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Is There a Culture of Child Labour? The Decision-Making Process of Working Among Girl Beedi Rollers in Jhalda Region of Purulia, West Bengal

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4.1 Introduction

Abedun, a 14-year-old girl from Jhalda city of Purulia District, West Bengal, told me that beedi rolling was a way of life for her (Fig. 4.1). She cannot remember clearly when she started, but now she can roll up to 800 beedis a day. From morning to late evening, she sits in one position, in the courtyard of her house to roll beedis, and thinks that her labour is indispensable for her family's survival. Abedun and the other children I met during my fieldwork accepted this reality of working from a young age and consider it natural to economically add value to the family income. But why do children accept these hazardous and exploitative working conditions? Are they consulted in making the decision of working? Is there a culture of child labour which rationalises and justifies their work?

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A. Posso (ed.), *Child Labor in the Developing World*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3106-4_4

Fig. 4.1 Abedun rolling beedis, Jhalda. ©Dakhinamitra

The child participants in my fieldwork were not born as labourers, but they were born into families where multidimensional poverty dictated life. These families belonged to the lowest caste and class hierarchies of the Indian society. Their socio-economic conditions and socialisation encouraged them to accept that they had to work as a paid/unpaid labourer to support their family income. Pierre Bourdieu (Mitra 2014) calls such an acceptance of one's conditions as the habitus which is a cognitive set of principles guiding action in a way that it appears to be instinctive and natural. Bourdieu argues that a habitus is not just there; it is produced by discourses, societal structures and the material as well as immaterial possessions that an actor owns in the world (p. 15). These children therefore have a habitus that encourages their naturalisation into the role of a child labourer (Mitra 2014).

This chapter utilises data collected from participant observation and conversations with children working on the streets of Kolkata, domestic and daily-wage earners in Purulia and an agroforest industry, beedi[1]-making, in Jhalda—all located in the state of West Bengal, India. It aims to shed a light on their perspectives of life and work which are embedded in their family discourses and surrounding social structures. In the next section, I will discuss the background for the chapter and research methodology. This will be followed by a description of the beedi industry and

[1] Beedi or Bidi/Biri is a thin, South Asian cigarette filled with tobacco flakes and wrapped in a 'tendu' leaf tied with a string.

the stories of child labourers in their own words. I will analyse and deconstruct these stories using the narratives that surround them. This includes documenting the structural barriers in their physical environment, perceptions of their parents and the community as well as sociocultural norms of the Indian society. Finally, I will conclude with a short discussion on potential solutions and recommendations.

4.2 Child Labour: Background

Child labour is a global phenomenon. A 2017 ILO report reveals that there are about 152 million child labourers around the world. Of these 73 million are engaged in hazardous work. About 58% of the 152 million are boys and 42% are girls. Forty-eight per cent of the children fall in the age group of 5–11 years old, while 70.9% are engaged in agriculture or agro-based industries (ILO 2017). The report further states that even though there has been a decline in the global numbers of child labour since 2000, the progress has been slow, and the rate of decline in the recent years has decreased.

Child labour is a complex issue caused by the interplay of socio-economic factors such as poverty, inequality, illiteracy, political instability and natural disasters which make families vulnerable. In the absence of social security nets or savings, global challenges such as climate change, thriving informal economies, migration, rapid urbanisation and digitalisation further contribute to the vulnerability of families, and children get pushed into the labour market. Child labour predominantly occurs in the unorganised and unregulated sectors such as agriculture, fishing, weaving, construction work, sweatshops, mines and other labour-intensive industries. The implications of child labour from long hours of work and mild to extreme hazardous conditions include malnutrition, spinal deformities, poor eye health and respiratory diseases. Additionally social and economic challenges and low literacy levels impede their ability to prepare for a better future (MOSPI 2018; UNICEF 2016; ILO 2015).

