

**BONDED CHILD LABOUR IN THE SILK INDUSTRY, OF KANCHIPURAM
DISTRICT, TAMILNADU: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

SYNOPSIS

**OF THE THESIS TO BE SUBMITTED TO THE
UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS
FOR THE AWARD OF
THE DOCTORAL DEGREE**

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1:1 INTRODUCTION

“.....having found no other object to mortgage, my father pledged me!”

This is the voice of an invisible bonded child labourer. articulating millions of children's deplorable condition due to the system of debt bondage. In the 21st century, bonded child labour is acknowledged as a serious social issue and has become a global concern, as it is the most important source of child exploitation and child abuse. Exploitation is inherent in bonded child labour due to vulnerable of socio economic conditions of the poor in which parents trade their child's labour to organizations. The child is utilized as a commodity by the parent in times of need and coerced into work, and thereafter the employer exploits the child in terms of long working hours, arduous labour and with 'objectionable' wages due to the credit advanced. Exploitation takes place due to the innate power imbalance that exists between the child and the parent, and child bonded labourer and employer. The universal feature of bonded child labour is the exercise of coercion and denial of freedom. Though all children are endowed with the same fundamental right to life, protection, education, health, and an adequate standard of living, the chances of achieving these rights remain a distant dream for bonded child labourers as they are organizationally exploited and consequently denied of basic security, education, health care, leisure and much more.

The system of debt bondage is a double edged sword, having adverse implications for the child and the society. The child is denied of a normal childhood hampering the physical and cognitive development, and the society is deprived of human potential but assured of an illiterate and poverty stricken generation.

In recognition of this affront to the human spirit the specialized UN agencies, namely **International Labour Organization, United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund** have called for the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labour. In current policy discussions of child labour the emphasis is now shifted towards 'worst forms of child labour' which includes debt bondage, as they expose children to physical and psychological stress. In 1999 a new ILO convention was designed to ban those forms child labour only (Convention 182). As part of its campaign to eliminate child labour, the International Labour Organization is proposing the adoption of new international legal instruments to combat the worst forms of child labour, supplemented by recommendations for practical action and assistance.

1: 2 MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

According to International Labour Organization's estimations one in every six children is involved in child labour and amounting to the total of 246 million children in the world. In terms of geographical distribution, the Asia-Pacific region harbours the largest absolute number of working children between the ages of 5 - 14 with some 127 million, or 60% of the world's total of child labourers (World of Work, 2002). Studies by UNICEF and others indicate that that there are 5 to 8 million working children between the ages of 5 and 14 in Philippines. The number of working children between the ages of 7 and 14 are 4 to 5 million according to the estimations of ILO and NGO's in Thailand. Surveys in developing countries indicate that the vast majority (70%) of children are engaged in primary sectors like agriculture, fishing, hunting and forestry. About 8% of them are involved in manufacturing, whole sale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels; 7 % in domestic work and services; 4% in transport, storage and communication and 3 % in construction and mining and quarrying. About 8.4 million children are caught in worst forms of child labour including debt bondage and other forms of forced labour (World of Work, 2002). Reliable statistics on bonded child labour are not forthcoming due to the sensitivity of the problem. There is a silence born out of necessity and opportunism which keeps the problem hidden. In Asia, numerous bonded children work predominantly in agriculture, brick kilns, carpet industry, agriculture, glass industries, stone quarries, silk industry, lock industry, brassware, match and

firework industry, brick kilns and beedi industry. According to South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude approximately 700,000 bonded child labourers are toiling in Pakistan and 200,000 in Nepal. In India according to Human Rights Watch's (1996) conservative estimation 15 million children work as bonded labourers.

