

# Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives of Child Labour in India

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**Abstract:** Target 8.7 of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) seeks to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2025. However, a joint report by the ILO and UNICEF titled “Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward” presents a stark contrast to this goal. The report reveals that 160 million children 63 million girls and 97 million boys-are engaged in child labour, representing one in ten children globally. Alarming, 79 millions of these children are involved in hazardous work, with boys being particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, one-third of these child labourers are out of school, compounding the long-term socioeconomic impact. The report suggests that previous gains in reducing child labour have stalled, even reversed in some regions, exposing critical gaps in global and national interventions. In this light, the present paper revisits the child labour crisis in India, highlighting the structural and socioeconomic factors contributing to persistently high and often underreported numbers. It seeks to critically analyze the reasons behind the resurgence of child labour, particularly in informal and invisible sectors, thereby questioning the reliability of official data and the effectiveness of existing policies aimed at its eradication.

**Keywords:** Traditional Indian social system- Homo hierarchical- Hereditary specialization of occupations - Jajmani system - Child Labour

## Introduction

India has achieved significant success in its initiatives combating child labour over the past few decades, thanks to the convergence and collaborative efforts between the government and its development partners, which have contributed to tremendous progress in achieving universal school education as well. In this

regard, the government has passed the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act 2016, as well as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, to regulate child labour practices and safeguard child rights.

### **Revisiting Root Causes and the Elusive Goal of SDG 8.7**

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) for 2017–18, there are approximately 32 million children in India aged 6–17 years who are out of school. A large portion of these children belong to economically and socially disadvantaged groups, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), including girls from remote and underdeveloped areas affected by civil unrest and systemic neglect. These children, despite being within the age bracket for compulsory education, are systematically excluded from schooling, which pushes many into the labour force. A similar global trend is reflected in the joint 2021 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which emphasizes that a significant number of school-age children around the world continue to remain out of school and are engaged in child labour, particularly in hazardous and exploitative work environments (Tripathy, 2011, 2012).

Nevertheless, a glimmer of progress is seen in the Asia-Pacific region, where the number of children in child labour decreased from 62.1 million in 2016 to 48.7 million at the start of 2020, indicating positive strides toward reduction. However, with the SDG Target 8.7 deadline approaching, which aims to eliminate child labour in all forms by 2025, the pace of progress remains inadequate. Achieving the target would require an annual reduction rate of about 35 per cent in child labour post-2020—a pace that seems unlikely given current trajectories. Due to the limitations of this paper, it refrains from assessing whether such accelerated reductions have indeed occurred, but it acknowledges the projected estimates that indicate continued prevalence. According to the ILO-UNICEF report, India and the wider region may still be home to 33.4 million child labourers in 2025 and 22.7 million by 2030 unless immediate corrective actions are taken.

### **Statement of the Problem of Study**

India, as a signatory to various international conventions on child rights and labour, including ILO Conventions 138 and 182, has shown commitment toward eradicating child labour through legislative measures and welfare schemes. Significant progress

has been made in reducing child labour, especially after the enactment of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016. However, despite these efforts, recent estimates and survey data point to the persistence and even resurgence of child labour in various parts of the country.

This study examines the persistence of child labour in India from anthropological and sociological perspectives, highlighting how historical socioeconomic structures—such as caste-based hereditary occupations and systems like the *jajmani* system—normalized the practice of involving children in labour as part of community tradition. These deeply rooted societal norms continue to influence current patterns of child labour, particularly in informal sectors. The paper, therefore, revisits these embedded socio-cultural frameworks and other contributory factors to understand the complex interplay of poverty, exclusion, and institutional neglect in sustaining child labour in India despite strong policy frameworks and international obligations.

### Objectives

This paper aims to examine the persistence of child labour in India by presenting the scale and nature of children engaged in both hazardous and non-hazardous sectors while also exploring the traditional social arrangements as a caste-based division of labour has historically normalized child labour.

