

THE ECONOMICS OF CHILD LABOUR: HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL, LABOUR MARKETS AND THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN

A Study of the Determinants, Market Linkages and Policy Response to Child Labour in India

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Abstract

Child labour remains one of the most persistent and troubling features of the Indian economy, straddling the domains of household economics, labour markets and human development. This paper examines the economics of child labour through three interlinked lenses: the household survival strategies that push children into work, the structure of labour markets that pulls them in, and the resulting welfare costs borne by children and, ultimately, by the economy as a whole. Drawing on Census of India data, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, and the ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour (2020 and 2024 rounds), the study traces long-run trends in the incidence of child labour in India and situates them within the theoretical framework advanced by Basu and Van (1998), namely the luxury axiom and the substitution axiom. The paper argues that child labour in India is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, not a matter of parental preference but a rational, if tragic, response to household poverty, incomplete credit and insurance markets, and the low and uncertain returns to schooling perceived by poor households. Labour market conditions the wage gap between adult and child workers, the elasticity of demand for cheap, unorganised labour, and the seasonal absorption of children in agriculture and allied occupations reinforce this supply-side pressure. Using secondary data compiled into tables and figures, the paper documents that while the absolute number of child workers in India fell from roughly 12.6 million in 2001 to about 10.1 million in 2011 (Census of India), a still-substantial number of children between the ages of five and seventeen years remain outside school and outside protective legislation, particularly in agriculture, home-based manufacturing and domestic service. The welfare consequences foregone schooling, compromised health, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty are examined alongside the policy architecture of the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Child Labour Project. The paper concludes that a durable reduction in child labour requires the simultaneous strengthening of household income security, labour market regulation, and the quality not merely the availability of schooling, rather than reliance on prohibition alone.

Keywords: child labour, household economics, luxury axiom, labour markets, education, poverty, India, welfare of children

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Walk through any wholesale vegetable market, any roadside dhaba, or any small workshop tucked into the by-lanes of an Indian town, and the chances of encountering a child at work rather than at school remain uncomfortably high. Child labour is not a residual or marginal phenomenon in India; it is woven into the everyday functioning of large parts of the informal economy in cottonseed farms in Gujarat, in the glass and bangle units of Firozabad, in the carpet belt of Bhadohi-Mirzapur, in the zari and embroidery clusters of the National Capital Region, and, most commonly of all, on the family farm. According to Census 2011 figures, India's child population in the 5-14 age group stood at 259.6 million, of which about 10.1 million, or roughly four in every hundred children, were classified as either main or marginal workers (ILO, 2024; Census of India, 2011). When the wider 5-17 age bracket used in international estimates is applied, the number of Indian children engaged in

some form of economic activity is considerably higher still.

The persistence of child labour in a country that has, over the same three decades, more than trebled its per-capita income and enacted a constitutional right to education is something of a puzzle, and it is this puzzle that motivates the present paper. Standard textbook accounts often treat child labour as a straightforward consequence of poverty poor households send children to work because they cannot afford not to. This is broadly correct, but it is an incomplete story. Child labour is jointly determined by household circumstances on the supply side and by the structure of labour demand on the other; it is shaped by the functioning, or malfunctioning, of credit and insurance markets that would otherwise allow households to smooth consumption without resorting to child work; and it interacts closely with the returns that a household expects from schooling relative to the returns from immediate work. An economic treatment of child labour must therefore examine households, markets

and the welfare of the child together, rather than in isolation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite a broad decline in the incidence of child labour recorded across successive Censuses and National Sample Survey rounds, India continues to account for one of the largest absolute numbers of child workers among developing countries. The problem is compounded by three features specific to the Indian case. First, a substantial share of child work occurs within the household itself on family farms, in home-based piece-rate production, or in domestic chores and is therefore poorly captured by conventional labour force statistics, which tend to focus on work outside the home. Second, the incidence of child labour is highly uneven across states, social groups and gender, so that national averages conceal serious pockets of concentration among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Muslim households and children of migrant and seasonal labourers. Third, legal prohibition, in the form of the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, has coexisted for decades with widespread non-enforcement, particularly in family-based and informal-sector work, which the law finds difficult to reach. This paper is concerned with unpacking why, notwithstanding legal prohibition and rising average incomes, child labour has proved so resistant to elimination in India.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the trends and patterns of child labour in India and globally over the period 2000-2024, using Census, NSSO/PLFS and ILO-UNICEF data.
- To analyse the household-level determinants of child labour through the lens of the household survival hypothesis and the luxury axiom associated with Basu and Van (1998).
- To study the linkages between labour market conditions adult wages, informality and demand for cheap labour and the incidence and persistence of child labour.

1.4 Research Questions

- What have been the broad trends in the incidence of child labour in India between 1971 and 2011, and how do these compare with global trends between 2000 and 2024?
- To what extent is child labour in India explained by household poverty as opposed to other household or community-level factors such as parental education, caste, or household size?
- How do labour market conditions, including the informal-sector wage structure, influence the demand for child workers?

- What are the principal welfare costs of child labour, and how do these costs propagate across generations?
- How effective has India's legal and welfare architecture been in reducing child labour, and what are the identifiable gaps?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant for at least three reasons. First, India is a signatory to Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which commits member states to end child labour in all its forms by 2025, a target that, on current evidence, has not been met either globally or in India (ILO and UNICEF, 2025). A clear-eyed economic assessment of why the target has been missed is therefore timely. Second, with the National Education Policy 2020 emphasising universal foundational literacy and numeracy, and with recent curricular reforms including the National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2023, understanding the economic pressures that pull children out of school is directly relevant to education policy. Third, the paper is intended to be of practical use to students, researchers and policy practitioners in India who require a synthesis of household-level and market-level explanations of child labour, illustrated with up-to-date data presented in accessible tabular and graphical form.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

The paper relies entirely on secondary data drawn from the Census of India, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, National Sample Survey rounds, and reports of the International Labour Organization and UNICEF, supplemented by peer-reviewed literature published up to 2024-25. No primary survey or field data collection was undertaken. The paper is therefore descriptive and analytical rather than causal-econometric in the strict sense; where the underlying studies cited employ regression or other econometric techniques, their findings are reported and interpreted, but no new estimation is carried out here. A further limitation is that official statistics on child labour in India are known to undercount work performed within the household, particularly by girl children engaged in domestic chores, and this undercount should be borne in mind when interpreting the figures presented in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on child labour spans development economics, labour economics and the economics of the household, and has grown substantially since the mid-1990s, when trade-related concerns about child labour in export industries first drew sustained academic attention. This section organises the literature under three heads:

theoretical contributions, cross-country empirical work, and studies specific to India.