1:3 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CHILD LABOUR

The history of India is replete with the evidences to the effect that child slavery was present even in ancient India. It has been applied to a wide range of characteristics from **slave labour** to **caste -based subservience** (Chakravarty: 1985; Olsen: 1996). These labourers were frequently drawn into debt bondage and associated the ideology conferred the responsibility of redeeming obligations to the borrower's descendants, making intergenerational bondage possible. Servitude was imposed until the principal was repaid and till then, labour service constituted interest on the debt (Sarkar: 1985). This led to the prevalence of child slavery among the lower castes where child slaves could be sold and purchased like commodities. This practice of child slavery had prevailed even during the medieval period but the cause for child labour could be attributed to the pressure on land, which ultimately forced the poor peasants to use their children for earning livelihood.

In British India, economic forces unleashed by capitalism destroyed the family based economy. Coupled with this, colonial policies of free import and heavy revenue burdens led to massive displacement of artisans on the one hand and pauperization of large section of poor peasantry on the other. With the penetration of exchange relations, traditional forms of caste based servitude is replaced by the monetized forms of bondage i.e. debt bondage. The destitute labourer, freed from his hereditary ties, or the pauperized peasant took a loan and mortgaged thereby his own capacity to labour as well as that of his descendants. (Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney: 1985).

1:4 BONDED CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA

Of all the countries in the world, India is reported to have the largest number of child labourers. According to 1991 census of India, 11.3 million children were reported to be working as child labourers. In 1992, 43rd National Sample Survey report revealed that there were 17 million child workers in India. Various reports provide ample evidence that debt bondage among children is widely prevalent in India. The South Asian Coalition on child servitude estimated that there were approximately 10 million child labourers in chronic bondage in India alone. According to Human Rights Watch, the most conservative estimate was 15 million children worked as bonded labourers in India.

Bonded child labour is widespread in the beedi industry in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Tamilnadu (Mehta, Prayag: 1983). More than 3,25,000 children work in the beedi industry, mostly in the southern state of Tamilnadu (Neera Burra: 1995). The carpet industry of Mirzapur-Bhadoi in the state of Uttar Pradesh is known for the use of bonded children (Anti Slavery Society Child Labour:1988). About 2,70,000 children are in bondage in this industry (Ela Dutt: 1995). Other industries with a high incidence of bonded child labour include the match industry of Sivakasi in the state of Tamilnadu (Sarma A.M:1979) ,the slate industry of Mandasaur in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Singh, N.K :1986), and the silk industry of Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh (Juyal, B.N.,et al :1985). In Karnataka alone it is estimated that 100,000 children are involved in the production of silk and most of these children are bonded (Human Rights Watch: 1996). In the Hybrid cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh about 53,500 bonded children work on farms (International Labour Rights Fund: 2004). In silk industry of Kanchipuram District, Tamilnadu, it is estimated that 40,000 to 50,000 children are involved in the process of silk weaving, and majority of them are in debt bondage (Human Rights Watch: 1996).

1: 5 CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE OF BONDED CHILD LABOUR

Multiple factors are responsible for the practice of bonded child labour in varied sectors in different states. The economic factors that contribute to bonded child labour are landlessness, loss of crops, unemployment, indebtedness, lack of institutional credit system and informalization of production. Bonded child labour is also a reflection of socio-cultural practices like parents attitude towards children's roles and functions and the nature of socialization process in different societies. Bonded child labour is primarily seen as a result of parent's ignorance of the importance of education and leisure in childhood. Various customs and rituals practiced in relation to marriage and death is the bases for incurring heavy debts and hence leads to bondage of children. Widespread illiteracy and ignorance, especially among the lower caste people have also led to the continuance of the practice of bonded child labour.

Bonded children are the objects of extreme exploitation in terms of slogging for long hours for no pay or very poor wages. Their work conditions are especially deplorable, often impeding their proper physical and mental development. Many of these children endure lives of deprivation. Bondage has been associated with abduction, and family separation, deprivation of schooling and sustenance, extremely long hours of arduous work, and physical and psychological, including severe anxiety and depression, malnutrition, anemia, tuberculosis and skin diseases. (UNICEF: 1998).