It further seeks to analyze contemporary shifts in societal attitudes, review relevant literature and policy interventions, and assess the status of child labour, considering recent data, to identify root causes and propose actionable strategies for its effective elimination.

### Methodology

This paper stems from the researcher's in-depth understanding of the child labour issue, developed through active involvement in the ILO-IPEC APSBP project previously implemented in the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh. It is primarily based on secondary sources rather than primary data collection. The study draws from a wide range of literature, including academic books, journal articles, government reports, NGO publications, and international organization databases such as those of the ILO and UNICEF, accessed through libraries and online platforms. Statistical data and policy analyses relevant to child labour have been reviewed to understand global and regional trends. Quantitative sources, such as NSSO surveys, Census data, and ILO reports, have been analyzed to identify patterns, track changes over time,

and understand the scope of the problem. The literature review also provides the necessary background to evaluate current interventions and recommend practical future actions.

### **Review of Literature**

The phenomenon of child labour in India has been critically examined through various perspectives since it was recognized as a social evil by both international and national conventions. Scholars have approached the subject from economic, sociological, and anthropological angles. One prominent school of thought emphasizes economic causes of poverty, unemployment, wage structures, the informal labour market, trade dynamics, and the rising cost of education as key drivers of child labour (Basu, 1998; Basu & Pham, 1998; Jacoby & Skoufias, 1997; Grote *et al.*, 1998, Tripathy 1991, 1996,1997). According to this view, economic necessity compels families to engage their children in work, particularly in sectors where adult employment is scarce or underpaid.

Mehta and Jaswal (1996) present a more nuanced understanding by situating child labour in its historical and socioeconomic context. They argue that child labour has existed across different periods, though its nature and extent have varied with changing social and economic structures. In pre-industrial societies, particularly in rural India, child labour was an accepted part of the family's subsistence economy. Children contributed to farming and household activities not only for economic survival but also as part of their socialization process. Labour was seen as a necessary means to ensure the continuation of the family unit, and children's work was often integrated with their upbringing and cultural education.

### **Child Labour and Socialization**

Another critical perspective views child labour not merely as an economic compulsion but as part of a larger socialization process embedded in traditional Indian society. Within this framework, children's participation in labour was not necessarily seen as exploitative but as a form of training that prepared them to assume adult roles within their family or caste-defined occupations. The traditional Indian social structure was characterized by caste-based occupational specialization, where each caste was associated with specific hereditary occupations. Families, as units of production and social reproduction, involve all members-including children-in-work, thereby transmitting occupational skills from one generation to the next (Tripathy, 2004).

In this context, the work performed by children was considered a part of the moral and household economy. It was assumed to be essential for teaching discipline, responsibility, and the practical knowledge needed to sustain livelihood in adulthood. The process of engaging children in such activities was often considered an informal yet vital curriculum, with work serving as a tool for character development and social integration. This perspective aligns with Hindu philosophical traditions, particularly the Purusharthas, wherein shrama (labour) was valued as a path to moksha (liberation). The perfection of the individual was thought to be dependent on the training received from early childhood, thus interlinking child labour with moral and spiritual development.

Scholars have also explored the institutional frameworks that legitimized and perpetuated child labour in traditional Indian society. Two notable institutions are the jajmani system and the hereditary specialization of occupations. The jajmani system involved a network of interdependent service relationships between different castes, where lower castes provided labour or services to the upper castes in exchange for patronage or livelihood. This system ensured that occupational roles remained fixed across generations and that children from service-providing castes were systematically inducted into labour from a young age. Similarly, the principle of hereditary specialization meant that children inherited their parents' occupations, which often required them to start work at an early age to master the skills necessary for those jobs.

These traditional institutions helped institutionalize child labour, making it a socially accepted and often legally unchallenged practice. The literature thus reveals that child labour in India cannot be understood solely through economic determinants; instead, it must be examined through an integrated lens that includes historical, cultural, and institutional factors that continue to influence its persistence today.