2.1 Theoretical Literature

The single most influential theoretical contribution remains Basu and Van (1998), who model child labour as arising from the interaction of two behavioural postulates. The luxury axiom holds that a household sends children to work only when household income from other sources, principally adult wages, falls below a certain subsistence threshold; child leisure and schooling are treated, in effect, as a luxury good that poor households cannot afford. The substitution axiom holds that child and adult labour are substitutes in production, so that the wage rate paid to children depends on the going rate for unskilled adult labour. Basu and Van show that these two axioms together can generate multiple equilibria in the labour market: a 'good' equilibrium with high adult wages and no child labour, and a 'bad' equilibrium with low adult wages sustained precisely because children are also working and adding to aggregate labour supply. This multiplicity has an important policy implication: a legal ban on child labour, by removing children from the workforce, can in principle raise adult wages enough to make the ban self-sustaining, even though the same ban would appear unenforceable if attempted against the wishes of desperately poor households acting individually.

A second strand of theory, associated with Baland and Robinson (2000) and later formalised by several authors under the label of the wealth paradox, points out that in agrarian societies where land or productive assets can be used as collateral, richer, land-owning households may sometimes deploy children more intensively on the family farm than poorer, landless households who instead send children out for wage work or who, lacking any capital at all, may keep children at home or in school. Bhalotra and Heady (2003) formalise this wealth paradox econometrically, showing that in some agrarian contexts, land-rich households exhibit higher rates of child labour than land-poor households, a finding that complicates any simple, monotonic poverty-child-labour relationship. Dessy and Pallage (2005) extend the theoretical literature to the 'worst forms' of child labour, arguing that hazardous and exploitative work can persist even when overall child labour is declining, because the worst forms are often organised by intermediaries who capture the surplus, delinking the welfare of the working child from the welfare of the household.

2.2 Empirical Literature: Cross-Country and Global Evidence

Edmonds and Pavcnik (2005), in an influential review published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, survey the empirical evidence linking trade liberalisation, poverty and child labour, and conclude that increases in household income, rather than trade exposure per se, are the dominant force reducing child labour across developing countries; their review of Vietnamese rice-price liberalisation remains one of the cleanest natural experiments in the literature, showing that higher farm-gate prices, by raising household income, sharply reduced child labour even though the same price rise raised the return to farm work. Edmonds (2006) further shows, using data on birth order and family composition, that the allocation of work within a household is not random but reflects intra-household bargaining over which children work and which attend school. The ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour series, now in its fourth edition (2024), is the principal source of comparable global time-series data; the 2020 round documented, for the first time in two decades, a rise in global child labour to 160 million, attributed in part to the economic shocks preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, while the 2024 round recorded a decline to approximately 137.6 million children in child labour, of whom about 54 million were in hazardous work (ILO and UNICEF, 2021; ILO and UNICEF, 2025).

2.3 Empirical Literature: India-Specific Studies

Studies specific to India broadly confirm the poverty-child-labour link while identifying additional social determinants. Kurosaki (2006) uses rural Indian household data to examine child labour and school enrolment jointly, finding that whose education is prioritised within a household is closely tied to expected labour-market returns and the gender of the child. Samantroy, Tomar and Arora (2017), in a study prepared for the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, provide a detailed state-wise account of child labour patterns from Census 2011 and find Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, followed by Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, to be the states with the largest absolute numbers of working children. A more recent econometric contribution, published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, uses Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019-20 data with binary logistic regression and finds that poverty and low parental education remain the two most powerful predictors of child labour, and that children from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class and Muslim households, together with children from agricultural households, face a significantly higher probability of being classified as child workers

(study reported in ScienceDirect/Children and Youth Services Review, 2022, drawing on PLFS 2019-20 data). Ghose (2020), applying a combined-data Bayesian approach using the Employment-Unemployment Survey and the India Human Development Survey, arrives at an estimate of roughly 13.2 million children aged 5-17 in child labour, moderately higher than the Census figure, underlining the sensitivity of child labour counts to survey methodology and definitional choices.

A 2024 UNICEF Innocenti report on child labour and schooling in India is particularly valuable for the present paper because it draws on Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018-19 data to show that roughly nine in every ten Indian children aged 6-17 years were classified as attending school only, with less than one per cent combining school and paid work, and a residual category either working exclusively or engaged in neither activity (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). The same report notes that hazardous work constituted between 93 and 97 per cent of measured child labour among those children who were working, a finding that underscores that the child labour which does persist in India is disproportionately concentrated in its most damaging forms rather than being spread evenly across relatively benign part-time work.

2.4 Research Gap

Much of the existing India-focused literature examines either the determinants of child labour or the effects of specific legislative interventions, but comparatively few studies bring together the household-survival perspective, the labour-market perspective and the welfare-consequences perspective within a single, accessible framework supported by updated 2023-2024 data. This paper attempts to fill that gap by synthesising Census, PLFS and ILO-UNICEF data into a single narrative that moves from household behaviour, through labour market structure, to welfare outcomes and policy response.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Luxury Axiom and the Household Survival Hypothesis

The theoretical starting point for most economic analysis of child labour is the household survival hypothesis, formalised most rigorously by Basu and Van (1998). The hypothesis treats the household, rather than the individual child, as the relevant decision-making unit, and assumes that parents derive positive utility from their children's welfare but are constrained by household budget requirements. Formally, if household utility is written as a function of aggregate household consumption and the leisure (or schooling) of the child, and if child labour supply is non-negative only when the wage income of adult household

members falls short of a subsistence consumption requirement, then child labour will be observed if and only if adult household earnings are below this threshold. This single behavioural postulate — the luxury axiom — generates the empirically well-supported prediction that child labour is concentrated among the poorest households, and that even modest increases in adult household income, whether from wage growth, cash transfers, or remittances, can be expected to reduce child labour substantially, often more effectively than legal prohibition alone.

3.2 The Substitution Axiom and Multiple Labour Market Equilibria

The second postulate in the Basu-Van framework, the substitution axiom, holds that child and adult labour are substitutable inputs in production, differing mainly in the efficiency units of labour they supply rather than in kind. Because employers can, at the margin, substitute two or three child workers for one adult worker, the presence of a large pool of child labour depresses the market wage available to adult workers. This generates the possibility of multiple equilibria: in a 'high-wage, no-child-labour' equilibrium, adult wages are sufficiently high that no household needs to send children to work, and the absence of child labour is precisely what sustains the high wage by keeping aggregate labour supply low; in a 'low-wage, child-labour' equilibrium, the presence of child labour depresses adult wages, which in turn compels poor households to continue sending children to work in order to meet subsistence needs. Both equilibria can be consistent with the same underlying technology and household preferences, and the economy can, in principle, become trapped in the inferior equilibrium. This multiplicity is the theoretical basis for the argument that a binding legal ban on child labour, if it can be enforced even temporarily, may be self-reinforcing, because the resulting rise in adult wages removes the economic necessity that originally drove households to defy the ban.