Hence, the present attempts to analyse the bonded child labour in the socio-cultural and economic context.

1:6 PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Various studies have been conducted on child labour in the carpet industry, match industry and other industries which have a high incidence of child labourers. But there is dearth of empirical studies on the problem of bonded child labour in the silk industry of India. In Uttar Pradesh some significant studies conducted on child labour reveal the element of bondage in silk industry. Various reports have brought to light the working conditions and the deplorable plight of pledged children drawn in sericulture in

Karnataka. It is in Kanchipuram that there is absolute lack of awareness and recognition of the problem of bonded child labour. It is generally believed that in Kanchipuram child labour exist in the form of family labour or apprenticeship and not in the form of bonded child labour. Human Rights Watch (1996), report reveals that approximately 40,000 to 50,000 child labourers, mostly bonded are involved in silk weaving. The ignoramus of the problem is due to concealing it under silence by vested interest groups out of necessity and opportunism. At the governmental level this problem remains unreported because admitting that bonded child labour exist in their district reveals their own failure to address and eliminate it, which has a negative bearing on their career. The strong factors that help in concealing this problem are favourable attitude of the enforcement officials towards the industry as well as parents loyalty to the employers. Therefore there is reluctance on the side of the administration and the parents to expose the problem. Thus misplaced sympathy and loyalty and lack of through understanding of the consequences of the problem shrouds the problem of bonded child labour.

Against this background a sociological analysis of bonded child labour will be useful in furthering our understanding of the silk industry in Kanchipuram district. This study is based on Kanchipuram, the headquarters of Kanchipuram district which is known globally for its silk saris. The entire process of silk weaving is carried out in the home of the weaver and it is a common sight for anyone visiting Kanchipuram to see young children engrossed in anyone of the process of weaving.

The Kanchipuram silk industry has a 500 year old tradition of producing silk saris. The silk saris are woven with three ply, high denier threads using thick zari for supplementary warp and weft patterns that consist of unique and intricate designs. From a turnover of a few crores of rupees about 50 years ago, today the industry generates business worth several hundreds of crores. Estimates of the number of looms in the town of Kanchipuram vary from fifty thousand to one lakh. Silk weaving is a home based industry, in every loom there is one adult and at least one child assisting the master weaver. The process in silk weaving include, preparation of warp thread; setting the loom; preparation of weft thread; weaving of the saris; removing it from the loom and folding. Children are involved in the process of stretching the warps for the loom and to fit the pirns in the shuttles, thereby preparing for the actual weaving to begin. Children

are seen as inseparable parts in silk weaving, it is from this notion that the demand for child labour also increases. This notion arises due to multiple factors interlinked with the production relations and socio cultural practices. The most prevalent type of production is the private or independent type of arrangements (thaniyar system). In this arrangement the private silk firms play the intermediary role in the production process. They assume greater role over the production process by procuring the raw materials for the weavers involved in weaving. Though the weavers are paid piece rates, advances are willingly paid by the intermediaries to meet various expenses of the weaver. This practice led to the weaver's loyalty and at the same time a means of tying (bondage) the weavers to them. A portion of the money advanced to the weavers is financed to the parents of child labourers. Children are preferred to adult assistance as they are paid very less, easy to control and exploit, and they tend to remain with them for a longer period of time not only helping in the process of weaving but also partaking in household chores. Thus it could be seen that apportion of advance received by the weavers are transacted in the same form towards the lower rungs of the workers. Consequently, the organization of production promotes the establishment of debt bondage among children in Kanchipuram.

Kanchipuram saris are duplicated in Arani and Dharamavaram and sold at a lesser price this has led to decline in silk production in Kanchipuram and correspondingly leading to unemployment and underemployment among silk weavers. As the wage of an adult worker is high, employers prefer to employ child labourers, the family reeling under unemployment is under severe financial constraint, and thus forced to pledge children as young as seven and eight years. There is a close nexus between demand and supply factors that leads to the spread of bonded child labour in the silk industry in Kanchipuram.

