

Child Servitude in India:

Shedding Light on a Dark Subject

“The bonded laborer system is really the modern form of slavery, in which one cannot choose his or her location or type of employment.” – Kailash Satyarthi, head of South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS)

Slavery has been a problem throughout mankind’s history. Modern society often sees slavery as a disgraceful practice. However, slavery, in a more secretive form, still exists, and the products of this form of slavery are often right before our eyes. Many Americans purchase items from The Gap, Macy’s, Home Depot, Lowes and Target without realizing that these items may have been made by children under the age of fourteen.¹ I am referring to what is known as child servitude, child labor, or bonded child labor. Though children under fourteen work in many areas of the world, child labor is an especially large problem in the country of India, where the Indian government itself estimates that 12.6 million children abandon their education to earn less than a dollar a day.² If I could travel anywhere and report anything as a foreign correspondent, I would travel to India to share these children’s stories and lift the black veil of secrecy.

A specific example of this horrendous phenomenon is a 14 year old boy named Titakashwar Sada. Titakashwar is from the village of Patori, in the State of Bihar, the poorest state in India. When Titakashwar was 9 years old, a middle man came to his village and took Titakashwar away, making false promises of education and vocational training for Titakashwar. Instead, the middle man sold Titakashwar to a loom master named Ramraj

Bind, who forced Titakashwar to work at a carpet factory for no pay. Titakashwar was beaten regularly, made to work up to 15 hours a day, and fed only undercooked rice and dried beans. He worked under these conditions for 5 years.³

Unlike the Indian government, international organizations estimate that 15 – 60 million children can be found working in India.⁴ Many articles on the subject of child labor in India report that the Indian government does not have a unified approach to enforce the Child Labor Prohibition & Regulation Act that it passed in 1986.⁵ The problem is complicated by lack of industry inspectors to make sure that there is no child labor in any specific industry.⁶ For example, there are only 6 inspectors for the entire carpet industry of India, which utilizes an estimated 1,050,000 child laborers.⁷

Another reason why child servitude in India is such a big problem is because of the employers and businesses themselves. This is mainly because the employers make false promises of education or money to parents in return for use of their child for industrial or domestic purposes.⁸ In some cases, the employer pays a cash advance or loan to the parents before the child starts their work.⁹ Poor Indian families accept the loans in order to buy food and shelter. If the child laborer dies before the full amount has been paid off, other children of the family inherit the responsibility to continue the labor.¹⁰ Employers also develop ways to keep children working for free after the full payment of labor is complete.¹¹ Employers increase the number of child laborers by luring the children away from the villages to the factory or place where the labor happens.¹² Often these children are very young. For example, 55% of the workers in the match industry are under 14 years old, and some are just 5 years old.¹³

Many health issues face the victims of child labor. One problem caused by child labor is contagious and deadly diseases like tuberculosis.¹⁴ Studies of children in the glass industry have shown genetic damage caused by long exposure to high temperatures on the factory floor.¹⁵ In addition to disease and illness, child laborers face work-related injuries. While in the factories, the children wear no protective gear. Their hands are often cut, burned, and bruised and no first aid is available.¹⁶ Children are beaten if they cry for their mother, complain of hunger or make a mistake.¹⁷ Discipline includes being hung upside down from trees and poked with cigarettes.¹⁸ On April 24, 1994, a 12 year old boy was caught trying to escape from a carpet factory. He was beaten and his body was buried in three different locations.¹⁹

There are also bigger social consequences of child labor. One of the largest impacts of child labor is educational. If children are working up to 16 hours a day, they cannot be properly educated, if they are educated at all.²⁰ International bodies such as The World Bank and the European Union give large sums of money toward “education for all”, or compulsory primary education. However, child laborers who are working up to 16 hours a day cannot take advantage of these educational programs.²¹ Lack of education among child laborers leads to low political and socio-economic status. As adults, these workers will remain in the lower caste with few job opportunities and little ability to change their lives for the better. These same people then rely on buying loans from the middle men, resulting in another generation of child laborers.

However, we as world citizens can change that. If more foreign correspondents reported on child labor in India, it would raise international awareness. Presumably, more charities would work toward stopping this phenomenon and more people would refuse to

buy products produced with child labor. Also, new awareness and media attention could pressure the Indian government into better enforcing their laws. If businesses were forced to stop using child labor, more Indian children could be in school. If education became a true alternative to the factories, then the next generation of children would be less likely to be child laborers. So, if I were a foreign correspondent, I would travel to India to help the lives of many young children by shedding light on the secret world of child servitude.

¹ “Child Labor: Why We Can’t Kick Our Addiction”, Forbes Magazine Cover Story, February 25, 2008.

² “Child Labor and India”, Embassy of India Policy Statements, www.indianembassy.org. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm.

³ “Profile of Titakashwar Sada, a 14 year former slave”, www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com

⁴ “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005. “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007. “The Tragedy of Child Labor: An Interview with Kailash Satyarthi”, The Multinational Monitor, 1994.

⁵ “Child Labor: Why We Can’t Kick Our Addiction”, Forbes Magazine, February 25, 2008. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm.

⁶ “Child Labor: Why We Can’t Kick Our Addiction”, Forbes Magazine Cover Story, February 25, 2008

⁷ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm

⁸ “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007.

⁹ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm.

¹⁰ “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005. “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007.

¹¹ “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007.

¹² United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm.

¹³ “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005

¹⁴ “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005. “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007.

¹⁵ “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005.

¹⁶ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/sweat/india/htm. “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005.

¹⁷ “Child Slavery: India’s self-perpetuating dilemma”, World in Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Summer, 2007. “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005. “The Tragedy of Child Labor: An Interview with Kailash Satyarthi”, The Multinational Monitor, 1994.

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²⁰ “Child Labor: Why We Can’t Kick Our Addiction”, Forbes Magazine Cover Story, February 25, 2008. “The Hidden Factory: Child Labour in India”, The South Asian, March 7, 2005.

²¹ “The Tragedy of Child Labor: An Interview with Kailash Satyarthi”, The Multinational Monitor, 1994. “Child Labor: Why We Can’t Kick Our Addiction”, Forbes Magazine Cover Story, February 25, 2008.