3.3 The Wealth Paradox and the Substitution of Child Labour for Hired Labour

A qualification to the poverty-centred view comes from the wealth paradox literature. In predominantly agrarian settings, land and livestock are simultaneously productive assets and sources of demand for family labour. Bhalotra and Heady (2003), among others, show that households owning more land may, under certain market conditions particularly where hired agricultural labour markets are thin, seasonal or subject to moral hazard deploy their own children more intensively than land-poor or landless households, who instead rely on wage employment away from the farm or who withdraw children from work

altogether because they lack complementary assets on which children could be productively employed. This literature cautions against treating child labour and household poverty as related in a strictly linear, monotonic fashion; the relationship is better understood as a function of both income poverty and the household's asset and occupational structure.

3.4 Labour Demand, Informality and the Structure of Product Markets

On the demand side, the persistence of child labour in India is closely tied to the structure of the informal economy. Small, unorganised production units in brick kilns, in home-based garment and zari work, in agriculture, and in domestic service operate with thin profit margins, limited capital, and weak regulatory oversight, all of which make cheap, compliant child labour attractive relative to costlier adult or mechanised alternatives. Where product markets are competitive and margins are thin, individual producers who might otherwise prefer not to employ children can find themselves competing against others who do, reproducing at the level of the firm the same 'bad equilibrium' logic that operates at the level of the household. This demand-side dynamic means that supply-side interventions such as cash transfers or schooling subsidies, while necessary, are unlikely to be sufficient on their own; labour market regulation and enforcement targeted at employers remain an essential complementary instrument.

3.5 Human Capital and Intergenerational Transmission

Finally, the welfare dimension of child labour is best understood through the human capital framework associated with Becker (1964) and subsequently applied extensively to schooling decisions in developing countries. Because working children forego schooling, or attend school irregularly and perform poorly when combining school with work, they typically accumulate less human capital than they otherwise would. Lower human capital translates, in adulthood, into lower earning capacity, which in turn raises the probability that the next generation of children in the same household will also be sent to work. This intergenerational transmission mechanism is central to why child labour is frequently described in the literature as both a symptom and a cause of persistent poverty.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a descriptive-analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. It does not employ primary field survey methods; instead, it synthesises official statistics, international agency

reports and peer-reviewed academic literature, and presents them through tables and graphs to build a coherent economic narrative around three linked questions: why households supply child labour, why labour markets absorb it, and what the resulting costs are for children's welfare.

4.2 Data Sources

- Census of India (2001 and 2011 rounds) for long-run trends in the number of working children aged 5-14 and state-wise distribution.
- Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2018-19 and 2019-20 rounds, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation for activity status of children aged 6-17 and household-level correlates of child labour.
- ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour, 2020 and 2024 rounds for global and regional trends, sectoral distribution and hazardous work estimates.
- UNICEF Innocenti (2024), Child Labour and Schooling in India for the linkage between schooling status and work status among Indian children.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles (Economic and Political Weekly, Children and Youth Services Review, Child Indicators Research, Journal of Economic Perspectives, among others) published up to 2024-25.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The paper organises the determinants of child labour under four broad categories commonly used in the empirical literature: (i) household economic status, comprising income, poverty status, and asset or land ownership; (ii) household demographic composition, comprising family size, birth order and dependency ratio; (iii) parental characteristics, principally parental education and occupation; and (iv) social identity, comprising caste, religion and gender. Labour market variables considered include the sectoral composition of employment (agriculture, industry and services), the degree of informality, and the relationship between adult and child wage rates. Welfare outcomes are assessed principally through schooling status, as reported in PLFS data, supplemented by evidence on health outcomes drawn from the wider literature.

4.4 Limitations of the Data

Three data limitations deserve mention. First, Census and PLFS estimates of child labour differ somewhat in coverage and definition, so that figures from different sources are not always strictly comparable; where this arises, the paper notes the source explicitly rather than presenting a single blended series. Second, both Census and PLFS are known to undercount unpaid work within

the household, particularly domestic chores performed by girl children, which are frequently classified as 'helping the family' rather than as work. Third, the most recent Census data available for India remains that of 2011, since the decennial Census due in 2021 was postponed; consequently, sub-national, state-wise figures for the 2020s presented in this paper are necessarily drawn from PLFS estimates or extrapolated trends rather than from a fresh Census count.

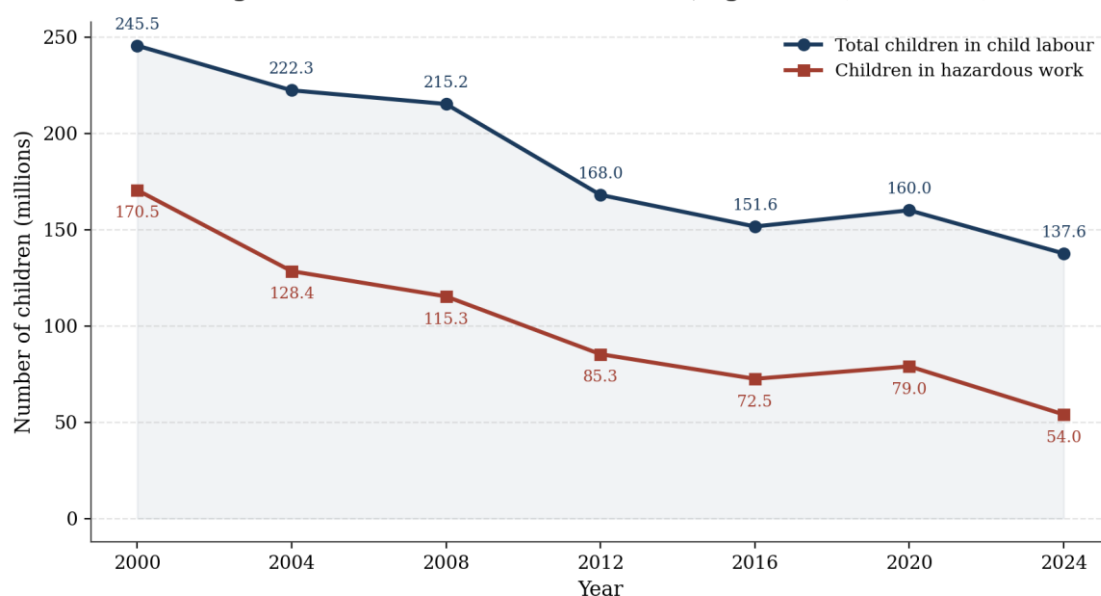
5. Global and Indian Trends in Child Labour

5.1 Global Trends, 2000-2024

Global estimates of child labour, compiled jointly by the ILO and UNICEF, show a long secular decline between 2000 and 2016, followed by a troubling reversal between 2016 and 2020, and a renewed decline through 2024. The number of children aged 5-17 years in child labour worldwide

fell from about 245.5 million in 2000 to 151.6 million in 2016, a decline of over ninety million children in sixteen years. Between 2016 and 2020, however, the count rose again to 160 million, an increase the ILO and UNICEF attributed to slowing progress against poverty, conflict-related displacement, and the early economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). The most recent round of estimates, released in June 2025 and covering the reference year 2024, records a decline to approximately 137.6 million children in child labour, of whom 54 million, or just under two in five, were engaged in hazardous work directly endangering their health, safety or moral development (ILO and UNICEF, 2025). Figure 1 plots this trajectory for both total child labour and the hazardous work subset.