### **Jajmani System and Hereditary Specialization of Occupations: Roots of Child Labour in India**

The Jajmani system, as described by Louis Dumont (1988:97), was a deeply rooted socioeconomic institution in traditional Indian society. He explains, "What is the principle behind what is called the Jajmani system? Firstly, it utilizes hereditary personal relationships to convey the division of labour. Each family has a family of specialists at its disposal for each specialized task." The system was based on

long-standing patron-client ties, whereby lower-caste service providers (the Praja) performed essential tasks for upper-caste patrons (Gaiman). Payment was often made in kind and not per transaction but cumulatively across the year, reinforcing a permanent economic relationship rooted in custom. Obligatory gifts during festivals and major ceremonies also supplemented compensation, while some prajas even received land from communal funds, further legitimizing their roles in the village economy (Dumont 1988:98–99).

Closely linked to the Jajmani system was the concept of hereditary specialization of occupations, another institutional framework that ensured the rigidity of caste-based labour. Dumont (1988:92) elaborates that the caste system promoted specialization and interdependence among different social groups, forming a division of labour that served the entire society rather than individual economic interests. Unlike the capitalist mode of production, this structure upheld hierarchy and social cohesion over profit motives.

Epstein's ethnographic observations from Wangala village reinforce this institutional continuity. She notes that craftspeople such as goldsmiths, potters, washermen, and barbers held small landholdings, depended mainly on peasant patronage, and were paid in kind at harvest time (Epstein, 1988, p. 44). These hereditary occupational groups were respected for their skills, yet their socioeconomic mobility remained limited.

Together, these two institutions-Jajmani systems and hereditary occupational specialization-provided the structural framework that normalized child labour. From an anthropological and sociological standpoint, they helped embed child labour as a part of the traditional moral economy.

**Training and Skill Transmission:** In traditional Indian society, work was not just an economic function but a vital aspect of socialization. Children began assisting their parents early in life, gradually learning the skills of their caste-bound occupation. This training was not considered exploitative but rather essential for moral and spiritual development, as it linked shrama (labour) with moksha (liberation). Therefore, placing children in work settings was seen as a preparatory step toward becoming productive and respected adults.

**Social Legitimacy:** The vertical division of labour institutionalized by caste and reinforced by the Jajmani system legitimized children's participation in work. Since all family members were expected to contribute, children's work was not questioned but viewed as customary and even honorable.

## Child Labour in the Context of Modernization and Change

Despite their deep entrenchment, traditional occupational structures in India have undergone a substantial transformation, particularly since the colonial period and later under globalization. Changes in the economy, education, urbanization, and labour laws have both positively and negatively impacted child labour.

Abbott (1988:111) notes that external factors—such as technological changes, organizational restructuring, and new knowledge—can redefine occupational boundaries and create or eliminate specific professional roles. In India, multiple forces have reshaped the occupational terrain, influencing the nature and prevalence of child labour.

## Western Education and Formalization of Learning

The most influential change has been the introduction of Western education, which replaced traditional forms of informal, occupation-based learning. The shift from learning-by-doing within families to formal classroom-based education de-linked children's participation in work from their social identity. Education became a separate domain, perceived as essential for economic mobility in emerging sectors such as IT, services, and modern manufacturing.

The rise of new industries, driven by globalization, as well as the construction, hospitality, and automotive sectors, further increased the demand for educated and technically skilled workers. These sectors required formal training and literacy, gradually reducing the acceptability and feasibility of child labour in skilled domains.

Moreover, sectors such as construction, roads, and plantations (including indigo, cotton, tea, and jute) expanded rapidly, creating a large volume of jobs. While this brought economic opportunities, it also led to large-scale internal migration. Migrant families, especially from marginalized backgrounds, often took children along, resulting in their engagement in informal and low-skill work in urban and semi-urban spaces.

