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Hindu Religious Leaders Define the Issues as adults Insist Children, too, Have Human Rights

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The issue of child labor now under scrutiny in many world cultures came to the fore in India following an October 1994 meeting of Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Muslim leaders to discuss the problem. Hinduism Today assigned me to explore the situation, solicit the comments of swamis, concerned Hindus and the children themselves [see sidebars, pages 8 and 9] to prepare a comprehensive report.

All the religions of the world unequivocally recognize children as the most marvellous of God's creations. Yet the painful truth is that about 200 million children continue to languish in workplaces all over the globe. India alone accounts for a whopping 55 million-80% Hindus, and nearly all lower caste. The main industries employing children, some as young as four, are farming, stone quarries, construction, carpet weaving, glass making, match and fireworks, handloom, gem polishing and lock assembly. All are known to damage the health of children, causing lung, eye and skin diseases. Explosions in match and fireworks factories have killed and injured many. Such employment is in open violation of Article 32 of the UN Convention, "The Rights of the Child," which protects children from work "likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or be harmful to the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

Kailash Satyarthi, Chairman of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude, is one of the leading activists struggling for the betterment of working children and the rescue and release of bonded child labor. It is he who organized the October

meeting of religious leaders. According to him, a rough count of the number of working children below age 14 (the legal limit) in India is 110 to 120 million. However, half this number is classified as assisting their parents or relatives. The rest are children whose parents feel forced to put to work.

Getting a First-Hand Look

Ferozabad (known as the "land of glass") is a small town near Agra in Uttar Pradesh. More than half the total population is engaged in the US\$100 million glass-bangle industry. There are over 20,000 children toiling here in exceedingly dangerous conditions.

Raja Ram Arya, head of Mukti Ashram school which is providing education to employed children, helped set up my visit to a factory. I posed as a businessman as owners were reluctant to entertain a journalist. No owner admits openly to employing children. To conceal the fact, children often work in small ancillary units near the main factory.

But I saw a good number of children working at this large factory in most shocking and appalling conditions. I could not talk to them as my activities were being closely monitored by a senior manager. However, I managed to take a few photographs [page 1 and above].

Most of the children, ages ten to thirteen, were working on the factory floor where the furnaces are located. The temperature of the furnaces is as high as 1400° to 1700° celsius, I was told by Raja Ram Arya. Children were pushing rods into the furnaces to draw out the molten glass. This rod was then passed on to the workers who were giving shapes to the glass. The children could be seen running between the furnaces and the station where they were delivering the glass. Many of these children have burn marks on their faces, hands and other parts of their bodies. Many suffer from tuberculosis. They have no access to schools or playgrounds, but are confined to strenuous ten to twelve hour factory shifts. Neither the employers nor the parents seem bothered about their plight.

I visited a number of glass-joining units operating in various private houses. I found in a small room of ten feet by twelve feet over two dozen workers on the job. A large number of children were seen working here. Many of these rooms were completely dark and there was no facility of cross ventilation. It is said that these rooms are intentionally kept dark and airless. As there is no natural light, the children have to focus on the light of the lamp, and as no air comes inside it is easier for them to work on the flame which does not flicker. It is on this kerosene flame that the children do the joining of bangles.

Says Raja Ram Arya, "The children are confined to these rooms for as long as fourteen to sixteen hours, as the more they work the more they get paid. An average child working here gets \$1.50/day. Sometimes the child workers do not have a bath for a number of days as they do not want to waste any time on bathing. The parents of these children know that they will suffer from various ailments in the long run, but they are greedy and do not want to lose immediate financial gains. So far as this mentality of parents is concerned, there is no difference between Hindus and Muslims."

"Our Mukti Ashram school," he went on, "has many children enrolled in it who were previously employed in the bangle-joining units. midday meal is given free and this is also one reason parents send their children to us. But those who are greedy or addicted to drinking do not, despite our best efforts."