In India, the Census of 2011 reported that from the total child population of about 26 million, more than 10 million children in the age group of 5–14 years were working (main and marginal). About

75% of these working children belonged to the age group of 10–14 years, while 25% were from the age group of 5–9 years (MOSPI 2018, p. 52). Although ILO (2017) reports that child labour numbers in India are declining, there is speculation that the phenomenon has simply become invisible. UNICEF (2016b) reports that growing awareness amongst buyers, changes in legislation and their enforcement and international pressure have moved children from formal factory settings to homes. Therefore, the decline can be attributed to the undocumented child labourers who continue to work informally or within the confines of the home. They do domestic work at their own homes (to free their parents to engage in paid labour); work as domestic helps for others; engage in agriculture labour such as cotton growing and tea-picking; and work in informal cottage industries/ workshops for lock making, embroidery, stone quarrying, brick making, beedi rolling and rag picking, amongst others. Traditional-gendered roles dictate the work of girls who perform domestic and home-based cottage industry activities. Whereas boys primarily work as wage labourers at places such as unregulated food joints, motor repair workshops, small-scale factories/workshops and others.

4.3 Setting the Scene: Filling Gaps in Knowledge

The current chapter is a continuation of a body of research work (which includes papers, a master's thesis and a doctoral thesis) that I have undertaken since 2003 to highlight the social, cultural and cognitive aspects that influence the decision of working for children. Through a comprehensive review of reports and journal articles on child labour covering different disciplines (historical, theoretical, development and health economics, public policy, sociology and anthropology) and issues such as causes, implications, cost-benefit analysis and policies, I identified a number of gaps in the literature (Mitra 2014, pp. 30–36). Firstly, the voices of child labourers were missing. Childhood studies argue that understanding what a child

thinks about his or her situation is crucial for any decision that is taken for them (Schildkrout 2002; Nieuwenhueys 1996).

However, my fieldwork revealed that the decision of working depended on a family's social, economic and cultural poverty and not on the child's will (Mitra 2014, p. 188). In India, where caste and traditional norms guide day-to-day life and poverty is rampant, children belonging to the most socially, structurally, culturally and economically disadvantaged groups considered that their work was the only viable option for the survival of their family (Mitra 2014, pp. 212–213). By documenting the perspectives of the children who are at the centre of this issue, and exploring the narratives that influence a family's decision to send a child for work, I aim to add to the existing body of knowledge on child labour. Furthermore, exploring the discourses that facilitate the child's acceptance of this decision, further contribute to a multidimensional understanding of the child labour issue. This is in line with what the ILO report states that one of the ways by which we can achieve the elimination of worst forms of child labour by 2025 is by "understanding and addressing family reliance on children's labour" (ILO 2017, p. 13).

The second aim of this chapter is to fill an evidence gap for mapping the extent of child labour in the unregulated beedi industry and capture the lived experiences and voices of the young beedi rollers. Beedi-making in India is a prime example of a home-based activity with a high incidence of undocumented child labour (Dube and Mohandoss 2013). Beedi, known as a poor man's cigarette as it is sold cheap, constitutes almost 48% of tobacco consumption in the country. A change in factory regulations during the 1960s led to a decline in factory-based beedi production, and the activity moved to the house of the workers (Dube and Mohandoss 2013). As a result, this traditional agroforest industry became strongly embedded in the informal sector of the country. The industry employs an estimated 6–8.5 million workers (guess estimates have been cited in various studies which include Singh et al. (2017), TII (2017), Mishra (2014) and Srinivasan and Ilango (2012)), and majority of them are below the poverty line (Ghatak 2017). These studies also estimate that about 90% to 95% workers are women and children who have no protections from unions or country's labour regulations. Current data is

missing, but a health study in 2009 estimated that more than 1.7 million children were working as beedi rollers.[2]

4.4 Methodology

When I began my research on the issue of child labour, I found another gap in methodology. Many emerging scholars criticised the majority of child labour studies as they lacked the use of participatory techniques to document the perspectives of children (Liebel 2004, p. 34). However, in the last 15 years, a number of studies have started to use a bottom-up approach that provides a space for children to voice their opinions and in turn, understand them. In order to add to this emerging body of literature, I developed a participatory fieldwork plan in the state of West Bengal (Kolkata and Purulia districts). I chose these locations on the basis of expert interviews held with government officials and staff of non-governmental organisations in Delhi. I tapped into existing familial networks in these locations that helped me to connect with local officials, school administration and beedi-worker union members. From 2009 to 2011, I conducted fieldwork in two blocks of 4.5 months. In each phase, I spent 1 month in Kolkata and 3.5 months in the Purulia district. In this first phase, I worked as teacher at a National Child Labour Project[3] (NCLP) school in an indigenous community in Purulia town, for 3.5 months. In the second phase, I did another 1-month visit to Kolkata and spent the rest of the time at the school as well as in Jhalda city and Singhbajar village, where the primary economic activities are beedi-making and silk weaving, respectively.