Figure 1: Global Trend in Child Labour, Ages 5-17 (2000-2024)



Source: ILO-UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2024, Trends and the Road Forward* (2025); ILO-UNICEF (2021).

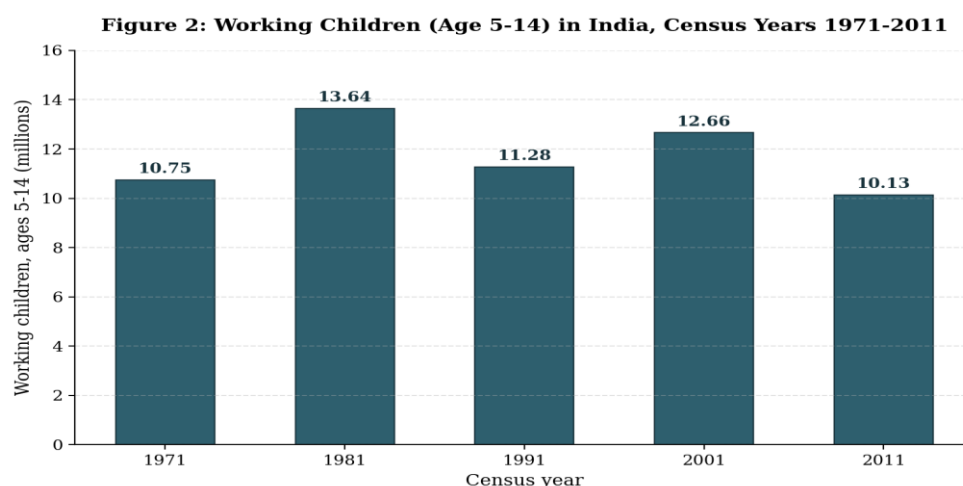
Figure 1: Global trend in child labour, ages 5-17, 2000-2024 (millions of children).

Two features of Figure 1 are worth emphasising. First, hazardous work has consistently comprised a substantial share of overall child labour around 40 to 70 per cent across the period — indicating that a large fraction of child labour is not merely inconvenient for schooling but actively dangerous. Second, the 2016-2020 reversal demonstrates that progress against child labour is not automatic or irreversible; it depends on continued income growth, functioning social protection, and sustained

policy attention, and can be undone quickly by economic shocks that affect poor households disproportionately.

5.2 Long-Run Trends in India, 1971-2011

India's own Census-based series on working children aged 5-14 shows a somewhat uneven decline over four decades, rising in some intervals before falling substantially by 2011. Table 1 and Figure 2 present the series.



Source: Census of India, various years (as compiled in Ministry of Labour and Employment records and ILO India Factsheet, 2024).

Figure 2: Working children aged 5-14 in India, Census years 1971-2011 (millions).

Table 1: Working Children (Age 5-14) in India by Census Year

Census Year	Working Children, Age 5-14 (millions)	As % of Total Child Population
1971	10.75	5.4%
1981	13.64	6.0%
1991	11.28	3.6% (approx.)
2001	12.66	5.0%
2011	10.13	3.9%

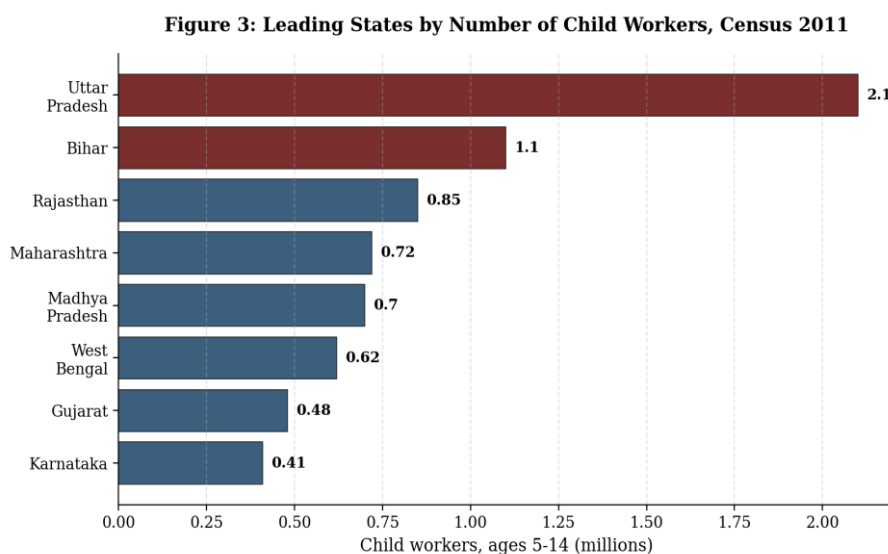
Source: Census of India, various years, as compiled in the Ministry of Labour and Employment records and the ILO India Factsheet on Child Labour (2024).

The decline recorded between 2001 and 2011 a fall of about 2.6 million working children, or roughly one-fifth of the 2001 total is frequently cited as evidence of the combined effect of rising household incomes during a period of relatively rapid GDP growth, the expansion of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan school-access programme, and the

enactment of the Right to Education Act, 2009 (ILO, 2024). It is also notable that the decline was considerably sharper in rural than in urban India; several studies attribute the relatively slower decline, and in some data series a mild increase, in urban child labour to rural-to-urban migration and the growing demand for cheap child labour in urban informal service occupations such as domestic work, small eateries and street vending (UNICEF, 2021).

5.3 State-Wise Distribution

Child labour in India is heavily concentrated in a handful of populous, largely agrarian northern and central states. Census 2011 data show Uttar Pradesh accounting for the largest absolute number of child workers, followed by Bihar, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Figure 3 presents the eight leading states by the absolute number of child workers aged 5-14 years.



Source: Census of India 2011, Office of the Registrar General; figures as cited in Samantroy et al. (2017) and subsequent literature.