B.K. Singh, Assistant Labor Commissioner in Ferozabad, told Hinduism Today that prosecution is not easy. "Factory owners produce fake certificates that state the age of the children is higher than their factual age. Due to loopholes like these the culprits go scot free." Nonetheless, the government is not idle. The local labor department is running a number of special schools for the children. On a national level, the Prime Minister recently announced a \$2.5 billion program to eliminate children labor in hazardous industries, to begin with, by 2000ce.

One Man's Mission

It was a first-hand experience that set Kailash Satyarthi on his life's mission. "Near my house," he relates, "there was a small shop of a shoemaker. I was young. All the children I knew went to school, except the shoemaker's son. One day I

approached the boy's father and asked him why he was not sending his son to school. The cobbler explained to me that as he was poor he could not afford his son's going to school. Now this incident touched me a lot. Somewhere in my heart I decided then and there that I was going to work for the betterment of such children who are deprived of their childhood due to poverty, illiteracy and other such reasons. I went on to become an electrical engineer, but I was dissatisfied. In 1980 I quit and dedicated myself fully to this mission-abolition of child labor from India."

For the children rescued from the anxieties of bonded labor and child slavery, Kailash has set up a Mukti Ashram on the outskirts of Delhi. On 1.5 acres of land, Mukti Ashram is a rehabilitation cum vocational training center aiming to facilitate social, economic, political and cultural liberation. I visited the ashram and interviewed the inmates [sidebar page 8]. The ashram endeavors to shape the children to become leaders, activists and catalysts of change.

Besides this, there are eleven non-formal education and social conscience-building centers for free bonded children and child labor run by Kailash in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi. The Ferozabad ashram is one example.

Kailash organized the October meeting of religious leaders because he felt that if they joined him in spreading awareness about the problem among the masses, it would have a far-reaching impact. Delegates promised to help, as all were quite moved to know about the inhuman conditions in which children are working in different industries.

The Saffron-Robed Activist

Swami Agnivesh is president of Bandhua Mukti Morcha [Bonded Labor Liberation Front]. He spearheaded the liberation of bonded labor in the stone quarries and brick kilns of Haryana. A movement led by him is strongly voicing its opinion against child labor. Until some time back, Kailash and Swami Agnivesh were working together, but now they have parted ways.

In an interview in his New Delhi office, Swami told Hinduism Today, "Spiritual pursuits and social transformation, according to my perspective of Hinduism, go together hand in hand, and one without the other really does not work. It is a holistic thing. While we are struggling for the liberation of 55 million children in this country, at the same time we are trying to liberate ourselves. My own pursuit of liberation is inextricably linked with the millions of children around me."

Swamiji's solution to the problem of child labor is "to provide them meaningful education and give them economic incentives. These two things will attract the poorest of the poor to send their children to schools." Swami is not happy with the present system. "The education we are providing students today is useless. First, we spend on education, then we realize it is good for nothing. A farmer's son or a laborer's son or an artisan's son after having spent twelve years getting this type of education will not be of any help to the parents because the value system has been completely changed. If the farmer says, 'I have good land, why not do farming on a better scale?' The child will say, 'No, no, I am educated. I will not handle this kind of job.'" A total overhaul of the education system is necessary, feels Swami. He would like the education to be more production and labor oriented, more relevant to life and problems. He notes that not many religious leaders have come forward to work for the abolition of child labor.

Creating a New Awareness

Dr. Mahaveer Jain is in charge of the Child Labour Cell of the National Labour Institute. He told me that if religious leaders start preaching from their platforms that child labor should not be allowed, and the children sent to schools, it will certainly have strong effect. "I am a Jain, and I know the reach of Jain religious leaders is up to the remote villages of this country. If they start creating awareness about this problem the results can be really mind boggling. The same is true for all other religions as well. But the problem is that everybody thinks it is alright for children to work, and it is not a serious problem."

