

# **The Poverty Argument**

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## The Poverty Argument

One of the most commonly held beliefs in the area of child labour, especially in an under developed economy like India's, is that it exists because parents unable to make ends meet put children to work in order that the family survives. This in brief is what can be termed as the Poverty Argument of the existence of child labour. So overwhelming is the influence of this Argument that many do not even realise the extent to which they subscribe to it. As a result, one finds that even those who stress the role of other factors in the sustenance of child labour ultimately succumb to the temptation of identifying economic circumstances as the 'real' factor. It is this that makes it crucially important to understand not only the implications of the Poverty Argument but also its limitations.

The plausibility of the Poverty Argument arises from the single fact that any family with a critically low level of income and struggling to keep "the wolf from the door"<sup>1</sup> must, in order to survive, send the children to work. Child labour in this situation is not only inevitable but also logical and hence a 'harsh reality'<sup>2</sup>. Figures relating to enrolment show that more than 95%<sup>3</sup> of children are enrolled into schools at the age of 5-6years, when they are too young to work but this figure drops dramatically once the threshold age of 8-9<sup>4</sup> years is crossed. Figures also show that an overwhelming majority of children engaged in work today come from families who belong to the lower strata of economic development. In the Poverty Argument therefore one apparently has an explanation to all the observed facts. It simply is obvious. Parents belonging to the lower economic strata of the society are neither willing nor indeed able to send their children to school.

The compelling logic of the Poverty Argument and its automatic implication of the inevitability of child labour has always exerted a tremendous influence on all

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Labour, GOI, Report of The Committee on Child Labour, (December 1979)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Labour, GOI, Status note on Child Labour Policies (1995)

<sup>3</sup> Selected statistics on School Education, 1997-98, Commissioner and Director School Education, Andhra Pradesh

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

programs seeking to either eliminate child labour or provide for universalised elementary education. In terms of elimination of child labour it demands that any program seeking to achieve this objective must have an in-built mechanism for compensating the family for the loss of the income earned by the child. Otherwise the family, it is argued, will face unbearable economic stress. Most schemes involving elimination of child labour therefore have cash incentives to the family as a basic component. As far as universalisation of elementary education is concerned the Poverty Argument implies that one has to reckon with the “harsh reality” of child labour and incorporate components that provide for education outside the working hours of the child. Elaborate structures such as Non-Formal Education and Open Schools are a result of this perceived need to cater to working children without affecting their work schedule.

Plausible as the Poverty Argument sounds concrete evidence in its favour is not always easy to find at the field level. In the first place, while it is in general true that the economically deprived sections tend to engage their children in work more often than the better off, there is no evidence to show a direct correlation between the level of poverty and the tendency to send a child to work. If one were to extend the logic of the Argument one should find that in any given situation it is the poorest who drop out first while the relatively better off continue in school for a longer time. Similarly, in terms of enrolment in school, especially in the higher classes, the Poverty Argument predicts that the relatively better off would have greater representation than the economically backward. Field level studies<sup>5</sup> do not reveal that this situation holds. On the other hand what is found is that not only are literacy rates similar between groups having dissimilar income levels but also vary widely between groups with the same income levels. In other words situations where better off families have engaged their children in work while parents with lower income have retained their children in school are not uncommon.

It could, of course, be postulated that a critical level of income exists below which all families are compelled, in order to survive, to send their children to work and supplement the family’s income. In fact the Poverty Argument implicitly

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<sup>5</sup> Profile of school going and non school going children and their families, a study of Mominpet Mandal, Research and Development Society

