

CHILD SLAVERY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CARPET CHILDREN
IN BONDAGE IN INDIA

By

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I feel privileged to address the congregation of the eminent people having a common bond of marshalling the cause of suffering humanities especially in the third world and other racially oppressed regions.

When I ponder over the issue of 'Child Servitude', my head hangs down with shame. The contemporary world, though boasting of its advancement in civilisation, despising its medieval age spectrum, bears the inexcusable stigma of holding a whopping figure of 200 million children in the web of servitude especially in the Continents of Asia, Africa and in South America. This system is also prevalent in domestic services in some European countries. But when I look at the congregation it provides some relief to my tormented heart that the world is NOT devoid of humane cult; a stream of love for humanity is still quietly flowing notwithstanding any distinction of race, religion, caste, creed etc. As a matter of fact this segment is the real worshipper of Almighty as they love His creatures. Slavery is a man-made phenomenon. When we look at Mother Nature, we find that there is a perfect harmony among her objects namely Sun, Moon, Stars, Earth and Water. But this is non-existent in mankind - called supreme creation of God. The Godly image in them is being tarnished by the Satanic greed, lust for self-aggrandisement.

After a few years, we shall be steaming into 21st Century with hopes and aspirations of better living of mankind. Can we hope such a milieu when we will be carrying a big back-log of children in servitude - called as the future of the world? No religion and its teachings permit exploitation and abuse of children.

India has a staggering figure of 55 million children in servitude, mostly leading a slave-like life.

Indian hand-knotted carpets are famous all over the world. The consumers enjoyed the pleasure of walking on these luxury items, hardly aware that these beautiful carpets are made out of sweat and blood of slave children.

Still fresh in my mind is the harrowing tales of 128 children freed by my organisation, South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS) through a raid from carpet weaving units in village Awasanpur, Dist. Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh State only last fortnight May, 28th 1993. These children revealed the stories of

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torture. Among the youngest stock, I picked up 6 years old Tasleem and made him to sit in my lap and caressed him. He started weeping. He narrated that last he wept was two years ago when he cried to meet his mother and he was thrashed badly by the master. He showed injury marks on his head. Another pathetic scene was the plight of 7 year old Waheed Ansari (one of the recovered boys) son of dumb widow Mrs. Jamila Khatoon, who was kidnapped and brought over to the carpet belt. The mother was searching for her son for the last three years with all her disabilities. These Muslim children were extremely happy as their liberation coincided with Id Festival and they rejoined their families on this happy occasion after lapse of a long period.

These children are made to work from 14-16 hours a day as voiceless and non-beings. Their working places are unhygienic poorly ventilated and dimly lit. In most cases, these children reside in the working sheds devoid of all basic civic amenities. They are either paid nothing being bonded or sometimes paid a pittance. They are susceptible to all sorts of occupational diseases like TB, Bronchitis, Skin problems, defective eye vision, cancer and deformity in various organs of the body. Some studies have brought out that their span of life is reduced by 20-25 years.

These are spine chilling revelations of more than 6000 children whom we got liberated during the last 10 years from carpet industry.

It was observed that there has been a proportionate increase in the number and magnitude of child exploitation corresponding to the rise in the export of carpets. In India while the estimates showed 1,00,000 children in carpet (1984) the export figure was 100 million US \$. With the export figure touching 300 million US Dollar mark, the child labour swelled to a whopping 3,00,000.

In 1990, SACCS in collaboration with partner organisations in Germany like Bread for the World, Terre-des-Homes, Trade Unions etc. launched a massive campaign called 'Carpet Consumers Awareness Campaign'. The objective was to dissuade the consumers from buying carpets made by children and to persuade them to insist on labelled carpets guaranteeing free of child labour. This generated a tremendous pressure on carpet manufacturers/exporters. As a result of continuous dialogues and persuasion, quite a number of manufacturers have come forward and pledged to produce carpets free of child labour.

SACCS consulted various specialised agencies including Indo-German Export Programme Project (IGEP) to get involved in developing a professional labelling system. IGEP has taken up this project since 1992. Modalities have been jointly formulated on this and also processed future course of action.

In the meantime, the Tom Harkin Bill was introduced in US Senate (August 1992 and March 1993) which proved a shot in the arm for the movement of SACCS. This evoked a good amount of pressure on the South Asian Governments and their carpet industries.

While welcoming the Tom Harkin Bill and respecting its spirit, SACCS observed that the stipulation of self certification by importers (component of a network of trade) about non-involvement of Children in products coming to the US Shores was not without flaws and prone to negate the sole purpose of this bill. In this context, it has become imperative to have independent and professional mechanism for certification in producing country. Though it was agreed to incorporate necessary amendments to plug the loopholes after my meeting with Senator Harkin in May 1993.

Among the ongoing programmes of SACCS, it is running a Vocational Training Centre-cum-Transitory rehabilitational Centre near Delhi which besides imparting training in certain vocations helps the released Bonded Labour to acquire leadership qualities and social awareness. In the area of awareness building, in February this year SACCS undertook a 2000 Km march from Bihar to Delhi passing through industrial belts having predominance of Child Labour, contacting about 500,000 people en route arranging about 100 public meetings, street plays, exhibitions, etc.

It is commonly contended that the Child Servitude is a harsh reality, born out of socio-economic and historical reasons. It is believed that four factors namely poverty, unemployment, population and illiteracy are the main reasons for this malady and removal of these factors is a pre-requisite for wiping out Child Servitude. But we argue the other way. Our experience and various studies conducted by researchers corroborate the facts that the Child Servitude is equally if not solely, responsible for causing and perpetuating unemployment, poverty, population growth and illiteracy.

Today in India for example we have a whopping figure of 55 million children in servitude on the one hand and an equal number of unemployed adults i.e. 55 million on the other hand. According to rough estimates, the respective figures of these phenomena have also been running parallel since 1947 when India had attained freedom. Then the number of child labour was approximately 10 million and the unemployed adults also were at the same pedestal. No Government can scale down unemployment without curbing child labour as the maximum job opportunities created every year are preferably given to the children because of their physical and mental vulnerability and also their being the cheapest source of human labour.

Our logical apprehension is that if we do not eradicate the child servitude today, we would be responsible for perpetuating poverty, abject misery and sickness of 55 million future adults.

As observed, the growth rate of population is much higher among the communities where unemployment is rampant. The poor parents believe that 'more children - more earning hands'. Obviously, if the child labour is not removed, the temptation of having more 'earning hands' could not be contained.

Similarly, there exists a correlation between illiteracy and child servitude. In the areas where the parents find more job opportunities for their children, the incidence of dropout in schools is maximum. If we do not liberate 55 million children from their jobs today, we would be responsible for keeping them illiterate for the whole of their life. Thus, the natural corollary is that the level of illiteracy could not be shrunk without eradicating the child servitude in the land.

At this forum, I call upon the consumers of western countries not to buy carpets made by children unless it carries a label guaranteeing free of Child Labour. Also I urge the Government of Germany to enact a law banning import of products made by child labour.

I cite Ravindranath Tagore's prayers:

"Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high
where the knowledge is free?
.....
Into that heaven of freedom,
my Father, let my country awake".

I conclude with the Vedic prayers:

"Liberate Man from Servitude
for flying free into the open skies".