According to Dr. Jain, people in the carpet industry maintain that the children pick up the traditional skills faster and work more efficiently due to their nimble fingers. However, when international pressure mounted and it became clear to the carpet industry people that the child labor could not be justified, the industry then admitted that adults could also do what the children were doing and the real problem was that they had to pay higher wages to adults.

Dr. Jain concludes, "It is educated people like you and me who are really exploiting child labor. It is we who are employing them at our residences and factories [and buying the products they produce]. So the first thing we have to do is to create an awareness among the educated about the wrong we are doing to these children."

Madhu Kishwar, editor of Manushi magazine, offered this opinion: "The issue is rooted in rural poverty-parents send their children to work only when they are unable to feed them themselves. I strongly believe the greatest attention must be paid to an increased sympathy toward the peasantry, instead of attacking its byproduct. Unfortunately, the radical intelligentsia in our country have imbibed strong anti-peasant biases, due to the influence of Nehruvian socialism."

The child labor situation in India has come to the fore now because of international pressure on all nations to not trade products produced by children. But it is really a matter of "right child labor" and "wrong child labor," not "no child labor." No one thinks it wrong for a farmer's child to help his parents. In fact, the "summer vacation" of western schools was to allow time for just such work. People envy child actors, who also work 12-hour days under stressful, sometimes dangerous conditions. But when a six-year-old non-speaking extra in a TV series earns US\$6,400/month, the problem is ignored. So it is not child labor, but child exploitation that is the problem. All Hindus and Hindu institutions should work in concert to eliminate the woeful cruelties I have witnessed in modern India.

Correspondent Sri Rajiv Malik lives with his parents, wife, son and daughter in New Delhi, India. He is a free-lance journalist [in Hindi and English] as well as a partner in a textile showroom.

Sidebar: It's Not Child's Play

The Workers

Jhoolan, age 12, does all kinds of odd jobs for a roadside tea stall, including preparation, serving tea and washing dishes. "I did go to school in my village [in

Uttar Pradesh], but I did not like it. We have relatives in Delhi. One of my uncles brought me here, and I stay with his family. I earn around US\$12/month. A part of it is sent to my father whenever someone from the family goes to the village. I never think about my future. So far as the present is concerned, life is just OK. The only problem I face is that the duty hours are very long. I work from 9:00am to 9:00pm."

Ram Khilari, 13, works for a small roadside dhaba [restaurant] in Delhi. He said, "I studied up to class two in my village in Uttar Pradesh. Thereafter my father decided to settle in Delhi at a better job. Now I and my father stay here in a slum, and the rest of the family lives in the village. For me working here is quite tough. I work from early morning to late night. However, I get all my meals here, and my salary is \$18/month." He is not interested in going to school. "My dream is to set up my own restaurant when I grow up."

Babli, 10, says she has never gone to school. "I am begging because my parents want me to do this. My father is working for a small shop and my mother works at home. Gita [center], my younger sister, always accompanies me. Neetu [right] is my neighbor's daughter, and we stay in the same slum. Each one of us earns 35 to 45 US cents every day. I am happy and do not have much problem in doing this job. We leave for the day early in the morning and go back before it is dark. Earlier we used to beg without the pictures of the Gods, but then someone suggested to my father that we can make more money if we carry the pictures. I also feel it is better to beg this way. There are many who bow before these pictures before they offer us a coin."

Ramu doesn't know his age. He works as a domestic for a middle-class family in New Delhi. "Both my mother and father work as laborers with a building contractor. We have no place to stay on a permanent basis. We shift from one place to the other quite frequently. This is probably the reason my father does not send me to school. However, I would love to go to school and study like other children."

Pappu, 10, works in the same factory in which Manjo [photo page 1] works. Interestingly, he sits next to his father, Ramgopal, under whom he has learned the skills of the trade. "My family needs money, and therefore I work," says Pappu. Ramgopal believes that going to school and studying will lead the child nowhere, and therefore the best thing is that the child should learn the trade and earn money. Despite his bad health due to working in this trade, Ramgopal has

encouraged his child to join the glass industry. When asked if Pappu would not also face the chest infection tomorrow which he himself has today, Ramgopal just gave a faint smile and would not reply.