assumes that all working children belong to such families and hence cannot be withdrawn from work without financial compensation. But what exactly this critical level of income is below which a family is compelled to send the children to work and, whether it is a fact that the particular family under scrutiny does have an income below the critical level is something that has to be established. On the other hand there is some evidence that a number of families with income below the normally defined poverty line send their children not to work but to schools. The real danger in blindly accepting the Poverty Argument is that every case of a child working tends to be seen as one more instance of the “harsh reality” of child labour without all the factors being examined. It is in this context that the empirical evidence which the MV Foundation<sup>6</sup> project has generated is of enormous significance. The success of the project which seeks to eliminate child labour without in any way attempting to increase family income clearly suggests that the critical level of income is quite low and that most families who put their children to work have incomes in excess of this. Clearly, therefore, there are factors other than the purely economic compulsions arising out of poverty, which dictate whether a child is sent to work or to school. Factors such as parents’ literacy status, their levels of motivation, social background, accessibility of schools and so on have to be invoked to make sense of the behaviour pattern of parents and children. The Poverty Argument in these circumstances then becomes only one of the many factors, which govern the situation. The question that remains to be resolved is how important a factor it really is. This is not just a debating point but infact is of considerable significance in deciding the strategy to be adopted in dealing with the problem of child labour.

### **Some Results**

The results of a recent study initiated by the MVF are of relevance in this context. The main purpose of the study was to understand if, and to what extent, even in the circumstances prevailing today, economic factors influence parents’ decision to send their children to work. In order to focus attention on those who are most likely to be affected by the limitations imposed by economic conditions the sample that was surveyed involved only Scheduled Caste families. Further, the sample was from an area not currently covered under any special program of either the government or the

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<sup>6</sup> MVF, Annual Report 1997

MVF. In brief therefore the sample involved families belonging to the economically most vulnerable sections and who were taking decisions regarding whether their child should go to work or to school on the basis of their judgement alone.

The selected sample included one set of families where at least one child was going to school and another that had at least one child labourer. Given the fact that enrolment figures especially in the lower classes are notoriously incorrect and exaggerated, only those families where a child was in class 5 and above were selected as representatives of families where a child was in school. To ensure greater accuracy the children were selected at the school itself laying to rest all arguments on whether they were actually in school or not. The selection of child labour families was made by visiting the village concerned and identifying the child at the work spot. In all 79 families (Group I) were selected to represent families sending at least one child to work and 138 families (Group II) to represent families sending at least one child to class 5 and above.

As a first step it was sought to understand if there was any significant difference in the economic status between the two categories of families. The status was worked out on the basis of points allotted to the various economic attributes of the family which included the type of dwelling, availability of facilities such as drinking water and electricity in the household, availability of farm implements and land as well as cattle holding of the family. The relative status of the two groups is indicated in the Table 1.

**TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILIES ON THE BASIS OF ECONOMIC STATUS.**

ECONOMIC STATUS	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	NO.	PERCENT	NO	PERCENT
0 – 8	51	64.5	90	65.0
9.0 - 16.0	24	30.5	40	29.0
>16	4	5	8	6.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100</b>

An obvious feature of this table is that there is little to distinguish the two groups. The distribution of the two groups into the three categories each representing a different level of economic status is almost identical. The only conclusion that one can draw from the table is that there is little difference in the economic status of those families sending their children to school and those who are not.

One method of explaining this is to postulate that in most families while some of the children are sent to school some are sent to work also. The economic status of the families sending their children to school and those that send their children to work would therefore tend to be the same. However the figures in Table 2 in this context are extremely revealing.

OCCUPATION	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	NO.	PERCENT	NO	PERCENT
AGRICULTURE	37	21.3	8	2.4
ANIMAL HUSBANDRY	27	15.6	5	1.6
HOUSEHOLD WORK	38	21.8	29	9.0
BONDED LABOUR	4	2.3	1	0.3
STUDENTS	68	39.0	279	86.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>174</b>		<b>322</b>	

**TABLE 2. OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN  
IN 5-14 AGE GROUP**

Of the 174 children belonging to the category I only 68 i.e. 39% are in schools. On the other hand in the other category, out of a total of 322 children as many as 279 i.e. 87% are in schools. This implies that a family habituated to sending one child to school tends to send the other children to school also.

In the normal course all families sending their children to work would be treated as families suffering from severe economic constraints resulting in the need to supplement the family income through child labour. What the above figures show is that there little to choose between the economic status of the families sending their children to school and those sending them to work. Conversely, the fact that some of these families are being able to send their children to school without facing

cataclysmic economic consequences indicates that other families can do so as well and that sending a child to school has much more to do with factors other than economic. The Poverty Argument has a tendency to collapse once it is subjected to closer scrutiny.