In Jhalda, I conducted key informant interviews with three union members and observed the daily work life of six girls between the age of 11 and 17, three women and their families. I chose the snowball sampling method to find respondents wherein one respondent connected me to another. After informing the respondents about the intention of the study

[2] http://www.zeenews.com/news578951.html.

[3] National Child Labour Project is an initiative by the Government of India which provides a sequential approach to rehabilitate working children into mainstream schools. Former (and current) child workers are supported to attend non-formal bridge schools where a mix of age and ability appropriate skills is taught. Literacy, numeracy and vocational training is provided along with a mid-day meal, a monthly stipend of about US$2.5 and health care.

and seeking parental consent, I maintained a field diary[4] of their daily activities, conversations, dwellings and physical surroundings. Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three primary school teachers working in and around Purulia town, the Additional District Magistrate and Director of the Department of Labour in Purulia. Apart from this sample, I engaged in informal conversations with several domestic helpers and children working at various locations such as railway platforms, markets, roadside food stalls, coal warehouses, stone quarries, grocery stores and brick kilns. Similarly, I conducted semi-structured conversations with several family and community members and employers, teachers and social workers to understand the social and cultural thought processes. All these conversations were recorded daily into the field diary. Each conversation was manually coded, and themes and discourses were identified and analysed.

4.5 Beedi Rolling in Jhalda

There are 400 villages in the Jhalda city (Block 1) where beedi rolling is the primary economic activity. Dried tendu leaves are cut to fit a designated mould, filled with dried tobacco flakes, rolled and tied with a thread to form a thin cigarette called beedi. The beedi-making companies in Jhalda bring the tendu leaves from Daltonganj (Bihar) and Keonjhar (Orissa) and supply it to the contractors. These contractors use subcontractors to find labour and then provide the leaves to the beedi rollers.

About 430 to 600 grams of leaves are used to make 1000 beedis in a span of 12 hours. The rollers are paid about Rs. 68 (less than US$1) for every 1000 beedis, a rate which has risen from Rs. 46 (less than US$1) which was paid in 2010. An amount of Rs. 4.90 (about US$ 0.06 cents) is deducted from Rs. 68 as a contribution to the provident fund/pension

[4] While travelling through the rural fieldwork locations in West Bengal, I came to understand that my urban clothing and use of phones, camera and recording devices served as distractions and put people on guard. Therefore, I changed my attire and stopped using devices during my interactions with children and their families. Respectful conversations, regular visits and support of a known and trusted village elder, enabled me to build a rapport and collect valuable notes from the fieldwork.

fund. The company also contributes the same amount (per 1000 beedis) to the pension fund for each roller. At the time of this fieldwork, due to the presence of a workers' union in Jhalda, the pension fund rate was steady and considered highest in Jhalda. There were reports that in other cities, companies are known to pay less.

The remaining amount of Rs. 63.1 (less than US$1) was not directly paid to the roller. The contractor found several reasons to deduct varying amounts from the total. One of the ways was by manipulating the scales while weighing the leaves or the tobacco. A lower quantity of leaves or tobacco yielded a lesser number of beedis, thus providing the contractor a reason to deduct from the pay. Discarding the poor-quality beedis further reduced the final pay. After a few strategic reductions, the contractor still did not pay the worker. In majority of the cases, the contractors owned a grocery shop where they sold goods at prices higher than the market price. The workers are provided vouchers which could only be redeemed at the contractor's store. Once the vouchers had been redeemed, the remaining amount (if any) was handed over to the beedi roller/family. Therefore, after 12 hours of rolling 1000 beedis approximately, the worker received a meagre amount of about Rs. 20–30 (less than US$0.50 cents).

The exploitative conditions, labour-intensive work and low income forced families to engage every able member to make beedis. Traditionally, it was a family activity where all members, including parents, grandparents, extended family and children, got involved. Being a trans-generational occupation, children learn from their parents and pass the skill to the next generation. But men and adolescent boys do not engage in this activity anymore. Young boys go to school and then transition to working as construction workers, rickshaw pullers, day labourers or factory employees like their older siblings and fathers/uncles. Many men and boys consider beedi rolling as the last option for them.