## Legislation and State Policy

Modern Indian state policies and legal frameworks have also contributed to the decline of child labour in specific contexts. Laws such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 and its 2016 amendment banning all forms of child labour below the age of 14 sought to criminalize exploitative practices. Labour inspections, school enrolment drives, mid-day meal schemes, and the Right to Education (RTE)

Act have created legal and policy pressures to keep children in schools and out of the workforce.

However, enforcement remains uneven, especially in informal sectors, seasonal employment, and among migrant families. The benefits of modernization have not been equally accessible to all communities. As noted by Srinivas (1996: 192–193), English-language education and modern jobs have primarily benefited upper-caste communities, who had early access to such systems. Consequently, marginalized groups- Dalits, Adivasis, and backward classes- continue to experience socioeconomic exclusion, perpetuating cycles of poverty that drive children into labour.

### **Diversification of Economic Opportunities**

The diversification of the rural economy, which followed the exposure of indigenous socioeconomic systems to Western influences, had a significant impact on traditional occupational structures in India. The rigid boundaries of caste-based occupational roles began to erode as market forces and industrial growth reshaped economic roles. The hereditary specialization that once governed the workforce lost its socioeconomic viability in many regions. Despite the increasing diversity of economic opportunities, this transformation did not result in comprehensive inclusivity. The shift failed to provide alternative livelihood systems to all those displaced from traditional occupations, thereby creating a critical gap between the supply of labour and the new job market demands.

In this vacuum, those who managed to enter new economic spheres early on began monopolizing resources and employment opportunities, often distributing them within their own social or kinship networks. This use of primordial loyalties in economic recruitment excluded many socially marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, from participating in the new economy. Consequently, these excluded communities were compelled to work for minimal or no wages under traditional landlords, a pattern that also involved pushing children into the labour force for household survival. This systemic exclusion from modern economic activities forced large numbers of villagers, including children, to migrate to urban areas, where they took up jobs in tea stalls, rag-picking, hazardous industries, begging, and other forms of informal and often dangerous employment.

### **Agricultural Revolution**

The agricultural revolution, marked by the Green Revolution and improvements in irrigation and farming technologies, also contributed to the expansion of child labour. While these changes modernized the agricultural sector and improved productivity, they simultaneously increased the demand for cheap labour. Children who were earlier engaged in household or artisanal work, such as weaving, oil pressing, or basket making, were now employed as agricultural labourers. In some cases, children even replaced adult labourers due to their perceived docility, lower wages, and ability to perform tasks in smaller or narrower spaces, especially in crop harvesting and weeding activities. This shift highlights how technological advancements, despite their benefits, have had unintended regressive consequences for vulnerable sections of society, particularly children.

### **Change and Modernization**

The broader process of modernization introduced a range of new occupations that were largely free from caste-based restrictions. Industries such as mining, quarrying, the hospitality sector, automobile workshops, slate manufacturing, and diamond cutting provided new employment opportunities, albeit often under exploitative conditions. These jobs, though detached from traditional caste hierarchies, did not necessarily guarantee safe or formalized employment conditions.

In many cases, children became preferred workers due to the same exploitative rationales: low cost, minimal resistance, and the ability to be moulded for repetitive tasks (Tripathy, 1991, 1996, 1997) and alongside emerging service sectors in villages such as pump repair, cycle and radio repair, well-boring, grain milling, and seed distribution expanded the scope for informal child labour. These developments underline the paradox that modernization, while deconstructing some regressive traditions, also created new platforms for child exploitation in the labour force.

### **Empirical Studies and the Decline of Traditional Occupations**

Various empirical studies conducted in Indian villages demonstrate how modernization eroded traditional occupations, giving rise to new labour dynamics. Mayer (1996) observed that in his study area, only a minority of traditional artisans continued their ancestral occupations. Among the sixteen adult male Carpenters, just four worked full-time in the village, while others sought employment in nearby towns or switched trades altogether. Similarly, the number of practising Blacksmiths,

Barbers, Tanners, and Drummers had drastically reduced. Many former artisans turned to daily wage labour as traditional professions no longer offered sustainable livelihoods.