Family crises in the form of desertion of the head of the household, death in the family, temporary or chronic illnesses, expenses due to life cycle rituals like marriage, puberty, child birth etc increases the burden on family which is ultimately passed on to the child in the form of bondage. For parents without other collateral pledging children is the only way to obtain credit. Addiction to alcohol renders the head of the household to be unemployed and thus poverty in the home forces the child into debt bondage.

Further NGO's functioning in these areas apart from trying to educate these children also release children from bondage by paying the required amount to the employer. This act of the NGO's rather than dissuading the parents to pledge their children in future, sustains the practice of mortgaging children by parents during emergencies, as they believe that these establishments will release their children.

Increasingly modern family is structured on the nuclear family set up, due to which alternate source of subsistence is absent that was previously present in the joint families. Joint family system to a certain extent prevented the problem of bondage of children. It at least exerted control on the behaviour of members who failed to perform their familial role adequately. Today alcoholism is a growing cause of family disorganization and thus bondage of children. Parent's perception of children's role as a means of adding to household labour force is the main contributory factor of child bondage. Many times children are pledged due to negative valuation of education and positive valuation of children working to learn the skills. The prevailing family dynamics coupled with ignorance of the parents about the importance of education and leisure activities of children undermines the needs of the children and leads to formation of deprivations among children.

Under these circumstances the push and pull factors act strongly in increasing the number of children in bondage in Kanchipuram. Children toiling in this industry are forced to do monotonous job for very long hours, cramped in ill ventilated houses, crouched in the same position without interruption excepting for breakfast and lunch breaks have serious repercussions on their health. Constant fear of reprimands instills in them fear for their employers, emotional, physical, verbal abuses adds to unfavorable psychological consequences for the child. These children are denied of education as they work for twelve hours on normal working days when the entire country celebrates the festival seasons which falls in November and December these bonded children work for more than 14 continuous hours. Fatigue prevents them from attending even night schools and the employers are concerned that this might distract them from work and the parents apprehension of the employer's reaction do not encourage children to go to school. These implications of bonded child labour are serious violations of human rights.

The concern on bonded child labour arises due to its impact on the child, family and society. As far as the child is concerned, there are many features of the informal sector which lead to major health and safety problems. In silk weaving, children are more prone to heat related problems like jaundice, blisters etc and excessive noise at the work place leads to hearing loss. Gastro-intestinal diseases caused among children due to the absence of drinking water and toilet facilities at the work place. Children's participation in laborforce activity reduces the potential for school and educational activities. Due to the long hours of work bonded children are prevented from attending even night schools due do fatigue. Physical and psychological violence stunt the physical and mental growth of children. Children find themselves secluded in low paying, unpleasant, unsafe work situations and greatly disadvantaged in the labor market and it also diminishes any chance of them moving up in the social ladder. Due to constant pressure on the child by the parents to sustain the work leads to hatred and anger among the children and thus the child's emotional bond with the family is also seriously affected. Scant respect for the institution of family has serious repercussions for the family and the society.

On the whole, the employment of relatively cheap child labor has helped to accelerate the process of capital accumulation by raising the over all rate of exploitation .As child's participation in labor force increases unemployment among adults also increases. The employment of children help to maintain low wages for the labor force as a whole, and due to low-priced labor they are substituted for adults. Hence, child employment reduces the total income share of working household and leads to increase in the degree of income inequality within society due to its impact on unemployment and wage rates. Bonded child labour generates poverty, as each generation of poverty-stricken, illiterate, ill health bonded child laborers becomes the next generation of poverty-stricken and illiterate, incapacitated adults who will reiterate the system of bonded child labour. In view of these backgrounds, the present study is undertaken to examine the bondage pattern, factors responsible for bonded child labour and its impact on children in the silk industry of Kanchipuram district, Tamilnadu.

1:7 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Bonded child labour in the silk industry, of Kanchipuram district, Tamilnadu: A Sociological Analysis.