As a result the onus of rolling beedis to supplement the family income sat with the young girls and women. Girls as young as 9 years followed the footsteps of their older sisters and mothers/aunts. Since the work can be done within the boundaries of the household, family elders considered it as the best option to keep their female family members safe. Women

and girls then do not need to be out after dark nor travel long distances for work, both of which can put them at risk of being kidnapped or sexually assaulted. Despite being the primary beedi rollers, women and girls continue to not receive the payment. The wages are collected by the male patriarch of the family, thus removing the women and girls' right to have ownership of the income.

Some of the adult males that I met attended school till grade 3 or 4, but majority of the adult females in these communities had never attended school. Similarly, many young girls had never been to a school, while others had left after primary school. However there were some girls who combined schooling with beedi rolling in order to have literacy and numeracy skills while supporting the family income.

4.6 The Beedi Rollers

The child labourers and their families in the study sample were from the most economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged groups in the country. Some belonged to indigenous communities, while others were at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy. Majority of the family members had never attended a school and those who had, did not study beyond primary level. Trans-generational child labour was a dominant feature observed throughout the study sample (Mitra 2014, p. 217).

In the following sections, I will relate the stories of the children and a description of the physical spaces into broad themes. The publicly available systems or discourses which have been produced earlier in the family or the society will contribute to understanding and deconstructing the children's perspectives about their work. Phillips and Hardy state that discourses legitimise social reality and can be seen as a social construction which is self-constructing as well (2002). They occur at the cognitive level, and at the level of talks and texts (Potter 1996). The children, their families, the peers and the society produce these discourses which influence the decision of working and normalise/justify a child's labour. The idea of a culture of child labour will be explored further in the following sections.

4.7 The Stories of Child Labourers

4.7.1 Intergenerational Child Labour: Discussions with Devaki, Sushila and Charu Bala (Late 30s)

“Our parents rolled beedis, and we are doing the same. For people like us, this is the way of life. When we were growing up, we were rolling beedis to increase our parents’ income, and now we are doing the same to support our husbands and children. The boys here do not want to roll beedis; even we do not want them to toil like us. We want them to study and leave the village for a better future. Our girls will follow a similar path like us. We were married off when we were 14 or 15 years of age. We bore children when we were 15 or 16. We never went to school, but would like our daughters to study for some years. However, they will eventually quit school as they have to do household chores or beedi rolling. The older daughters must be married off too. In our communities, if a daughter has not been married by the age of 15 or 16, she is considered to have surpassed the marriageable age. Then it is hard to find a groom. Even if we find one, they ask for a huge dowry to compensate for the increased age of the girl. Hence, we prefer that the girls are married off younger. But a girl’s beedi-rolling abilities are in great demand in some families. The higher the number of beedis a girl can roll, the lower the amount of dowry her parents need to pay. Learning beedi rolling then becomes an asset for us. So we teach our daughters to excel in rolling beedis" (Fig. 4.2).

4.7.2 Zoya (13 Years)

“I left school last year because it had no use for me. There was just one teacher who taught in the two schools of Belladi and Deondra, which are close to us. He could not do much as the school building was crumbling and he neither had assistance nor books to teach us. As a result he was absent for days and weeks and sometimes months. While I was studying there, the school remained closed for 6–7 months. Even the mid-day meals which are provided by all the government schools, was missing. My father decided that walking for a kilometre to a school where there was

Fig. 4.2 Devaki, Sushila and Charu Bala rolling beedis, Jhalda. ©Dakhinamitra

no learning or meals, was a waste of time. Since then, I have been rolling beedis all day. When I used to study, I made about 300–400 beedis, but now with all the time in the hand, I can roll up to 800 a day. At times, I help in household chores as I do not have any other younger sisters. I have one older sister who is married now and have four brothers. Three of my brothers are younger than me, and they go to school as they do not have to roll beedis. When they turn 13 or 14 years of age, they would seek work in the factories or leave the village like the other boys. Our eldest brother has gone to become an apprentice to our uncle who is a tailor in Jamshedpur. Once he learns tailoring, he will send us money to ease our financial burdens. My mother also rolls beedis when she gets some time off from household chores. My father is a rickshaw puller and took a loan of Rs. 80000 (about US$ 1125) for my elder sister's wedding. He must repay this amount soon or else the interest rates would keep getting higher. So I have to help my father repay this loan. Sometimes I wish that

Fig. 4.3 Zoya and her friends rolling Beedi, Jhalda. ©Dakhinamitra

I could also work in the plastic bag factory, which is close to the village, and where all the older boys of our village work. In that way I can earn more money to help my family. But my father says that it is unsafe for a girl to go far from the village and work in a factory with male workers. Therefore from morning to evening I must roll beedis" (Fig. 4.3).