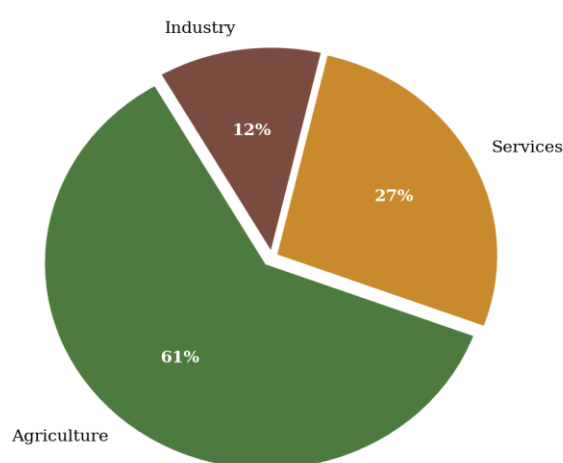
Figure 3: Leading states by number of child workers, ages 5-14, Census 2011.

The concentration of child labour in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reflects a combination of high population base, relatively lower per-capita income, lower female literacy, and a larger share of the workforce engaged in agriculture and allied activities, all factors identified in the determinants literature discussed in Section 6. It should be noted that a large absolute number does not necessarily imply the highest incidence rate; several smaller states and Union Territories record lower absolute numbers but comparable or higher shares of children in the workforce relative to their child population.

5.4 Sectoral and Gender Distribution

Agriculture remains, by a wide margin, the largest employer of child labour both globally and in India. ILO-UNICEF estimates for 2020 place approximately 61 per cent of global child labour in agriculture, 27 per cent in services (including domestic work, retail and hospitality), and the remaining 12 per cent in industry, comprising manufacturing, mining and construction (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). Figure 4 presents this sectoral breakdown.

Figure 4: Sectoral Distribution of Global Child Labour, 2020



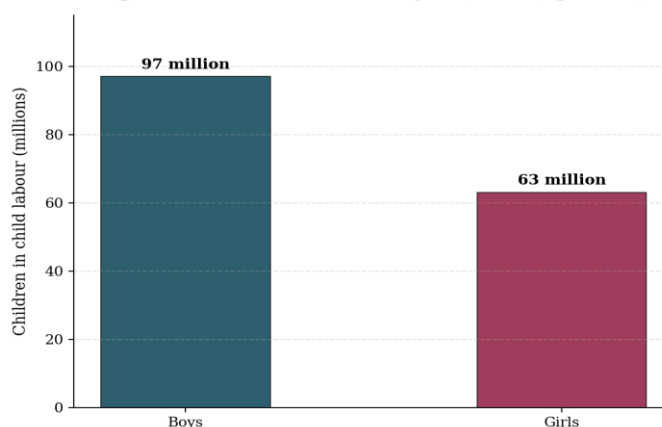
Source: ILO-UNICEF, Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward.

Figure 4: Sectoral distribution of global child labour, 2020.

Gender patterns in child labour statistics require careful interpretation. Global data for 2020 record 97 million boys and 63 million girls in child labour (Figure 5), a gap that likely understates the true extent of girls' work, since time-intensive domestic chores performed by girls within their own

households fetching water and fuelwood, caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning are frequently excluded from standard child labour definitions unless they exceed a specified number of hours per week (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).

Figure 5: Global Child Labour by Sex, 2020 (Ages 5-17)



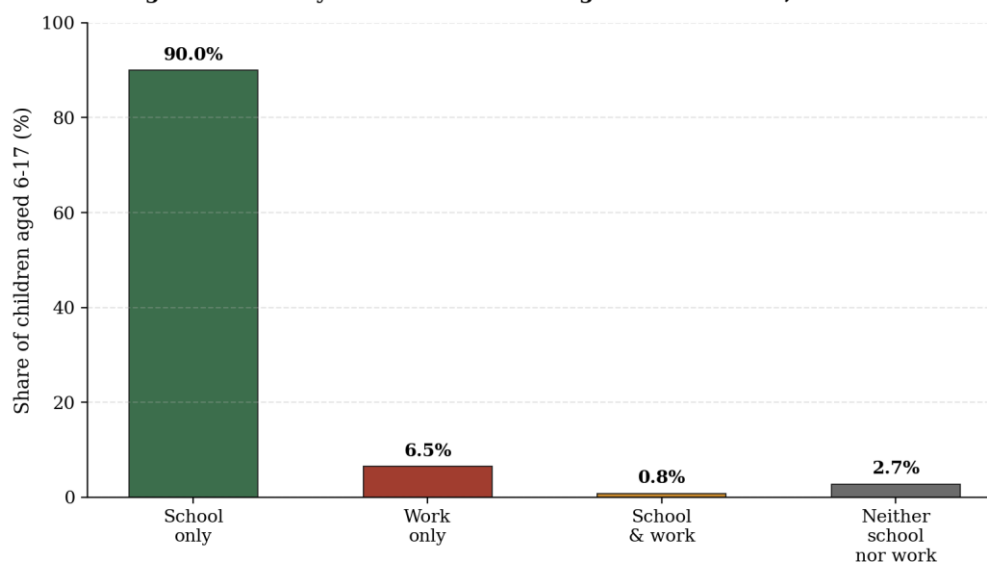
Source: ILO-UNICEF, Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward.

Figure 5: Global child labour by sex, 2020, ages 5-17.

For India specifically, the 2024 UNICEF Innocenti report on schooling and child labour, drawing on PLFS 2018-19 data, finds that the overwhelming majority of Indian children aged 6-17 years around ninety per cent were classified as attending school only, with a small share working exclusively, a negligible share combining school and work, and a residual share engaged in neither activity (Figure

6). The same report notes that hazardous work accounted for between 93 and 97 per cent of measured child labour in the PLFS 2018-19 round, meaning that where child labour in India does occur, it is disproportionately of the more severe, hazardous variety rather than light or occasional work (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024).

Figure 6: Activity Status of Children Aged 6-17 in India, PLFS 2018-19



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018-19, as analysed in UNICEF Innocenti, *Child Labour and Schooling in India* (2024).

Figure 6: Activity status of children aged 6-17 in India, PLFS 2018-19.

6. Household Survival and the Determinants of Child Labour in India

This section reviews the principal household- and community-level determinants of child labour identified in the Indian empirical literature, organised broadly according to the analytical framework set out in Section 4.3.

6.1 Poverty and Household Income

Poverty remains the single most consistently significant determinant of child labour across the Indian literature. Studies using PLFS 2019-20 data and binary logistic regression find a strong positive association between household poverty status and the probability of a child being classified as a worker, a finding fully consistent with the luxury axiom discussed in Section 3.1 (Children and Youth Services Review, 2022). The mechanism is straightforward: poor households, facing binding subsistence constraints and typically lacking access to formal credit or insurance, use child labour as a coping strategy against income shortfalls, whether these are chronic, arising from low and irregular adult earnings, or transitory, arising from a harvest failure, illness of the primary earner, or loss of casual employment. Because most poor Indian households, particularly in rural areas and in the informal urban economy, cannot borrow against future income or insure against such shocks

through formal instruments, sending a child to work functions as a substitute for the missing credit or insurance market.

