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**CONSUMERS' AWARENESS CAMPAIGN - A STRATEGY FOR
ERADICATION OF CHILD LABOUR IN CARPET INDUSTRIES**

By

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On the economic scenario, Indian oriented carpets have earned the reputation as a great foreign exchange spinner, for which the country is in dire need. Indian carpets have carved out their own niche in world carpet because of their quality, designs, colour combination, finish etc. From modest export performance of Rs. 4.72 crores in the year 1961-62, it touched the peak level of Rs. 539.20 crores in the year 1990-91.

But on the scale of humanity and morality, Indian carpets bear the stigma of exploitation of children in contravention of the Constitutional rights conferred, the prohibitive laws and International Conventions on Rights of the Child. All these combined make a good glossary of documents on the subject for research scholars, readers etc. since their implementation is rarely resorted to.

Work Force and Working Conditions

It is estimated that there are 300 thousand children in carpet industry spread over in Mirzapur-Badhohi area, Kashmir, Agra, Jaipur(Rajasthan). The mega production centre is Mirzapur-Badhohi area. It is spread over about 1500 villages operationalizing more than 70 thousand looms employing about 200 thousand child labourers, mostly in bondage.

The children work in squalid huts of the loom owners. These also constitute as their dwelling places. Their working hours are from 14-16 hours a day stretching to late evening. They are victims of mal-nutrition. They are provided coarse rice and watery dal twice a day. A medical sample

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survey reveals that 50 per cent child labour are anemic of suffering from worm infestation, skin infection and respiratory problems due to wollen fibres are common. Life of such a child reduces to 10 to 20 years due to continuous inhaling wool fluffs and chemicals.

These children are subjected to harsh treatment - beaten for any fault in manufacturing or raising any voice for liberty and wages. Sometimes these children are slung upside down on a trunk of tree. Burning of their skin by burning cigarette butts are reported.

The atrocities on girl child have been extreme in this area. We recovered some time back 8 girls from captivity of loom owner who were subjected to gang rape and other inhuman treatments.

These children are either not paid any wages or given a pittance amount as wages. They are treated as slaves. In some cases mortgage of children has come down to 2nd and 3rd generation. All these are spine chilling characteristics of this industry.

Enrolment of the Children

Trade and manufacturers of the industry have always been maintaining fallacious grounds for employment of children. They primarily advancing nimble fingers theory for turning out quality products and secondly opening of avenue of the employment of the children of the poverty stricken families. In reality, they have drafted children into this industry being cheap labour with an additional advantage of being mute most vulnerable, physically & mentally.

Consumer Awareness Campaign

We have been endeavouring to curb child employment in this industry for the last one decade and been facing a number

of hurdles in the mission. We have got about 4000 bonded children released from this sector so far after going through a lot of ordeals organising raids at the premises of loom owners with the help of local authorities and sometimes, knocking at the doors of the highest temple of justice (Supreme Court) for release of bonded labour. Bihar is the main catchment area for fishing out children of the poor families of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes by unscrupulous contractors, middlemen kidnappers etc.

On one hand we could have liberated a small number of child bonded labourers, but on the other hand, the multiple number of children are entering into industry. Thus conceived of another strategy by which we could penetrate deeper to dismantle the web of inhuman exploitation of child labour. Thus we proceeded to initiate a consumers' awareness campaign (a proven instrument) against child abuse in the industry in some of major importing countries.

Thus, we started seeking the support of foreign importers, traders, consumers, NGOs - upholders of Human rights so as to discourage purchase of carpets made by children. In this course, Bandhua Mukti Morcha in May, 1990 floated this proposition among NGOs, intellectuals, journalists by direct dialogues and through TV, press etc. in Europe.