4.7.3 Pinky (12 Years)

"I have never been to a school because studying was never an option for me. All I know is that I have to roll beedis to support my family. I cannot remember when I started, but I think I have always rolled beedis. Few of my friends go to school and roll beedis as well. But they can afford to do so as their brothers live in big cities, earn good money and send back to their parents. I do not have any older brother. I only have 3 more sisters. One is older than me and the other two are younger. My father had to sell a part of his land to get my older sister married. Marrying at the right age (14–15) is hard for girls like us as our parents do not have enough savings and may have to sell their possessions/land or take a loan. I do not want that to happen. So I must work hard each day to help my parents to save. My younger sisters have to miss school as they do all household chores like cooking, cleaning and washing. That way, my mother and I can concentrate fully on beedi rolling. My father works at the factory, but he

suffers from poor health. His income is not steady. Father also deals with the beedi contractor. He says that the contractor is constantly tricking us; hence I do not know the exact amount of money that I earn. However, it does not matter as father knows the best about family finances. Just before important festivals, we travel to our relatives or they come to visit us. Extended family members help each other to roll a large number of beedis. This boosts our income and we are able to celebrate the festivals as per our liking. I feel for people like us, this is the only option. Look around, most of my other friends are doing the same work. So I do not mind it either. In fact I feel happy that I am able to help my parents. But I worry about the future of my family once I am married off. My younger sisters do not know much about beedi rolling. I hope my father gets a proper medical treatment for his illness and goes regularly to work. But he says he does not have enough money for medicines. I do not know what the future holds for us. It is uncertain."

The stories of children provide a deep insight into the way they think about the notions of gender, caste/class divisions, rights of children and education. But before we deconstruct the stories, there is a need to understand the characteristics of the physical spaces occupied by the respondents. This will reveal discourses of distinction wherein the respondents differentiate their lives from the rest of the society and the structural barriers.

4.8 Living Conditions

Pierre Bourdieu states that human beings occupy a position in social and physical space. They are "topos" which means they exist in a site where action is taking place. The position they occupy in the social space is often synchronised with the physical space, and there are distinctions between smart areas and working areas in a geographical location. With location, things such as temporary or permanent and extent and size of space occupied by a person further determine social positions of human beings (Bourdieu 2000 cited in Mitra 2014, p. 146). The child labourers and their families as well as these communities belonged to the lowest strata of the society and occupied the lowest position in the physical hierarchy as well.

Fig. 4.4 Stagnant water, garbage and children washing dishes, Bauri Para, Purulia. ©Dakhinamitra

The fieldwork locations were characterised by narrow lanes with open drains on both sides. Open areas were treated as garbage dump sites which were a breeding ground for insects and diseases. A small rain-fed and stagnant waterbody was usually around the locality which was used for washing clothes and cleaning utensils (Fig. 4.4). There were no toilets or bathrooms inside the houses; therefore open defecation and bathing around wells, hand pumps and other waterbodies in the area were common. In each locality there were one or two public water taps which supplied clean water twice a day, and people queued up to fill their drinking water. Electricity supply was minimal with most houses relying on one or two bulbs. Having a refrigerator or a television was uncommon in these localities. If any family had domestic animals such as cows, goats, pigs and chicken, they were allowed to freely roam in the locality, which contributed to the unhygienic conditions (due to animal excreta) and stench in the lanes.

The houses were just enough to accommodate six to seven family members sleeping side by side, together. In one corner of the house, there would be clay stove next to a small window, serving as the kitchen. The small houses were stacked next to one another. The houses were so close to each other that the notion of privacy did not exist. In some cases, the way to one house was through another house. It was common for three to four families to share one courtyard which was a place for socialising, discussions and doing small activities like feeding the child or sorting out vegetables/food grains or even lighting the clay stove. Neighbours would help each other carry out small tasks, and the proximity led to the formation of a close-knit unit which acted as a social control unit as well. The unsaid norm was that all material possessions were shared with immediate neighbours. For example, if there was one television in the locality, all neighbours would get together to watch it. If someone was entertaining guests, then things such as utensils, chairs and other household items were borrowed from neighbours (Fig. 4.5).