6.2 Parental Education and Literacy

Parental education, and maternal education in particular, is repeatedly found to be inversely associated with child labour. Mothers with even primary-level education are significantly more likely to keep children, especially daughters, in school rather than at work, an effect operating both through higher household income associated with education and through parents' own valuation of schooling. Cross-country evidence using data for South Asia over 1990-2020, employing a Cross-Sectional Autoregressive Distributed Lag approach, finds a statistically significant negative long-run relationship between female education and child labour, reinforcing the case for continued investment in girls' education as a child-labour reduction strategy in its own right (Cogent Economics and Finance literature, South Asia panel studies).

6.3 Caste, Religion and Social Exclusion

Child labour in India is not distributed evenly across social groups. Multiple studies using PLFS and Census data find that children belonging to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class households, as well as Muslim

households, face a significantly elevated probability of being engaged in child labour relative to children from general-category, upper-caste Hindu households, even after controlling for household income (Children and Youth Services Review, 2022). This pattern reflects the interaction of economic disadvantage with social exclusion: historically marginalised communities tend to have lower average asset ownership, more limited access to formal-sector employment, and, in some regions, poorer access to functioning government schools, all of which raise the relative attractiveness of child work.

6.4 Household Size, Birth Order and Dependency

Larger households, and households with a higher child dependency ratio, are more likely to deploy at least one child in work, partly because the marginal utility of an additional child's labour rises as the number of dependents relative to earners increases, and partly because the opportunity cost of schooling in terms of forgone earnings or forgone assistance with domestic and care work rises with family size. The literature on birth order additionally finds that older children, particularly older daughters, are disproportionately withdrawn from school to work or to provide domestic and sibling care, a pattern of intra-household resource allocation documented by Edmonds (2006) and subsequently confirmed in Indian contexts.

6.5 Land Ownership and Occupational Structure

As discussed in Section 3.3, the relationship between household asset ownership and child

labour is not uniformly negative. In predominantly agrarian districts, land-owning households sometimes exhibit higher rates of child involvement in unpaid family farm work than landless, agricultural-labourer households, an instance of the wealth paradox. At the same time, agricultural households as a whole whether cultivating their own land or working as agricultural labourers are consistently found to have higher rates of child labour than non-agricultural households, since agriculture, alongside allied activities such as animal husbandry, offers flexible, seasonal, low-skill tasks (weeding, herding, harvesting, gleaning) that are well suited to children's physical capabilities and can be performed alongside, or instead of, schooling depending on the agricultural calendar.

6.6 Gender Dimensions

Gender shapes both the incidence and the form of child labour. Boys are more likely to be recorded in market-oriented, wage-earning child labour, particularly outside the household, while girls are more likely to be engaged in unpaid domestic work and sibling care within the household work that is frequently under-captured in official child labour statistics precisely because it does not involve a market transaction. Where girls are also engaged in outside work, this is disproportionately concentrated in agriculture and in home-based piece-rate manufacturing such as bidi-rolling, incense-stick making and embroidery, occupations that allow work to be combined, however imperfectly, with domestic responsibilities.

Table 2: Summary of Key Determinants of Child Labour in India — Direction of Association

Determinant	Association with Child Labour	Illustrative Source
Household poverty / low income	Positive (strong)	Basu & Van (1998); PLFS 2019-20 studies
Maternal / parental education	Negative	South Asia panel studies, 1990-2020
SC / ST / OBC / Muslim household status	Positive	Children & Youth Services Review (2022)
Household size / dependency ratio	Positive	General household economics literature
Land ownership (agrarian context)	Ambiguous / positive in some contexts	Bhalotra & Heady (2003) — wealth paradox
Agricultural occupation of household	Positive	ILO-UNICEF (2020, 2024) sectoral data
Access to functioning local school	Negative	RTE Act evaluations; UNICEF Innocenti (2024)
Adult unemployment / wage shocks	Positive	Edmonds & Pavcnik (2005)

Source: Compiled by the author from the sources cited in Section 6.

7. Labour Markets and Child Labour

7.1 Substitutability Between Child and Adult Labour

The substitution axiom of Basu and Van (1998), discussed in Section 3.2, implies that child and

adult workers compete, at least partially, for the same jobs in low-skill, labour-intensive segments of the economy. Where this substitutability is strong, an increase in the supply of child labour for instance, following a bad harvest that pushes more

households below the survival threshold tends to depress the market wage for unskilled adult labour, since employers can meet a given production requirement using a combination of child and adult workers at a lower average wage cost. This demand-side mechanism reinforces the supply-side pressure identified in Section 6: falling adult wages further tighten the household budget constraint, inducing yet more households to cross the survival threshold and supply child labour, a dynamic capable of sustaining the 'bad equilibrium' described in Section 3.2 over long periods, particularly in regions with weak labour organisation and limited government enforcement capacity.

7.2 Informality and the Demand for Cheap, Compliant Labour

India's labour market is overwhelmingly informal: the vast majority of workers, including a large share of child workers, are employed outside any formal contract, without social security coverage, and largely outside the reach of labour inspection machinery. Small workshops, home-based production units and family farms the dominant sites of child employment identified in Section 5.4 operate with thin margins and limited capital, and often compete on the basis of low unit labour costs rather than productivity or quality differentiation. In such a competitive environment, individual employers who might otherwise be willing to forgo child labour on ethical grounds can find themselves undercut by competitors willing to employ children at lower cost, reproducing at firm level the same coordination problem that operates at household level. This is one reason why voluntary corporate codes of conduct, though useful in organised export-oriented sectors with reputational exposure (for example, in parts of the carpet and garment export industry), have had only limited effect on child labour in domestically oriented, highly fragmented informal-sector production.

7.3 Public Employment Programmes and Adult Wages: The MGNREGA Channel

Because the luxury axiom predicts that raising adult household income should reduce child labour, public employment guarantee schemes that raise the effective wage floor for unskilled adult labour are of particular interest. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees up to one hundred days of unskilled wage employment per rural household per year, has been examined in several studies as a potential channel for reducing child labour, both directly, by raising household income during the agricultural lean season when child labour has traditionally risen, and indirectly, by placing upward pressure on prevailing agricultural

wage rates more broadly. While the empirical literature on MGNREGA's precise effect on child labour is more limited and mixed than the literature on its effect on adult wages and rural poverty, the programme is broadly consistent with the policy logic implied by the household survival hypothesis: interventions that smooth household income during periods of seasonal or shock-induced stress can be expected to reduce the pressure on households to deploy children as an income-smoothing device.

