

The Tragedy of Child Labour

India is a vibrant and diverse land - a country of immense contrast. 960 million people, living in both poverty and wealth. Small farming villages dot the countryside – millions crowd some of the world's largest cities. And what was once a purely agricultural society has become a major industrial power. Here, hard manual labour has always been the norm. But the labour backbone of many Indian industries is working children.

Internationally, child labour is defined as any worker aged under fifteen years who lacks access to education or is involved in hazardous or heavy work.

Globally, there are over 250 million child labourers. 100 million of these children go without schooling. Most of them are rural, and 60 per cent are found in Asia. In India, child labour has existed for thousands of years.

Today many landless people now supply industries with their children as a labour force. For employers, children are a source of cheap labour. For many poor families, it's the only way to survive. They have little choice, and their children become economic units.

Over the last fifty years the Indian government has regulated against industry using children under fourteen for factory labour. Factory owners and middlemen, or mudlali, are under increasing pressure to cease using children. But the tragedy of child labour still continues.

Sevikasi

Sevikasi is a major industrial town in southern India. It's known locally as mini-Japan. It's the centre of the fireworks and matchmaking industries, with two thousand factories within a ten-kilometre radius of the town centre. The work is unhealthy and dangerous, since it involves handling raw phosphorus and gunpowder. It's poisonous to breathe or even touch these substances – yet the workers are surrounded with the chemicals all day. Since the region is too dry for farming, and there is little other work on offer, whole communities are drawn into this hazardous factory work.

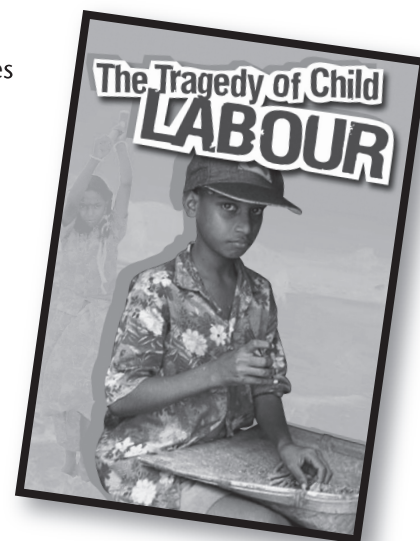
The factory buses and vans start arriving in villages at 5am. Here in Kalaiyarkurichi about two hundred and fifty workers are picked up. Girls as young as eight are encouraged to dress as if they were teenagers to avoid attention from the authorities. They are also taught to run from strangers and cameras. Some parents encourage their children to take these hazardous jobs. They had to do it and now it's their turn to live off their child's labour.

Many industries require children to work in unhygienic, dangerous conditions for more than 12 hours a day with no time for school or play. Their childhood is sacrificed so that business can make more profit. For the children, it means illiteracy tied to a life sentence of tedious and hazardous work.

Respiratory ailments and other health problems contracted at work are not dealt with. Workers won't take time off or pay a doctor's fee.

Some factories offer incentives to ensure a permanent work force – they offer payment for a wedding after eight years labour, or food and shelter to street kids in exchange for work.

Even though factories operate illegally, a community that is dependent on this work for survival is in no position to challenge the way things are. There are no alternatives. If the factories shut down, families would suffer. By turning a blind eye, families have a chance to make a living. But it means their children are forced to live without rights in a world where deception and dishonesty are considered acceptable.



Murugan's Story

These are beedi cigarettes. India produces the staggering amount of five hundred billion beedi cigarettes every year. That means on average over five hundred are smoked by every man, woman and child on the sub-continent.

Eleven-year-old Murugan will be responsible for making around half a million beedis this year. This is not something he does for fun. His parents borrowed three thousand rupees (around \$75 US) so they could feed the family. In return, Murugan was bonded to a mudlali (a labour broker) who arranged work for him in the beedi business. He will work until the loan and all the interest is repaid.



Despite the government ban on child labour, Murugan is just one of the countless thousands of children who work as bonded labourers in the beedi making industry.

Murugan: *"I am expected to close two thousand beedis a day. If I do not do that, my employer will beat me. I have been beaten many times on my back. That's why I'm scared."*

Murugan lives with his family in this one-roomed house. His parents, Chinabal and Dilly, are agricultural labourers. He has a younger brother and sister and a married sister, Salvi, who has two children. They, along with her husband Kumareavel, also live in the house.

After interest on his loan is deducted, Murugan earns around eighty rupees or \$2 US per week. Like many other children, his parents' poverty is robbing him of his childhood and forcing him into a future of no choices.

Murugan: *"At home, they didn't send me to school. That's because my parents owe some money to somebody else. So they have asked me to do work instead of going to school."*

Dilly: *"This is our fate. We have to eat. For the sake of our stomachs, we have to sacrifice my son's education."*

Murugan: *"When I see other children going to school I have a desire to learn, but I am not able to. I also like to play but I don't often get a chance."*

Murugan is surrounded by beedi workers – this job is all he knows. He has no concept of other ways to earn a living. His young nephew Mila is growing up with the same understanding. Beedi rolling is what you do to earn your way.