The shift was not limited to artisan groups. Even village priests and ritual specialists among Brahmins and other upper castes began seeking alternative sources of income. Only a few families of Pinjaras continued to perform traditional roles, such as cotton carding or mattress making. Goat herders took to farming, and even among Tailors, only two remained in the trade. This gradual shift away from traditional callings underscores how deeply modernization has restructured village economies.

### **Education and Social Mobility**

In a parallel vein, Epstein's study of Wangala village in South India revealed that education emerged as a significant factor influencing social mobility and occupational change. Initially, villagers did not understand the value of education. The prevailing belief was that education was suitable only for Brahmins and landless individuals seeking government jobs. Over time, awareness slowly increased, but poverty, ignorance, and poor educational infrastructure continued to deter school attendance. As a result, the literacy rate in such areas remained abysmally low, and child labour persisted as a survival strategy in many households.

### **Caste and Opportunity in the Changing Economy**

Baily (1957) documented that lower caste groups occasionally accessed new economic opportunities, especially during periods of state policy changes or infrastructure development. In regions like Ganjam and Boad, the prohibition policy led to relative prosperity in local distilleries, benefiting groups like the Telis, Noniyas, and Kolis. These groups exploited new avenues in oil trade, railways, road construction, and canal works. However, this economic mobility was often confined to the wealthier segments within these groups. The majority remained trapped in poverty and low-skill jobs, their children forming a substantial part of the unregulated informal labour force.

### **Analysis and Policy Implications**

The issue of child labour in India has typically been addressed from an economic standpoint, with poverty identified as the primary cause. While economic

deprivation is undoubtedly a factor, this narrow focus often ignores the deep-rooted socio-cultural systems such as the jajmani system and caste-based occupational hierarchies that institutionalized and legitimized child labour for generations.

These social systems, as analyzed by Louis Dumont in his concept of homo hierarchical, provided a framework where hereditary occupation was normalized and passed down through generations. Within this framework, children were socialized into their family's occupational roles from a very young age, contributing to household economies and ensuring the continuity of caste-based professions. This historical arrangement offers crucial context for understanding how child labour was not merely tolerated but integrated into the socioeconomic fabric of rural India.

Though recent decades have seen a decline in child labour due to policy interventions, international conventions, and awareness campaigns, reports indicate a resurgence in specific sectors. This resurgence is particularly pronounced among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, certain OBC groups, and minority communities. Internal migration-especially for construction and informal sector jobs-has reintroduced children into the labour force as entire families move together and lack access to educational facilities in their new locations.

### **The Way Forward: Policy Recommendations**

To effectively combat child labour, the policy must evolve beyond poverty alleviation to include:

**Educational Infrastructure Near Labour Camps:** Ensuring schools are available within or near labour camps for migrant workers is essential. Monitoring attendance through designated officials would ensure consistent education.

**Practical Implementation of Existing Laws:** The employment of children in hazardous industries, hotels, tourism, and agriculture must be tightly regulated through active enforcement of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act and other relevant legislation.

**Community Sensitization:** Parents, employers, local officials, and civil society must be educated about the long-term consequences of child labour and the importance of education and child rights.

**Strengthening the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** The NEP's emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) starting at age three must be supported with sufficient staff, infrastructure, and monitoring mechanisms to effectively serve children from underprivileged backgrounds.

**Stakeholder Collaboration:** A coordinated effort involving government agencies, NGOs, civil society, and international organizations must be re-initiated to take up comprehensive action programmes with funding, surveys, and direct interventions in high-risk sectors.

**Legislative Reforms:** A new national legislation is urgently needed that identifies vulnerable sectors and geographies prone to child labour and offers targeted strategies.

In conclusion, while modernization has opened new employment opportunities, it has also reproduced old inequalities in new forms. To eliminate child labour, India must take a holistic approach that addresses not just economic deprivation but also the cultural legacies and structural inequalities that sustain it.

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