Fig. 4.5 Houses stacked one after the other, Bauri Para, Purulia. ©Dakhinamitra

Fig. 4.6 Open drains, livestock and garbage along the lanes, Bauri Para, Purulia. ©Dakhinamitra

The physical surroundings faced structural neglect from government departments and policymakers. The city municipal cleaners and garbage collectors did not service or clean these neighbourhoods. Community members contributed and hired a cleaner two or three times a year to clean the garbage and the drains. The murky waterbodies and the open garbage dumps which included human waste as well as dirt from filthy drains, were an incubator of deadly insects/germs causing malaria, dengue and typhoid. But the people residing here have accepted this space and have lived there for at least two generations (Fig. 4.6).

Similarly, the school buildings in these areas faced structural neglect and lacked infrastructure to support education. In one of the schools, there were two classrooms, which were mosquito infested, were dark and had a limited supply of electricity. Each classroom had children sitting from two grades with one teacher attending to about 15 to 20 children.

Fig. 4.7 NCLP classroom in Bauri Para, Purulia. ©Dakhinamitra

This school served the mid-day meals, but it did not match the stipulated menu that was prescribed by the government scheme. There was one toilet, but only the teachers used it, while the children had to go out in the open field or back alleys if they needed. These localities also did not receive many "outsiders" except for census officials, occasional visits from teachers and people looking for cheap labour (Fig. 4.7).

The localities and school buildings in more affluent areas of Purulia town and Jhalda city were completely opposite to the above-mentioned spaces. They were well serviced by city cleaners and had access to electricity, water and sanitation. The school buildings had quality teachers, learning resources and good infrastructure to support children.

In terms of diet, these families consumed rice and potatoes on most days and could not afford more nutritious food items such as fruits, milk, meat and fish. If the parents or children worked as domestic help, they would be happy to eat leftovers from their employers. Many

children said they wore second-hand clothes and only had one or two fancy set of clothes. In addition to this, I observed that a number of children did not wear slippers or shoes which was often a safety hazard and led to accidents. They complained about the lack of spare time to play as they had to spend most of the time in doing household chores or working. The children understood that their localities, habits and resources were in stark contrast to those of the more affluent parts of the city. These differences were internalised by the children and shaped their identity. They often mentioned that their childhood was different from the lives of "lucky" children from higher castes and classes of the society.

4.9 Deconstructing the Stories

A discourse can be defined as…

> …a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Thus the term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representation and the way that knowledge is institutionalised, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play. ((du Gay 1996: 43) cited in Ainsworth 2001, p. 3)

There are a number of recurring themes that emerge from the talks of the older women and the young girls which are part of the larger discourses in India. Firstly, there is a clear acceptance of gender-based divisions which has roots in the patriarchal social norms. Secondly, there is an understanding about the low social and economic status which can be traced down to caste and class divisions in the country. Thirdly, despite being highly resilient, the children's sense of agency or their ability to make a choice is non-existent. And lastly, the absence of the discourse that education is useful and can be beneficial for the future.

4.9.1 Gender

In the unorganised rural sector of India, a number of studies have identified that women are engaged usually as the unpaid family worker or casual/wage labourer (Singh et al. 2017; Srinivasan and Ilango 2012; Dasgupta and Sudarshan 2011; FAO, IFAD, and ILO 2010). The labour of the girl child is said to be completely invisible (Mishra 2014). As the economic power in the household was with the men, a woman's/girl's entity was always identified in association with the man in the house. Even if they earned, the money was collected by the main male member in the house which is either the father or the husband or an older brother (Desai 1994). Through the conversations of the older women, it was evident that their identity was in relation to the support they provided to the men and children in their family.

Additionally, India's gender inequality is reflected in literacy levels. Girls have to do household chores if the mother has to work or girls schooling can be stopped if there are no economic returns (Sundaram and Vanneman 2008). In the discussions with the older women, they accept the fact that boys need to study and look towards their future, whereas the education of girls is optional as their ultimate goal is marriage. Zoya's younger brothers were allowed to go to the same school which was deemed unfit for her by her father. Furthermore, Zoya's brothers did not stay at home to do housework; and she had to help her mother instead. However Pinky's younger sisters had to skip school to do household work.