1:8 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the patterns of bondage prevalent in the silk industry, in Kanchipuram District.
2. To examine the relationship between production relation and patterns of bonded child labour in silk industry.
3. To explore the socio cultural factors operating in the institutionalization of bonded child labour.
4. To understand the family dynamics contributing to the bondage of children.
5. To study the hazards of children's work that has physical and psychological consequences on them.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1:9 Research Design: Keeping in view of the objectives of the study and the issues mentioned at the outset, an appropriate logic of enquiry is applied. The study is descriptive in nature; it attempts to delve into the socio economic and cultural factors affecting the system of debt bondage among children. It seeks to ascertain the patterns of bondage persistent in silk industry. It also delineates the implications of the debt bondage on the concerned stakeholders of the system. Through the adoption of inductive strategy, the researcher will collect data related to the concepts, and it will produce limited generalizations.

1:10 Sources of data: This study is empirical and analytical in nature and the analysis of the study is based on primary data. It is based on primary data in order to get the most reliable information and to facilitate the in depth analysis of the various dimensions of bonded child labour. Primary data is of paramount importance to identify the patterns of bondage, to understand the relationship between production relations and bonded child labour, to explore the socio- cultural and economic factor that are at interplay in the institutionalization of bonded child labour and the impacts of bonded child labour.

1:11 Tools of Data collection: Primary data was gathered using qualitative methods, namely open-ended interview schedule and observation methods. Qualitative methods can get the researcher close to the social actors meaning and interpretation to their accounts of the social interaction in which they have been involved. Schedule method in combination with observation of actual social situations provides useful techniques of data collection for the study.

Schedule :Two separate schedules for the households with bonded children and for the bonded child labourer was prepared with the key objectives in mind. Questions being open-ended gave complete freedom for the respondents to express their views and as the researcher interviewed everyone personally in their setting it gave them complete discretion to air their opinion. The questions were framed with the view of gathering information from parents about their socio-economic conditions, number of children pledged, and their attitude towards child labor, education and legal awareness. Children as respondents were interviewed on their working conditions, attitude towards work and education, wages, punishments at work place and their awareness of the illegality of the problem and measures to combat it.

Observation: As the focus of the study was on children below the age group of 14 years, the researcher was fully aware of the limitations of words. Hence observation method was adopted to record participant's behavior and to elicit meanings they attribute to their environment .Wherever words failed it was observation technique that filled in the gap. The researcher was able to gauge the kind of physical ill treatment if any these children had suffered; unhesitating use of abusive language by the children to describe the treatment at workplace divulged the kind of environment in which they worked. In

number of instances it was observed that the children suffered from blisters on their faces which made it possible to understand that this occupation induced a lot of heat related ailments even if the child failed to recognize it. As the researcher administered schedules in their setting the respondents living conditions, type of work, conditions at work place were keenly observed to supplement the information gathered through interview.

1:12 SAMPLING FRAMEWORK

Due to the sensitivity of the issue, simple random sampling method was not feasible. The investigator had to work in an environment of suspicion by the parents and employers about the intention of the researcher. Various public hearings organized by different NGO's in these areas and the recent media coverage given to this issue had heightened the awareness of the illegality of the employment of children. The employers had threatened the parents and children which caused serious setback to the field work. The respondents especially the parents responded to the researcher with wariness. Therefore the researcher had to depend on the animators and local people with whom the respondents were able to identify and thus felt at ease in responding to the queries of the research.

Judgement and Snowball Sampling

Bonded child labor households were selected through the combination of 'judgemental' and 'snowball' sampling. Judgemental sampling involves the purposive selection of respondents according to researcher's definition of those who fit specific research criteria. Thus the researcher identified bonded child labourers on the criterion of having received an advance by the parents, prior to engaging them in work. Where this technique proved difficult in terms of contacting the respondents, it was complemented by the snowball technique which helped in locating natural social networks. Once contact was made with one member of the network, that respondent was asked to identify other members who fit the specified criteria. Sensitivity of the issue led to constraints in locating respondents and curtailed any attempt at random sampling and selection. There were situations where the animators were not too sure of certain

neighbourhoods. under such circumstances through the assistance of respondents many more households with bonded child labourers were identified.