7.4 Migration and Child Labour

Seasonal and circular labour migration, a well-documented feature of the Indian rural economy, has an ambiguous relationship with child labour. On one hand, migration by adult household members in search of better-paid work can raise household income and reduce reliance on child labour. On the other hand, where entire households migrate together for seasonal agricultural or construction work as is common in sectors such as sugarcane cutting, brick-kiln work and cotton or cottonseed cultivation children frequently accompany parents to worksites, are informally absorbed into production, and lose access to schooling at their place of origin without necessarily gaining reliable access to schooling at the destination. Census 2011 data note that migration-linked child labour and disruption of schooling constitute a distinct and under-studied dimension of the problem, one that is difficult to capture through Census enumeration, which is tied to a fixed place of usual residence (Census of India, 2011; UNICEF Innocenti, 2024).

8. Welfare Consequences for Children

8.1 Education and Human Capital Loss

The most immediate and best-documented welfare cost of child labour is its effect on schooling. Even where working children remain formally enrolled, work commitments reduce attendance, homework time and classroom attentiveness, translating into weaker learning outcomes and a higher probability of eventual dropout. As noted in Section 5.4, PLFS 2018-19 data show that hazardous work accounted for the great majority of measured child labour in India, and hazardous work by its nature long hours, physically demanding or dangerous tasks, exposure to harmful substances is particularly difficult to combine with regular schooling (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). The resulting human capital loss is not confined to the years of childhood; because schooling in the early and middle years forms the foundation for later cognitive and vocational skill acquisition, interrupted schooling in childhood constrains earning capacity across the entire life cycle.

8.2 Health Consequences

Child labour, particularly in its hazardous forms, carries direct physical health risks: musculoskeletal strain from repetitive or heavy manual work, respiratory illness from exposure to dust, smoke or chemical fumes (documented among children working in glass, brick-kiln, and bidi-rolling occupations), and elevated risk of injury from unguarded machinery or unsafe worksites, particularly in small-scale manufacturing and construction. Long working hours also compromise sleep, nutrition and access to preventive healthcare, especially where working children lose entitlement to school-linked services such as the mid-day meal programme (now PM-POSHAN) or school health check-ups. Psychosocial costs including reduced opportunity for play, socialisation with peers, and the general developmental benefits associated with a structured childhood are harder to quantify but are consistently reported in qualitative and mixed-method studies of working children in India.

8.3 Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty

The human capital and health costs discussed above combine to generate a well-documented intergenerational poverty trap. Adults who worked as children typically enter the labour market with lower educational qualifications and, often, compromised health, both of which depress their lifetime earnings relative to what they would otherwise have achieved. Lower adult earnings, in turn, raise the probability that these adults, as parents, will themselves fall below the survival threshold identified in the luxury axiom, making it more likely that they will send their own children to work. This self-reinforcing cycle is one of the strongest economic arguments for treating child labour not merely as an unfortunate by-product of poverty but as an active contributor to the persistence of poverty across generations, and therefore as a legitimate target for public policy intervention on efficiency as well as equity grounds.

9. Policy and Legal Framework in India

9.1 Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution of India provides the foundational legal basis for child labour policy. Article 24 prohibits the employment of children below the age of fourteen years in factories, mines or any other hazardous employment. Article 21-A, inserted by the Eighty-Sixth Constitutional Amendment in 2002, makes free and compulsory education a fundamental right for all children aged six to fourteen years. Article 39(e) and (f), among the Directive Principles of State Policy, direct the State to ensure that the tender age of children is not abused and that childhood is protected against exploitation.

9.2 The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act

The principal statute governing child labour is the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, substantially amended in 2016 and renamed the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act. The amended Act prohibits the employment of children below fourteen years in any occupation or process whatsoever, and prohibits the employment of adolescents, defined as those aged fourteen to eighteen years, in a specified list of hazardous occupations and processes. The 2016 amendment introduced a controversial exception permitting children to help family enterprises after school hours and during holidays, provided the enterprise is not hazardous a provision that critics argue is difficult to monitor and risks providing a loophole for disguised child labour within family-based, home-based production, precisely the segment of the economy where child labour is most concentrated (Section 5.4).

9.3 The Right to Education Act, 2009

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, operationalises Article 21-A by mandating free and compulsory education for all children aged six to fourteen years, prescribing pupil-teacher ratios and infrastructure norms for schools, and requiring private unaided schools to reserve twenty-five per cent of entry-level seats for children from disadvantaged and economically weaker sections. By guaranteeing a schooling alternative and, in principle, removing direct cost as a barrier to enrolment, the Act complements the CLPRA's prohibition of work with a positive entitlement to schooling an important pairing given that prohibition without a viable schooling alternative risks leaving working children neither at work nor in school, arguably the worst of the available outcomes.

9.4 The National Child Labour Project

The National Child Labour Project (NCLP), administered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, is India's principal targeted rehabilitation scheme for child labour. It identifies children withdrawn or rescued from labour, particularly in hazardous occupations, and channels them through special training centres offering bridge education, vocational training, and a stipend, with the aim of mainstreaming them into the formal schooling system. The scheme is complemented by convergence with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (now subsumed under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan) and, since 2013, has been increasingly integrated with the RTE Act's schooling entitlements.

9.5 Social Protection: MGNREGA, PM-POSHAN and Cash Transfers

Beyond legislation specifically targeting child labour, a wider set of social protection instruments operates indirectly to reduce the household economic pressures identified in Section 6.1. MGNREGA, discussed in Section 7.3, raises household income and the effective agricultural wage floor. PM-POSHAN (the erstwhile Mid-Day Meal Scheme) reduces the cost of school attendance by providing a nutritious meal, thereby lowering the relative price of schooling versus work at the margin, and various state-level and central conditional and unconditional cash transfer schemes for girl children for example, incentive schemes linked to school enrolment and delayed marriage further tilt household incentives towards keeping children in school.

9.6 Gaps in Implementation and Enforcement

Despite this multi-layered legal and welfare architecture, enforcement gaps remain substantial.

Labour inspection machinery in most states is thinly staffed relative to the scale of the informal economy it is tasked with monitoring, and enforcement is particularly weak with respect to home-based and family-enterprise work, precisely the category exempted, subject to conditions, under the 2016 CLPRA amendment. School quality as distinct from mere school access, which has expanded substantially since the RTE Act also remains a constraint: where government schools are perceived by poor households to deliver weak learning outcomes, the expected return to schooling relative to work is correspondingly lower, blunting the effectiveness of compulsory-schooling provisions as a child-labour deterrent. Finally, seasonal and migrant child labour, discussed in Section 7.4, falls into significant administrative gaps between the jurisdiction of source and destination states, and between labour and education departments, making coordinated protection difficult.