The idea of having a son who will ease financial burdens was strongly observed across the families. A number of families that I met had four or more children. The mother of Abedun said that she had one boy and three girls. As a result, her husband decided that they needed another child, in the hope for a son who would share the financial burden with him; and she conceived again. She felt lucky that she had another son at that time; otherwise she would have had to probably conceive again for a son. This and a number of other conversations confirmed the research (Kosgi et al. 2011; Paul et al. 2017) that majority of the women in these families lacked control over their bodies and had little or no say in reproductive decisions.

4.9.2 Caste and Class

All the respondents, including the union members and the government officials talked about the low socio-economic status of the workers and their communities. Burra explains poverty as "the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development—to lead a long, healthy, creative life to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect of others" (Burra 2001, p. 481). Unregulated wages and exploitation by employers kept the incomes low. Combined with low social status, poor literacy rates, illnesses and limited access to health, water, sanitation and electricity, these families faced multidimensional poverty.[5]

This was exacerbated by intergenerational child labour which meant that most parents started working when they were children. Studies confirm that there is a significant relationship between a parent's child labour incidence and years of schooling, and those of their children, thus raising the probability of intergernational child labour (Emerson and Souza 2002, p. 20). Illnesses and untimely death of children or adults were common. Yet, money earned was saved for running the household or repaying debts or for the dowry during the wedding of a daughter and not for treating illnesses. Thus the cycle of poverty continued and children as well as their parents accepted the fate that the poor have to suffer.

Every strategy these families took revolved around survival. The phrase that "time is money" was frequently brought up in conversations and focus-group discussions, and children felt it was their duty to help the family economically. Reena, a 13-year-old girl, said that if she does not work, she will be a burden for her family of 7 who have very limited resources. She had to either do housework or roll beedis and going to school was never an option.

This resonates with the idea of culture of poverty, which Oscar Lewis (1959) explains is a set of practices typical to the poor that guides their daily actions. He asserts that groups of people, who share ideas and follow similar practices to deal with the problems of poverty, have a way of life catering typically to the poor. Similarly, two other ethnographic studies by Paul E. Willis (1977) and William F. Whyte (1943) argue that

[5] http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/measuring-multidimensional-poverty-leaving-no-one-behind.

children of working classes differentiated themselves from the other classes and the school system and would tend to take up working-class jobs (cited in Mitra 2014, p. 175). They have to overcome economic, cultural and social difficulties in order to break out of their class:

> During my fieldwork, the time for Christmas celebrations came up. I was working at the NCLP school at that time and decided to treat the students with some fruits and cake to make the day. I informed them at the beginning of the class that Santa Claus would pay them a visit by the end of the class (I had arranged for a cousin to bring the goodies for the children). The children assured me, that Santa Claus does not know about their existence and they were not lucky enough to get a visit or presents from him. Fieldnotes: 23rd Dec. 2010, Bauri Para School, Purulia

4.9.3 Children's Agency

The girls' stories demonstrate that they depend on their parents as the wages were being paid to the parents. This was true for most of the children (except some street children who I met in Kolkata and who were very independent). The beedi-rolling girls, the domestic helpers and the food stall apprentices worked long hours, but had no control over the money they earned. In most cases, they did not choose their work, but followed what their siblings and peers were doing. These children viewed the lack of control on their choice and earnings, as a norm and duty towards the family. Their parents did the same and they were following the footsteps. This view is deep-seated because children consider their parents in a position of power which prescribes them the duties of obedience (Levison 2000). Such thinking is evident in the story of Pinky who thinks she does not need to know anything about the payments for her labour as her father is the household head.

Powerlessness of the girl child is reflected in the discussions around child marriage as well. They had little or no power in making the decision about their marriage or giving birth to babies at a young age. A number of girls believed that their parents knew the best for them and would marry them off to the right person.

Children felt powerless even when they interacted with their employers. Some of them knew that they were being exploited, but did not have the courage or power to challenge the employers. Shefuna said that the contractor was bound to reject 100 to 200 beedis while counting. This affected the wage and added a financial pressure on her, especially on the days when she would only be able to roll about 600 beedis. Additionally, the entire community knew about the exploitation through the shop vouchers, but Shefuna said nobody can do anything to change it as even the union members are corrupt and involved.