Murugan's brother-in-law, Kumareavel, offers a tragic insight into what Murugan can expect for the next twenty or thirty years.

Kumareavel: *"I have been in this business for the past seventeen years. I started my work when I was six or seven years old. First I borrowed 3,000 rupees for my household maintenance, followed by 2,000 rupees for my sister's marriage."*

Despite years of hard work, Kumareavel has seen his loan increase from 5,000 rupees to 14,000 rupees, due to extreme interest rates.

The bonded labour system preys mainly on the poor who may need money for a daughter's wedding or a new roof after heavy monsoons. A labour broker, the mudlali, offers a loan in return for a child's work. This loan can only be repaid in a lump sum and interest is charged daily. It effectively ties the child up for years, for a fraction of their true worth. Interest rates are as high as 300 per cent.

Like most Indian boys, Murugan enjoys a game of cricket. Getting only one day off in ten means he has precious little time for play. And he's always conscious of those 2000 beedis that await him in the morning.

Murugan: *"When I grow older, I'd like to do some other work, like being a tailor. But I don't want to continue in this beedi work because they beat me and no matter how hard I work, they still are not satisfied."*

Kumareavel: *"I would rather he get into some kind of a trade, skilled labour, where he will be able to earn a decent living. If he doesn't get out of this beedi work, I know his life will end up like mine. I definitely wish something better for him than this."*

Valli's Story

Valli: *"My name is Valli. I am eleven years old and this is my home. Our village is called Kuparedi Candigai. In the evening, it sits in the shadow of the big rock we call Paladi Banda. In the morning it gets sun on it but if you get up on that rock, that's when you really feel the heat."*

Valli: *"Paladi Banda means 'child's feeding bowl'. I suppose that big rock feeds us too. My father breaks rocks. My mother breaks them too, though they're smaller. And now, I break them as well. This is not an easy way to live. I don't know what other people have to do but I hope it's easier than this job."*



Quarry work or rock breaking is not an industry that specifically targets child labour, but it does affect whole families. The work is physically demanding and impossible for young children to do. But they are still affected directly – Valli has been taken out of school to work and care for her five-month-old sister.

The working day for Valli starts soon after dawn. After doing her household chores, she takes breakfast up to her parents, who generally go up on to the rock just after 6am.

Valli's father, Kupusanay, has TB (tuberculosis) and now isn't able to work as hard as he once did. Too much hard liquor has made life miserable for the whole family. Most of his earnings of around 300 rupees (or \$7.50 US) are spent on drink.

Locally distilled hard liquor grips many men in the community. They are paid one rupee for each block they cut from the hill, one glass of liquor costs 10 rupees. It helps them forget their aches and the pain of this work. It also means wives and children must be on their best behaviour to avoid a beating after the drinking is over.

So Valli's home must be run on the earnings of herself and her mother, Muthamma, that's around 200 rupees per week. To make this, the two of them must break enough rocks into gravel six days a week to fill a tractor-trailer.

The physical toll paid by this rock breaking community is a heavy one.

Valli: *"I get pains in my hands and legs and on my shoulder. The nerves in my neck also give me pain. But what to do? That is my lot."*

Valli's mother has no idea of her age – she's probably about 40. She remembers being Valli's age when she married and was brought here to work thirty years ago. Her husband was a relative her dying father wished her to marry. He's ten years older.



Muthamma: *“Life has been very hard for me ever since I got married. It’s not only because of hard work but because of so many problems that I am having in my home. Sometimes I feel like ending my life but what will my two young daughters do? For their sakes, I am pulling along.”*

Neither of Valli’s parents attended school – they are both illiterate. They have relied upon their strong backs to provide them with a living. But youthful strength doesn’t last forever. That’s all too obvious for Valli as she finds herself pushed into this hard life.

Tomorrow though, this will all be forgotten. It’s August Festival Day, a Hindu holiday, and there’ll be plenty going on in the village.

The day starts unusually. The village has hired a TV and video for a night to celebrate. They’ve watched movies through the night and Valli catches a bit of the last film before her father calls her over to help him with his tool preparation. These rare film nights give Valli a glimpse into another world. With the dawn comes reality.

Valli: *“Watching the films last night was great, especially when the young ones got married. To think that people can actually live such lives.”*

Valli’s father sharpens his rock chisels and hammers daily. Quarry workers must pay for their own equipment - about 12 chisels and a variety of hammers. Although it’s a holiday, Kupasani will go up on to the rock and work.

For Valli, fetching water, cleaning the house and caring for baby sister Padmavathi consumes most of the festival day.

A local sorcerer visits, looking for an excuse not to use his spells.