The Rescued

Uday, 13, hails from Gadva district of Bihar and is one of hundreds of bonded child workers rescued by Kailash Satyarthi from the carpet industry in Uttar Pradesh. "A broker kidnapped me and took me to a carpet-making unit in district Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, which happens to be our border state," he painfully recalls. "There we were made to work from 8:00am to 10:00pm. If we made any mistake or were slow in working, we were physically manhandled and beaten mercilessly. Even weeping was not allowed. We were eleven children in total. In fact my brother Vidyanand was also later brought to this factory by the same broker. Whenever any of us hurt our finger, the employers used to put matchstick powder on the bleeding wound. This stopped the bleeding immediately, but was a very, very painful experience." Now Uday stays at the Mukti Ashram of Kailash Satyarthi. "I have come from four years in hell to heaven. I and my brother are learning reading, writing and carpentry. The ashram has changed our lives completely."

Lakshmi Sada, 12, is also living at the ashram. "My father died when I was very small. My mother was deceived into believing that I would lead a good life in the carpet-making industry. I had a real bad time there. We were made to work from six in the morning to ten at night. We were beaten and abused almost every day."

Sanjay, 15, was working for three years as a bonded laborer in a stone quarry in Jaipur, Rajasthan. "My father died due to illness. He worked in the stone quarry. After his death, the responsibility of bringing up my brother, sister and myself came on my mother. She also started working in a quarry. The family needed money and one quarry owner gave an advance of \$24.00 to my mother. When she was not able to repay it to him, she was compelled to offer my services to the money lender. The result was that I worked for him as a bonded laborer. It was really a tough time. I got very harsh and inhuman treatment from my employers. But now Kailash Bhai has liberated me. The mission of my life is to liberate others who may be leading a life which is really not worth living."

Rajpal Singh Panwar, 35, came to Delhi at age 12 to work. "I ran away from my house which is in Garhwal District in Uttar Pradesh as I was unhappy with the village life where money and employment were scarce. However, I was lucky that the gentleman in whose house I was employed as a domestic was an Arya Samaj leader who encouraged me to study up to tenth standard. After I completed my schooling, he helped me get a job in a textile showroom where I make \$75/month. Had no one paid attention to me at that time, I would still be working as a domestic servant somewhere. I feel if all of us are considerate to others the way my employer, Lala Hukam Chand Bagga, was, we can transform the lives of a lot of people. This approach of encouraging others to go ahead in life can be one of the possible solutions of the child labor problem."

Sidebar: What to do? Swamis, Social Activists and Students Speak Out

Swami Purnaswatantra, president, New India Movement: "A society where children are exploited hurts its own roots. Top priority must be given to the development of children which are the most valuable asset of any nation. We must create awareness about the plight and problems of the child laborer. It can be done in a Gandhian way. The crucial thing should be participation of the people."

Acharya Rameshwarananda, Ananda Marg sannyasin and editor of Prout, their weekly magazine: "Why, even after fifty years of independence, must our small children work? Why is there no guarantee for a minimum level of economic status for an individual or family? I think many of our problems are due to excessive centralization of powers. Our education system is useless. Why cannot we introduce an education system in which a child after attaining a certain age can earn while he is learning? This is needed in view of the poor economic conditions of our countrymen."

Swami Harinarayananda, general secretary, Bharat Sadhu Samaj: "I feel a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation is there with regard to the child labor issue. There is so much poverty in the country. Under these conditions if the children work for the financial betterment of their families, what is wrong with it? Moreover, a weaver will train his child to weave and there should be nothing objectionable about it. The extent of the problem is not as great as is being projected by some. The main reason is poverty. Now children of 8 to 12 years old look after the cattle owned by the family. This is something absolutely normal. However, harassment of working children in jute, carpet and handloom industries is taking place. But what is

the real extent of child labor in these and other industries? I feel the figures available are quite exaggerated."