Respondents of the study

The main respondents of the study included bonded child laborers and their parents. Bonded child labourers were identified on the criterion of age and the advance received by the parents. Only one bonded child labourer from each household was accounted by the researcher irrespective of the number of bonded children in the same household. This was to facilitate varied kind of responses to be recorded with a wide group of respondents belonging to diverse socio-economic background. Other bonded children of the same household if available were also included in the discussion to enhance the researcher's knowledge of the problem being studied. The children's responses primarily pertained to conditions and treatment at workplace, the hazards of work endured by them. Their attitude towards work, school, parents, employers and their future aspirations were also discussed to assess their emotions and deprivations.

Parents of the bonded child labourers constituted another group of respondents through whom the family dynamics, social economic conditions and the primary cause of pledging their children were examined.

1: 13 Area of study

Thus, PillaiyarPalayam, Nazerethpettai, Kannikapuram, Murugan colony, Abdullapuram, Iyyankarpuram, Iyempettai, Thirukalimedu, Olimohammedpettai, Anna weaver's colony and Thiruvallur weaver's colony were identified to have a high concentration of silk weaving, hence large number of child labourers. Due to the extreme sensitivity of the issue of bonded child labor there were constraints in conducting fieldwork in all these major areas of silk weaving. Three silk weaving areas Pillaiyar Palayam, Murugan Colony and Thirukalimedu were identified for detailed study. The selection of three areas was based on norms such as high concentration of silk weaving, high incidence of bonded child labor households, caste cultural diversities and

accessibility. Thus these three areas are a complete representation of the entire Kanchipuram town in relation to the study of bonded child labour.

1: 14 ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data obtained through schedule and observation technique were carefully scrutinized to make it more reliable. Data was systematically processed manually and with a help of a computer. The information from the schedule was tabulated and single and bivariate tables were generated. Charts and graphs were also used to represent data.

1:15 ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS:

The thesis is organized into five chapters.

Chapter 1: Background of the study

The first chapter constitutes the background of the study. In this chapter magnitude and prevalence status of bonded child labour are presented. A detailed sketch of the various dimensions of the problem is included in this chapter. It also includes conceptual framework of the study and the rationale for this empirical study.

Chapter 2: Review of literature

The second chapter on review of literature is organized under different headings. Studies on child labour and bonded child labour are included in the literature survey as empirical studies on child labour provided key insights for the study. As large numbers of studies were carried out in child labour from various angles, these studies are categorized under different themes and appraised. These studies on bonded child labour being few in number, the survey of the studies is presented under one category. The studies included the literature survey which throws light on the various dimensions of the problem from different angles. The gaps were identified in the literature survey and the insights drawn from these gaps helped in providing fresh and unexplored perspectives to study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological aspects of the study. It includes the need of the study, statement of the problem, its objectives, design of the study, field setting, sampling framework, tools for data collection and analysis of data.

Chapter 4: Analysis of data

In the fourth chapter the findings are analyzed and presented in two sections. The first part examines the profile of the respondents, the socio economic conditions of the parents, number of children pledged and the need that drives them to pledge children. This section also summarizes the parent's views on schooling, work, wages bondage and consequences of bondage on children.

In the second part of this section, the children's treatment at work place and the hazards of work are the important focal point of analyses. Physical hardships faced by the children in relation to the type of work performed, hours of work, and payment of wages for extra hours and work extracted are analysed. Physical, verbal and emotional abuses that these children undergo and its impact on them are also analysed.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

The fifth chapter consists of summary and findings of the study, followed by the suggestions and recommendations for legal and rehabilitative measures for combating the problem of bonded child labour.

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