Valli: *“When I was small, Mum used to tell me to eat or sleep, otherwise the sorcerer would come. Today I was frightened so I just gave him some rice and ran inside. He still frightens me.”*

Muthamma: *“I feel very unhappy that I had to stop Valli from school, but I had to do it only for the sake of my baby girl because she has to take care of her. I like to give her an education but then where is the means for educating her? I know that she will have a better life if she gets some sort of an education. I feel sad about what I am doing but I think I am quite helpless.”*

Although Valli’s mother feels she has no choice, removing Valli from school greatly reduces her chances of a satisfying life. Unless she marries into another trade, it’s almost assured she will repeat the life that her mother has lead.

On holidays, Valli still plays with her best friend Rada and studies her schoolbooks. They used to compete for top marks in the class, but now on Mondays their paths go in quite different directions.

Rada is working hard at her schoolwork. Like Valli she’s a bright girl who is showing a lot of potential.

Muthamma: *“If she gets an education, she’s likely to get an educated husband and that should make a difference in her life.”*

Valli: *“I did think about what kind of husband I shall have. My dream is that I shall get a man who doesn’t drink, who doesn’t smoke beedi and who will take care of me.”*



Bharati's Story

Dawn breaks for the village of Erikuti. Nestled in a valley near the town of Pernambut, Erikuti is another beedi producing area. For the Mohan family, today is business as usual. Muniama gets the fire going while daughter Bharati sweeps up. These days, it's not a struggle to get out of bed for thirteen-year-old Bharati and the bad dreams have stopped as well. Bharati was a bonded beedi worker for two years.

Bharati's father, Mohan, was also bonded into beedi work when he was ten years old. After 25 years of labour, he became very ill.



Muniama: *"My husband was becoming very sick and I did not have any money to help him out, so I thought I had to save him even at the cost of getting my child into bonded labour. I knew that I had ... my child would suffer much because I heard of people being beaten up by the mudlalis. But I had no other alternative. I just had to save my husband's life."*

As a nine-year-old, Bharati would leave for work with the prospect of ten hours of beedi rolling ahead of her.

Bharati: *"I never liked to do the beedi work. I found it very difficult. I used to go in the mornings and had a very short lunch break and then I again go back for duty and stay on till late into the night. I used to get pain in the legs. Rolling the beedi with my fingers caused pain for my fingers also. And bending down and doing the work gave me neck pain. There was a time when I felt that I should escape and run away from this but if I delay in going there, my mother and father will insist that I must rush because I must finish my work. I found it very difficult. When I was thinking of running away, the teacher came to my rescue."*

The teacher was a World Vision social worker who arranged for the payment of Bharati's debt, freeing her and allowing her to return to school. Now Bharati's morning work is quite different, it includes painting a cow dung mixture onto the house floors and the front yard. This stops the mud from breaking up and creates a smooth surface. After that, she makes a column with white powder. This is a traditional design with religious roots. It beautifies the front yards in the village.

This path used to take Bharati to her place of work. Now it leads to the local primary school where she is top of her standard eight class. She's making the most of her opportunities.

Bharati: *"Sitting and rolling the beedi, I used to watch other children running around going to school. I used to wonder if I will ever have that freedom and go and play, and go to school like that."*

Bharati's release from bonded labour has given her new hope and a vision for her future.

Bharati: *"I had no difficulty catching up with school. I found it quite easy in spite of the break that I had from school. My desire is to complete my 12th standard and then go in for teachers' training and work as a school teacher."*

Swamidoss: *"She is an intelligent child. If she is given the opportunity, she can really go up to college and go in for higher studies."*

Bharati: *"Since I have a desire, I know that with a little bit of hard work on my part, I'll be able to achieve this."*

Summary

In India, child labour is a part of the culture – it is ingrained in a society where families and children have no knowledge that they deserve better.

Globally, due to an increase in poverty, higher education costs, more informal economies and greater competitiveness, child labour is on the increase.

The challenge is to summon the will to end this tragedy. This can be done through public awareness, education, the enforcement of legislation and the alleviation of poverty.

The UN (United Nations) Convention for Child Rights, the International Organisation Against Child Labour and Non Government Organisations, including World Vision, are working against Child Labour. Action includes the prevention as well as the withdrawal of children from exploitative and hazardous situations, the improvement of working conditions and fair wages.

World Vision is against child labour and for child rights. All children deserve the right to learn and play.

Bharati: *“I wouldn’t like to see my sister ever get into this beedi rolling business. I will see to it myself that she doesn’t get trapped.”*

Vali: *“I have a dream that some day I will go back to school – that my mother will send me to school – then I hope I will have some happiness in my life.”*

Murugan: *“I have never been to school. If at all I go to school I would really like to learn to read and write. I have never thought about this right from the beginning, because right from the beginning I have been engrossed in my work.”*

For Murugan, this dream is coming true. On August the 15th, on the 50th Anniversary of India’s Independence, Murugan was able to celebrate his own Independence Day. World Vision paid the family’s debt – so he has now been freed from bonded labour. He is finally able to go to school. He is able to play with his friends.