### **Adjustments**

When a child gets out of the labour force and becomes a full time student it is clear that the family has to make some adjustments. The Poverty Argument does not admit of any scope for adjustments since it simply postulates that such adjustments are not possible in view of the severe economic stress that would result. In the MVF project on the other hand a number of children who were working have in fact left their work and become students in formal schools. A second study covering a sample of 248 children and families was undertaken to understand the implications of the results of the project. The study specifically covered those families where a child was withdrawn from work and enrolled in school and revealed that the overall enrolment levels in the families covered by the sample stood at 77% as opposed to 7.5% at the beginning of the project. In other words of the total of 248 children in the age group 5 – 14 who were out of school at the beginning of the project 204 are in formal schools leaving a balance of 44 who dropped out and are yet to be covered. The occupation profile of the children in these families prior to the project and after its implementation is indicated in Table – 3.

**TABLE 3. OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF CHILDREN BEFORE AND AFTER MVF PROJECT**

OCCUPATION	BEFORE		AFTER	
	NO.	PERCENT	NO	PERCENT
AGRICULTURE	52	21.0	26	10.5
ANIMAL HUSBANDRY	57	23.0	5	2.0
HOUSEHOLD WORK	100	40.4	12	4.8
BONDED LABOUR	21	8.7	-	-
OTHERS	-	-	1	0.4
STUDENTS	18	7.3	204	82.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>248</b>		<b>248</b>	

The first aspect that emerges is that there is no relationship between the work engaged in by the child and his withdrawal from work. The work profile in the pre project situation covers practically the entire range of activities normally engaged in by a child in any part of rural Telangana with bonded labour representing one extreme and domestic work such as looking after siblings representing the other. Notwithstanding the fact that the effort required to withdraw a child from bonded labour is obviously much higher the study shows that even families 'compelled' to put their child in bondage are in a position to send their child to school. Further, most families are in a position to make internal adjustments and reallocate the work among family members. Table 4 indicates how the work done earlier by 242 children has been reallocated within the family.

**TABLE 4. REALLOCATION OF WORK AMONG OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD.**

RELATION WITH CHILD	NO.	PERCENT
MOTHER	100	43.4
FATHER	41	16.3
BROTHER	32	12.7
SISTER	26	10.3
SISTER-IN-LAW	26	10.3
OTHERS	17	7.0

Table-5 gives the relative economic status of the families covered in the sample. As in the previous sample it is evident that a fairly wide range is covered. It is also apparent that a number of families who are relatively better off were prior to the project, not sending their children to school. Even more significantly the statement reveals that no cut off point exists in terms of economic status, below which a family has no option but to send their child to work.

**TABLE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILIES ON THE BASIS OF ECONOMIC STATUS.**

INDEX OF ECONOMIC STATUS	NO	PERCENT
0 – 8	51	20
9 – 16.	160	65
>16	37	15



<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>100</b>
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**TABLE 5A COMMUNITY-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE GROUP**

<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
SC	146
BC	64
OC	12
ST	26
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>248</b>

The pattern of dropout also indicates this. A statement of the economic status of families where a child has dropped out is given as Table 6. Even this reveals the absence of any bias towards the economically more vulnerable.

**TABLE 6. ECONOMIC STATUS OF ‘DROPOUT’ FAMILIES.**

<b>INDEX OF ECONOMIC STATUS</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
0 – 8	6	13.6
9 – 16.	30	68.2
>16	8	18.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

**TABLE 6A. COMMUNITY-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF DROPOUT FAMILIES**

<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
SC	28
BC	9
OC	2
ST	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>44</b>

The dropout figures are static in that it is representative of the situation only at a particular point of time. The project has in built mechanisms to deal with the individual cases of dropouts and the same child does not normally remain a dropout for any length of time.

### **The MVF Project.**

The fundamental belief on which the MVF project is based is that parents, even poor parents, are not only capable of sending their children to formal daytime schools but are also willing to do so. The project rejects the Poverty Argument and its implication of the inevitability of child labour. Consequently it also rejects the need to provide for education to working children outside the working hours and has adopted the formal school as the only means to universalise education and simultaneously eliminate child labour. The project, by viewing all children out of school as child labour irrespective of the nature of the work done by them, treats the problem of elimination of child labour and the universalisation of elementary education as inseparable processes the success of one automatically leading to the success of the other.

