reaches the age of 18.

After all, it is money that drives the poor parents to use their children as additional sources of income. So, some sort of pecuniary assistance should be provided and continued even after the child is withdrawn from the active employment and till he is completely mainstreamed.

Even though envisaged in the overall rehabilitation package, still the parents of the child labourers are not compulsorily entitled to get preferential treatment in allocation of different government benefits or goodies. One feels that there can be a general guideline in this respect so that there can be earmarked quota for such category of people as we already have with respect to SC/ST/OBC, war widows, ex-military personnel and the handicapped.

One another problem commonly faced regarding identification of the child labour relates to age determination. Whatever this project has done, at least, it has generated enough awareness relating to the employment of child labour. Now, everyone is aware that employing a child below 14 is an offence. So, today when one goes about enforcing prohibition of employment of child labour, one is faced with the difficulty that the child himself/herself tells his/her age to be above 14 and the same is told by their employers/parents even though one knows for sure that the child is below 14.

But as there is no way to verify the same, one finds oneself helpless and handicapped to do anything about rehabilitation of such children. These children have not been to schools and their births are also not registered, so they manage to get an age certificate from any corner and proffer the same in support of their age which one is forced to accept for want of any other way to do the same.

One also feels that the exemption given to children working for their parents or in their family workshops/factories also needs to be withdrawn as the same defeats the very purpose of the Project. After all, a good number of such children are employed by their own parents and family members and as such, they start doing so from a very early age which has very negative

implications for on their person including depriving them the unadulterated pleasures of an innocent childhood.

Again, there are some flaws in the ways in which the vocational training is supposed to be imparted in the Project-run special schools. As per present norms, while there is provision for the employment of vocational trainer, there is no separate allotment for the capital and recurring cost relating to these vocational training programmes, something without which there shall be difficulty in running these courses successfully.

So, there is also an urgent need to look into this aspect before we can expect to realise the true purpose and benefit of the vocational training. However, one also feels that a good portion of the recurring costs can be recovered if the products manufactured during the course of vocational training in these special schools are properly marketed and sold, at least, at break-even costs. But that depends on the specific Project, the range and quality of products manufactured and the ability of the Project personnel to be able to market the same.

Again, it has come to notice that the process of enforcement against the employment of child labour has been so designed that there has been very less enforcement in the field than expected otherwise. Because of sundry practical problems and the fact that the predominant majority of culprits employing child labour belongs to the poorer sections of the society, there is a general disinclination to arrest them or to penalise them.

Where the employers happen to be very well-off, they somehow manage to get away with the offence. It is here that we need to strike and ensure that the enforcement of the legal provisions of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act does take place so that the real objectives of the Act are realised.

Then, it has also been seen that many of the child labourers rescued are not immediately and suitably rehabilitated resulting in their relapse into child labour, something which should be strongly guarded against. Also, the amount of Rs 20,000 for rehabilitation of every child labour is too meagre and needs an upward revision to be of any consequence. There has to be centrally designed rehabilitation package/scheme with better financial support, which could be suitably customised at the field level.

Then, it has also come to seen that many state governments hesitate to report more number of child labourers and recommend the requisite number of special schools to avoid attracting stigma of officially having larger number of child labourers as that reflects poorly on their developmental initiatives and performance. This aspect is very important and needs to be addressed urgently as in all this, it is the child labour which suffers, for whom the whole project is designed.

So, if less number of schools are recommended to hide the real picture, then there is also a problem of undertaking more enforcement activities as that would mean more child labourers in need of mainstreaming and rehabilitation, something which shall not be possible in absence of adequate number of special schools and for which, therefore, there does not remain much infrastructure and resources available.

There is not only a need for a renewed thrust towards tackling the problem of child labour, but there is also an imperative need towards making more financial allocation for the Project,

not to speak of the need for certain conceptual clarification regarding identification of the child labour and revising certain aspects of the project design. Besides, more coordinated and synergised convergence is required to successfully eradicate child labour from this country.

Salient Points

- Children under fourteen constitute around 3.6 per cent of the total labour force in India.
- National Child Labour Project (NCLP) is one of the important government interventions towards for the eradication of child labour.
- Question arises, what is the criterion whereby we need to confine our identification of child labour till the age of 14 only, something which is accepted internationally.
- If we stop state support at 14 only, then it is very much likely that the child would relapse to his previous fate.
- Stipend should be continued even after the child is mainstreamed till he or she reaches the age of 18.
- Parents are not compulsorily entitled to get preferential treatment in government schemes.
- Another problem faced regarding identification of the child labour relates to age determination.
- There are some flaws in the ways in which the vocational training is supposed to be imparted in the Project-run special schools.
- Many state governments hesitate to report actual number of child labourer.
- We need more financial allocation, conceptual clarification regarding identification of the child labour, etc.