Mahant Avedyanathji, member of parliament (BJP), head of Sri Gorakhnath Temple, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh: "A very large number of the people in this country are living in abject poverty. This is the biggest reason for the child labor and exploitation. The income of parents is not sufficient to meet the expenses of their family. Undoubtedly there are a large number of parents who are greedy and exploit their own children. I am saying this from my personal experience. We run a school here from the temple in Gorakhpur and provide free education and meals to needy children. But still many parents do not send their kids to the school as their are making money out of their work. Many temples are not so resourceful that they can take up the cause of child labor. To do social service in this area we have to improve the economic condition of our temples and ashrams. However, I strongly feel that we must give the orientation of social service to our mathadheeshs and priests."

Swami Pragyand of Sai Pragma Dham, New Delhi: "It is really unfortunate that Hindu religious leaders are not actively working to solve the problem of child labor. It is high time the latent power of the Hindu sadhus and saints is channelized to solve the problems of working children. For example, we have over 700,000 temples and ashrams in India. If each decides to adopt ten working children, a very large number of children in the country will have no need to work as all their basic needs will be met. Another solution is for India's ten million sadhus to be mobilized to arrange care for five children each, which I feel can be easily done by them. You save fifty million children. It is my plan to set up a Gurukul type of school in which not only spiritualism is taught, but pupils are trained in a skill so that they can earn while they are learning."

Dr. Narayan Singh Rao, research associate, National Labor Institute: "In ancient India rishis gave a lot of importance to child care, education and character building. The education system in those days was ashram schools run by saints. I am convinced that such ashram schools are a solution to the child labor problem. The process of learning was not confined to books, but also included physical, mental and spiritual development. A large number of scientists, political and social thinkers, philosophers and poets were products of this ashram system. Today various child labor acts have fixed the minimum age for employment at 14 years. But in ancient India it used to be 25 years. Our ancient literature is full of details where the child care and education were put on top priority. Thus, in dealing with this complex problem, our policy makers should look back to our ancient history and glorious

cultural traditions which have answers to all these complex socio-economic problems."

Daman Ahuja, former project manager of Naya Prayas [Juvenile Aid Centre], social activist and broadcaster: "The problem of child labor is ages old. During the time of Kautilya Arthashastra [300bce], there were instances of children being sold. In one form or another it is still continuing. Now it is quite a complex problem with no easy and simple solutions. One of the ways the problem of child labor can be solved is to create awareness about it among the masses, so that people develop compassion towards the child laborer. Children who are working in hazardous industries which have adverse effects on their health face far-reaching consequences. Their life span will be reduced. The child born to them will be affected adversely. We will have a large number of citizens who would not be developed fully, mentally and physically. The result is a serious problem for society, nation and the world."

Vishal Gogne, 17, class 12 student: "This is one of the most oppressive and pressing problems of our time with hundreds of thousands of children losing their childhoods in favor of earning a living. The government should concentrate on industries like glass, bangle, carpet and bididi which employ children on a large scale. They should give adequate compensation to their parents and proper education to the children. As to children employed in other occupations such as restaurants or domestic help, the larger problems of poverty and the attitude of the people need to be tackled."

Bhadra Sinha, 17, student: "Children are supposed to be the future of a country. If proper education is not given, they won't be able to achieve the best. Educated children can play a very important role in giving help to these children by teaching. The government should also take some steps to open schools for children belonging to poor families. Exploitation of a child's potentialities should be put to a stop. If a particular child is not interested in studies, then he should be given vocational training so that he can earn his living by working for himself, rather than for others. People should volunteer to educate such children and persuade their parents to get them educated."

Kunal Ganguly, 16, class 11 student: "Anybody on the street will tell you it's the most vile of all evils that exists. Eighty percent of India's population is below the poverty line. With the rising cost of everything, the poor have to utilize every

available resource to earn money, even if it means that young and tender hands and feet have to bear the cruel cuts and scratches of life."

student interviews by Bhadra Sinha