The project recognises the crucial, and on most occasions, dominant, role which cultural and other non-economic factors play in influencing parents decision to send their children to work rather than to school. Consequently the project places considerable emphasis on motivation of parents and the mobilising of the community at large. Processes are built up to bridge the gap between an illiterate household and the school keeping in view the large number of factors that work to sustain this gap.

In terms of strategy the project recognises the need to adopt separate approaches for different age groups. Based on the understanding that the problems allowing for a smooth transition to school for an older working child are different from those faced by a 5 or 6 year old the project actively advocates bridge courses for the older children. The curriculum in the bridge courses makes full use of the greater ability of an older child to grasp concepts and this enables compression of the teaching period. As a result older children are prepared within a period of three to four months to be enrolled in higher classes more commensurate with their age

avoiding the embarrassment of their having to sit in class with children of a much lower age group. Older children are thus given much greater confidence in their ability to catch up with others of their own age group. This also reflects in increasing confidence of the parents in their wards, which in turn reduces reluctance on their part to send the child to school.

A good part of the expenses relating to the project are expended towards employment of teachers. Far too often the existence of teachers is taken for granted without realising that their numbers are too small to deal with the problem in any meaningful manner. Interaction with the teachers has shown how teachers unable to handle large number of children have devised various methods to limit their numbers to more manageable proportions. Significantly enough, not one teacher complained of lack of response from either the parents or children. A sizeable portion of funds for supporting the additional teachers is raised through local contribution through the medium of the parent-teachers association. Mobilising the teaching community and sensitising them to the specific requirements of working children is an important ingredient of the project. In the process a separate association of teachers, to mobilise others of the fraternity on the issue of child labour and to emphasise its close relationship with the issue of universalisation of primary education, has emerged.

The MVF has consciously adopted a policy of utilising existing government infrastructure to the extent possible rather than duplicate its efforts. As a result government primary schools form the focus of its work. Further, full use is made of other supporting institutions such as Social Welfare department's hostels and other support infrastructure. The government school teacher and representatives of the local bodies, wherever they have shown interest, have been co-opted into the planning process of the program. The objective has been to emphasise the positive role that existing institutions can play in eliminating child labour and to come up with a model that is sustainable.

In sum therefore the MVF project attempts at filling up a big gap in the existing efforts to universalise education that completely neglect the basic task of getting a child to school. In fact conventional programs for universalising education simply ignore this aspect because of the logic of the Poverty Argument which propels

them. Since working children work because of sheer economic necessity and cannot be withdrawn there is no need to build in a component for withdrawing them. Withdrawal of a child from work is therefore not an integral part of existing schemes to universalise education and the emphasis is on “retention” which can at best address children who at some stage are already in school. Given the fact that in attempting to universalise education one would necessarily have to cater to the large number of children outside the education system such a strategy is woefully inadequate. The MVF project on the other hand recognises the fact that this logic is flawed and that a number of factors, of which poverty though one is not necessarily the most important, play a role in determining whether a child goes to school or to work. The project therefore lays considerable emphasis on dealing with these factors and in creating conditions that allow for a smooth transition for the child from work place to school. All components of the program are aimed at this specific task.

### **Some Implications**

It is important to understand clearly the implications of the main conclusions that are to be drawn from the studies. If one were to accept the Poverty Argument the only way by which a family sending a child to work can be made to send him to a formal daytime school is to compensate the family for the loss of income. This, as we have already seen, can be done either by providing monetary incentives to the family for each child sent to school or by sanctioning subsidised economic development schemes to them. Schemes of this nature exist in most parts of the country and some are even sponsored by the Government of India. Since universalising primary education would also involve withdrawal of children from the work force it would also necessarily have to build in a component of financial incentive if it were to achieve its objective. An alternate method, which also treats child labour as inevitable, is to provide for such systems as Open School and Non-Formal Education centres which essentially do not interfere with the working schedule of the child. This is the approach that projects such as DPEP adopt.