Bread for the World (German) and Terre des Hommes German Trade Union, Anti-Slavery International, U.K., have involved themselves seriously in this campaign. As a result of their persistent efforts in this direction by holding dialogues with foreign importers, press statements and carrying out propaganda at various meets/forums, this campaign seemed to have picked up as evidenced by other indicators. These are namely fall in the export of Indian carpets to European countries

and change in the attitude of Exporters/Traders/manufacturers to hold a dialogue with Bandhua Mukti Morcha for eradication of child labour in the industry.

Now, a consensus has arrived that imported carpets in Germany and other European countries & USA should bear a seal that these have been made sans child labour. This movement seems to have got wings entered into the corridors of UNO as borne out by the fact that UN Human Rights Sub-Commission has espoused this seal system on carpets as a measure of eradication of child labour in carpet industry in one of its recent reports. Its excerpts are :

" 119. Recommends that products such as carpets whose manufacture is liable to involve child labour should bear a special mark guaranteeing that they have not been produced by children. In this context, consumers should be alerted so that they will demand products bearing such a mark. In this end, information campaigns should be conducted with a view to the boycotting of all goods produced on the basis of the exploitation of child labour."

It is gratifying to learn that foreign big importers have shown a great concern on child abuse in this industry and they have started pressurising Indian counterparts to manufacture carpets free of child labour.

Achievements in the area

As a result of these persistent efforts, a growing realization among the Indian exporters to come to dialogue with Bandhua Mukti Morcha to thrash this crucial issue. It needs no emphasis that earlier they had shown the stance of indifference and hostility for any move in finding solution of this issue. We have convened three meetings with them and the last meeting held on 17th December, 1991 in New Delhi was historic one and joint declaration was made for eradication of child labour in

carpet industry. The salient outcome was :

- (1) By 31 March, 1992 all bonded and migrant child labourers to be liberated and returned back to their families. All India Carpet Manufacturers Association and Carpet Export Promotion Council announced not to issue export certificate and pass on export orders to those manufacturers who continue to employ bonded/migrant children after this date.
- (2) A joint committee consisting of 12 representative of NGOs and 12 from carpet manufacturers/exporters Association has been formed to further formulate and monitor activities to :
 - (i) eradicate child labour in carpet manufacture.
 - (ii) replace child labour by the employment of adults at appropriate wages.
- (3) Another remarkable achievement is that about 20 carpet manufacturers predominantly from Mirzapur region breached from their old Association and formed a 'Carpet Manufacturers Association without the use of child labour' and committed themselves strictly to the production of carpet by adults only. The concerned NGO's and this new 'Association' is working out on the feasible strategy, methodology and monitoring of seal system. One of the idea emerged as to register it on a trade mark, and a joint committee comprising NGOs, manufacturers/ exporters, trade unions and Human Rights Organisations could be formed and authorised for monitoring.

As the result of the campaign perssure and criminal cases lodged against the employers, a fear has cropped up in the mind of employers and as reported, the degree of exploitation and torture has lessened.

Internal Campaign

To give a support to our external consumer awareness campaign, we made a vigorous drive to enlist support of NGOs engaged in Mirzapur-Badhohi area. They are about 12 organisations in the area who have joined together in our mission.

A number of meetings were held with NGOs. In the last meeting held on 18th January, 1992 at New Delhi. These NGOs demanded complete abolition of child labour in carpet. Further it reviewed the overall situation of child bonded labour numbering more than 300 thousand engaged in this industry in different parts of the country. It noted with concern that on the one hand NGOs are trying to liberate the tender aged children from the clutches of carpet manufacturers whereas the number of children in the industry is increasing by importing children from Nepal and other States. A joint committee of NGOs has also been formed for monitoring of the campaign and laying down of future line of action.

We sparing no efforts of pressurise the Government to constitute a National Commission on Bonded Labour in India. Unfortunately, due to frequent change of the Governments, this standing demand of ours remains unaccomplished. However, we gather that the Central Government is showing concern for formulation of such a body as this is expected to solve many problems of bonded labour including child labour in the country.

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