4.9.4 Education

Many children expressed their wish to study and do something different. But they had no say in the decision of going to school. Majority of the parents could not read or write, but they still wanted their children to study. However, considering the inefficiency of the school system and the costs entailed to support secondary education, many children had to drop out. All the conversations reflected that in its current state, schools and education were a waste of time and money. There were no immediate returns from attending school; hence it was seen as nonprofitable. But earning, which was a short-term benefit of working, seemed more practical for the family. The intention of the National Child Labour Project and Right to Education Act (RTE)[6] is to support children to continue school and transition to higher grades. But the success of the NCLP and the RTE Act heavily depends on the school infrastructure and the teachers. Corruption, teacher absenteeism, unavailability of funds and educational resources and dilapidated school buildings forced parents to reject the use of education and embrace the work of children.

Shefuna's father said that they cannot help their children study as they have never attended a school.

> We do not have means to pay for tuition and extra coaching to compensate for the poor quality of education. It is the task of the teachers and the gov-

[6] Right to Education Act states that all children between the age of 6 and 14 years have the right to free and compulsory education in India.

ernment. But they are apathetic to our children's educational progress. If our children become educated, they would compete with the children of the teachers and that is dangerous. Then who would clean their homes, plough their fields and do all the menial tasks of the society? Our children are hence destined to work and not study. Field-notes: 18th Jan. 2011, Beedi rollers' village, Jhalda

4.10 Discussion

The stories and discourses above are an instrumental part of the children's socialisation. They construct and rationalise the social reality of working for the children. The child participants in this study belonged to the lowest section of the society which was considered different at multiple levels from the other sections. A distinction is observed in their physical spaces, living conditions and socio-economic status. The lack of basic amenities and school infrastructure management for these communities reflect structural neglect, which is also different from the other parts of the city. Most of the children in the study cohort had internalised this distinction. The discourses of distinction therefore influence the decision of working for these children and can be seen to produce a culture of child labour.

The societal discourses of caste hierarchies, cultural practices, traditional norms, gender biases and efficacy of schooling further impede children's right to exercise their choice or influence decisions. None of the children interviewed had heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. They were also not aware of legislations passed by the Indian government, such as the Child Labour Ban (2008) or Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), which could protect them from exploitation. As a result they exhibited a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability.

Work then was a moral duty and provided the children an opportunity to support their families. They felt pride in their ability to work and demonstrated high levels of resilience to hardships such as deaths, illnesses and family separation by means of marriage or migration at a young age. They were actively involved in the daily conversations of survival which happened among their peers and family members. I would argue that such discourses further contribute to the culture of child labour.

To conclude, this chapter provides a unique insight into the lived experiences of child labourers and the perspectives of their family members and the society. It demonstrates that child labour is not just an economic response to hardships. It is also about the social and cognitive level where discourses shape the decision of sending a child to work. In this way, the culture of child labour is generated, perpetuated and transferred from one generation to another. As a result, children and their families continue to remain at the lowest levels of the social, cultural and economic hierarchies in India.

4.11 Recommendations

A number of strategies are being developed around the world to eliminate child labour. It is being increasingly recognised that a multidimensional approach is needed to combat the issue of child labour. Education is seen as the means to levelling the playing field (UNICEF 2016a). By introducing practical educational initiatives which include basic literacy and numeracy courses combined with vocational trainings, the efficacy of education can be increased. Cash transfer programmes are becoming popular around the developing countries as well. For instance, there is emerging evidence that the concept of school stipend for girls which has been introduced in West Bengal (the Kanyashree Prakalpa conditional cash transfer programme) is serving as a deterrent to child marriage and enabling girls to complete their education (Nandy and Nandi 2019; Sen and Dutta 2018). Corruption-free implementation of regulations and policies and equal access to good quality school infrastructure are needed. Additionally, behaviour change mass media campaigns to break caste barriers that lend to the broad acceptance of child labour must be promoted. Finally, policies and legislations must act as a deterrent for employers who exploit vulnerable children and families. Without such a multi-pronged approach, the culture of child labour will continue to prevail and be an omnipresent intergenerational reality.

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