The MVF studies and the project itself however clearly demonstrate that the entire logic of the Poverty Argument is questionable. The field situation is replete with examples of children from relatively poor families attending schools while their better off counterparts are sent to work. The simple fact that emerges is that parents,

even those belonging to families with relatively low levels of income are willing to send their children to school and the explanation to the fact that they are sending them to work instead lies not in the economic sphere but elsewhere.

In the situation that prevails in much of rural India what is to be clearly understood is that for many families the mere task of sending a child to school rather than to work represents a major deviation from the past. This is particularly so in the case of families belonging to certain communities which have traditionally been associated with labour intensive activities. Conditioned by norms set for them over generations these families have as a rule been sending their children to work and the concept of utilising an institution like the school is something that is totally alien. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the parents, on whom the decision to send the children to school or to work lies, are themselves illiterate. To assume, under these circumstances, that parents are unwilling or unable to send their children to school mainly due to poverty is to ignore the real constraints that society places on them. Studies in the past have often relied on responses given by parents to queries on the efficacy of the education system. The fact, however, is that little conclusion can be drawn from these responses since most of them have been conditioned by the existing situation. That parents talk of the need to supplement family income or the irrelevance of education has much more to do with the manner in which they have been tutored by circumstances than their actual preferences. In fact even parents who are sending their children to school find it easier to explain why children should be sent to work rather than to school. The inability on their part to articulate their desire to send their children to school is more a reflection of their incapacity to grapple with what has been fed to them as conventional 'logic' often propounded by those who would not think twice about sending their own children to schools. Drawing too many conclusions from this would be to deny them the ability to think and act in the interest of their children. The results of the MVF studies and the project itself amply illustrate this. Given an environment where parents are encouraged to think that in withdrawing their children from work and sending them to school they are taking the right step, parents respond enthusiastically and decisively in favour of educating their children. Any attempt to universalise education therefore must recognise the fact that for many parents in rural areas the mere act of sending a child to school rather than to work is in itself a revolutionary step involving a major

departure from established conventions. Programs for achieving universalisation of education must accept this need and incorporate a component that specifically addresses this issue.

Motivation of the parents is only one part of the story. What is equally crucial is to work out a mechanism that enables smooth transition for the child from a work situation to school. A factor that is seldom appreciated is the extremely efficient manner in which a child's transfer from a household to workplace takes place in the rural areas. Parents know exactly whom to approach, when and what to offer in order to secure a place for their children at a work site. Employers familiar with the workers requirements provide special incentives that result in such facilities as transport to the work site. On the other hand the elaborate and often unfathomable procedures set in place to enrol a child in school, the insistence on various certificates and documents are all designed to intimidate even the most willing parent. It is a task that demands interaction of the parents with unfamiliar institutions situated outside the boundaries of the village, well beyond their normal area of operation. The simple fact that emerges is that for many parents in the rural area the process of securing a place for a child as a bonded labourer is considerably simpler than enrolling him as a student. To attribute, under these circumstances, the high incidence of child labour and illiteracy merely to parent's unwillingness and poverty is to disregard their intense latent desire to seek a better future for themselves and their children.

The relative success of the MVF project leads one to suspect that as far as the government is concerned the convenience of the Poverty Argument has much to do with its acceptance. In the first place both child labour and illiteracy can now be treated as problems that cannot be solved unless the *basic* problem of poverty itself is resolved. Thus neither the labour nor the education department has a decisive role to play and the solution lies elsewhere in the realm of what can be loosely described as overall economic development. Secondly, the Poverty Argument does away with the need to take hard decisions such as enforcement of compulsory education legislation. Such a measure, in terms of this Argument would only lead to harassment of parents than any meaningful results in terms of increased literacy levels. Finally, the Poverty Argument provides legitimacy to low cost 'solutions' such as NFE and Open Schools making sure that neither the government's repeated assurances of increasing spending

on education to 6% of the GDP nor its reiteration that the allocation to primary education would be increased need to be honoured. In the name of providing for working children, centres have been provided, which are manned by ill trained and poorly motivated part-time staff. At the same time formal schools which alone are capable of dealing with the problem of both illiteracy and child labour in any significant fashion are left largely unprovided for and no effort is made to get adequate number of qualified teachers to take up the challenge of primary education.