Table 3: Timeline of Major Indian Legal and Policy Measures on Child Labour

Year	Measure	Key Provision
1986	Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act	Prohibited employment of children below 14 in specified hazardous occupations
2001	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan launched	Universalisation of elementary education access
2002	86th Constitutional Amendment (Article 21-A)	Free and compulsory education made a fundamental right, ages 6-14
2006	Ban on child domestic work and hospitality-sector employment	Extended prohibition to domestic and dhaba/eatery work
2009	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act	Statutory entitlement to free schooling, ages 6-14
2016	CLPRA amendment	Extended prohibition to all occupations below age 14; regulated adolescent (14-18) hazardous work; family-enterprise exception introduced
2020	National Education Policy 2020	Reaffirmed universal access and foundational literacy/numeracy goals
2023	National Curriculum Framework for School Education	Revised curricular structure supporting retention and quality

Source: Compiled by the author from Ministry of Labour and Employment and Ministry of Education records, and UNICEF Innocenti (2024).

10. Findings and Discussion

Bringing together the evidence reviewed in Sections 5 through 9, several findings stand out.

- Child labour in India has declined substantially in absolute terms over the long run, from roughly 12.6 million working children aged 5-14 in 2001 to about 10.1 million in 2011, but the pace of decline has been uneven across rural and urban India and across states, and the global reversal recorded between 2016 and 2020 is a reminder that the trend is not irreversible.
- The household survival hypothesis, formalised through the luxury axiom, receives strong support in the Indian literature: household

poverty and low or unstable adult income are the single most powerful and consistent predictors of child labour, more so than most other household or community characteristics examined.

- Nonetheless, poverty alone is an incomplete explanation. Parental, and especially maternal, education; caste and religious identity; household size and dependency ratio; and occupational and land-holding structure all exert independent, statistically identifiable effects, indicating that child labour is a multi-causal phenomenon requiring correspondingly multi-pronged policy responses.
- Labour market structure matters as much as household characteristics. The overwhelming

concentration of child labour in agriculture and in the informal, unorganised segments of industry and services reflects a genuine demand-side pull, rooted in the cost advantages of employing cheap, flexible, non-unionised child labour in low-margin, competitive production.

- Where child labour in India persists, it is disproportionately of the hazardous variety — PLFS 2018-19 data attributing between 93 and 97 per cent of measured child labour to hazardous work — implying that the residual problem, though smaller in absolute numbers than two decades ago, is concentrated among the most severe and damaging forms of child work.
- India's legal and policy architecture is comprehensive on paper, combining prohibition (CLPRA), a positive schooling entitlement (RTE Act), targeted rehabilitation (NCLP) and indirect income-support instruments (MGNREGA, PM-POSHAN), but enforcement gaps particularly with respect to home-based, family-enterprise and migrant child labour limit its practical effectiveness.
- The welfare costs of child labour extend well beyond the years of childhood, operating through reduced human capital accumulation and compromised health to depress adult earning capacity and to raise the probability that the affected individual's own children will, in turn, be sent to work — an intergenerational transmission mechanism that gives child labour policy a long-run, dynamic efficiency rationale in addition to its immediate equity rationale.

11. Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the analysis presented above, the following policy directions are suggested. These are offered as a synthesis of directions already implicit in the literature reviewed, rather than as novel prescriptions.

11.1 Strengthen Household Income Security

Because household poverty is the single strongest predictor of child labour, measures that stabilise and raise household income — full and timely implementation of MGNREGA entitlements, expansion of maternity and child-linked cash transfer schemes, and strengthening of agricultural price and income support during the lean season — should be treated as core child-labour policy instruments, not merely as general anti-poverty measures pursued for unrelated reasons.

11.2 Close the Family-Enterprise Enforcement Gap

The 2016 CLPRA amendment's exception for family enterprises, while intended to accommodate

legitimate cultural practice, coincides with the segment of the economy — home-based production and family agriculture where child labour is most concentrated and hardest to monitor. A narrower, more clearly and conservatively defined exception, together with stronger monitoring through local self-government (panchayat and municipal) bodies, would help close this gap without criminalising ordinary household chores.

11.3 Invest in School Quality, Not Only School Access

Given that school access has expanded substantially since the RTE Act while learning outcomes in many government schools remain weak, continued investment in teacher training, learning outcomes assessment and remedial instruction — in line with the goals articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2023 is necessary to raise the perceived and actual returns to schooling relative to work, thereby reinforcing rather than merely mandating school attendance.

11.4 Target Migrant and Seasonal Child Labour Specifically

Because seasonal and circular migration creates administrative gaps between source and destination states and between labour and education departments, dedicated inter-state coordination mechanisms including portable school enrolment records and seasonal hostel or childcare facilities at major worksites such as brick kilns and construction sites are needed to prevent migration from becoming a channel through which children are drawn into work and lose access to schooling.

11.5 Strengthen Labour Inspection in Informal and Hazardous Sectors

Given that hazardous work constitutes the great majority of remaining measured child labour in India, enforcement resources should be prioritised towards the specific hazardous occupations and processes identified under the CLPRA schedule, with periodic, unannounced inspection of high-risk clusters such as brick kilns, glass and bangle units, and cottonseed and other high-labour-intensity agricultural operations.

11.6 Improve Data Systems

Because the most recent full Census is now over a decade old and PLFS, while more frequent, is not designed primarily to measure child labour, a dedicated, regularly repeated national child labour survey building on the approach of the NSSO's earlier dedicated child labour rounds would substantially improve the evidence base available for monitoring progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 and for evaluating the effectiveness of specific policy instruments.

12. Conclusion

This paper has examined the economics of child labour in India through the complementary lenses of household survival, labour market structure and child welfare. The evidence reviewed supports a central conclusion: child labour in India is best understood not as a matter of parental indifference to children's welfare but as a rational household response to poverty and to the absence of adequate credit, insurance and social protection mechanisms, reinforced by a labour market structure dominated by agriculture and the informal sector that continues to find cheap, flexible child labour economically attractive. The luxury axiom associated with Basu and Van (1998) receives consistent empirical support in the Indian literature, while the wealth paradox and demand-side considerations caution against a purely income-centred explanation.

The substantial decline in the absolute number of Indian child workers between 2001 and 2011, and the parallel expansion of schooling access following the Right to Education Act, 2009, represent genuine and measurable progress. Yet the global reversal of 2016-2020, and the continuing concentration of India's residual child labour in its most hazardous forms, indicate that this progress remains incomplete and reversible. A durable resolution of the problem is unlikely to come from prohibition alone; it requires the simultaneous strengthening of household income security, more effective regulation of the informal labour market that continues to demand child labour, and continued investment in the quality, not merely the availability, of schooling. Only through this combined approach can India realistically expect further progress towards the elimination of child labour envisaged, but not yet achieved, under Sustainable Development Goal 8.7.

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