

# **Child Labour in the Indian Subcontinent**

## **Dimensions and Implications**

*edited by*

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# 5 Child Labour in Dryland Agriculture in India

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## *Introduction*

Child labour broadly performs two roles in dryland agriculture. First, it has an important place in the production and self-provisioning systems characterising the agriculture of the dry tropical regions. Secondly, depending on the relative demand and supply situation, child labour, through formal employment, supplements the family income. The latter is well-known but the former needs a brief introduction.

Low and variable rainfall makes agriculture a highly unstable activity in dry regions. Survival under such an agro-climatic environment calls for a high degree of diversification of activities as well as flexibility in the use of resources and operations. This, in turn, not only involves frequent changes in production and consumption patterns but also compels people to accept low pay-off activities. Moreover, these activities seldom offer regular and fuller employment. Child labour, because of its certain attributes, fits well into the structure of these activities. Hence child labour plays an important role in the peasants' (this includes labour households) adaptive strategies in the dry tropics. However, because of the very informal and routine nature of these activities, the contribution of the child's labour is seldom recorded. This paper discusses some aspects of this process. In contrast to the fore-mentioned, the child's engagement in formal activities or wage employment is quite low. In the latter part of the paper, some evidence on this aspect of child labour is discussed. We have used data from various studies conducted by ICRISAT in the dry tropical regions of India.

## ***Child Labour and Peasants' Adaptive Strategies***

### **Adaptive Strategies**

To face the inhospitable production environment in the dry tropical areas, the peasants, through their experience over generations, have evolved various adaptive strategies. These strategies help them to make maximum use of good rain years and minimise losses during poor rain years. These strategies extend to both production and consumption activities. They are reflected through various features of traditional farming systems in dry regions. Diversified farming systems, flexible pattern of resource use, acceptance of low pay-off activities, a variety of salvage operations, emphasis on farm storage and recycling, and heavy dependence on self-provisioning are some examples. Depending on the nature of the activity facilitating adjustment (i.e., whether it needs low/high cost labour, casual/part-time or regular/full-time involvement, or it suits better or otherwise to the skills and work style of child labour), the latter plays important role in the adaptive strategies. Table 5.1 lists a few selected components of the adaptive strategies and indicates the potential role of child labour therein. Table 5.1 illustrates that child labour potentially plays significant role in the adaptive activities where the latter's requirements match better with the attributes of child labour.

For instance, in a diversified production system where crop-livestock based mixed farming or mixed cropping involves a number of activities (such as, animal grazing, tending young stock and harvesting minor crops in instalments for family consumption), child labour plays a key role. Similarly, for a number of self-provisioning activities (including collecting material from common property resources) and salvaging or recycling operations where the required task is insufficient for adult workers or when adult workers are already preoccupied, child labour is the key input. The involvement of child labour becomes more important during people's adjustment to a drought situation. To supplement household supplies, in salvaging/conserving resources and in helping parents during migration, child labour plays a direct role. However, in certain adaptive strategies, factors other than attributes of child labour (such as, low cost, its availability for casual/part-time engagement and its comparative advantage in specific tasks) play an important role. Under these strategies, children (not necessarily working ones alone) are involved as passive entities. The withdrawal of

Role of Child Labour in Peasants' Adaptive Strategies against Instability in Agriculture in Dry Regions

Some Components of Adaptive Strategies	Child Labour's Involvement Due to			
	Features of Child Labour			Other Factorst
	Low Cost	Availability for Casual/ Part-time Tasks	Comparative Advantage in Jobs	
<i>Diversified Production Systems</i>				
Crop/stock mixed farming	✓	—	✓	—
Mixed cropping*	✓	✓	—	—
<i>Flexible Resource Use</i>				
Operational diversification†	✓	✓	✓	✓
Self provisioning	—	✓	✓	—
Resource recycling	—	—	✓	✓
Accepting low pay-off activities**	✓	✓	✓	—
<i>Adjusting to Drought Crises</i>				
Reducing current commitments	—	—	—	✓
Salvage operations	✓	✓	—	—
Accepting low pay-off activities	✓	✓	✓	—
Collective risk sharing	—	—	—	✓
Migration	—	—	—	✓

Source: For further details on peasants' adaptive strategies, see Jodha (1978), Jodha and Mascarnhas (1985), and Walker and Jodha (1986).

Note: † The factors or circumstances that involve children as a passive entity in the adjustment activity.

\* Combining crops of varying maturity, drought tolerance, input needs and end uses.

‡ Including through staggered planting, plot splitting, input use splitting, plant spacing, etc.

\*\* Including collection of products from common property resources like village forest, wasteland and pond.

children from school to reduce current commitments during drought is one such example. The same applies to a situation where children have to accompany parents in migration during a drought.

### Empirical Evidence

The forementioned hypotheses can be confirmed with the help of village and household level data from different districts in the dry regions.

*CPR-Product Collection:* As mentioned earlier, the dependence on common property resources (CPRs) and, thereby, the acceptance of low pay-off options is an important means through which resource-poor and income-poor households supplement their incomes. Jodha (1986) reported that CPRs are a significant source of fuel, fodder, fibre and food items for the rural people. For the rural poor, they contributed from 15 to 23 per cent of the average household income received from other (formal) sources in 10 out of 12 region studies. Table 5.2 suggests that the bulk of the gains from CPRs are due to the engagement of child labour in CPR-based activities. In the case of the rural poor, that is, labour and small farm (2 ha. of dryland) households, child labour accounted for 39 to 71 per cent of the total labour engaged in the collection of CPR products. For the rural rich (large farmers), the absolute employment through CPR-product collection was quite low as they had less preference for low pay-off activities.

*Contribution to Seasonal Activities:* The productive period in most of the dry regions is quite short. It generally extends over 3 or 4 months of the monsoon season. To extract maximum benefits from this, the peasant attempts to engage all resources available to him in one activity or another. Children, including those attending the school, also have to contribute to the process in different ways.<sup>1</sup> This is indirectly reflected in the decline in school attendance during the crop season. Table 5.3 clearly shows this.<sup>2</sup> The decline in school attendance

<sup>1</sup> Cattle grazing, fodder and fuel gathering, food collection including by harvesting of minor crops (e.g., pods from legume crops) for self-provisioning are some examples. In some cases, they have to support the adult workers by bringing food and water from home to the field and by babysitting.

<sup>2</sup> In view of the situation, it would probably be better if the annual vacation in the village schools is made to coincide with the rainy season rather than the summer season as at present. As was observed in Rajasthan villages, more children attended schools during summer, even when it was more hot and in most cases children had to carry their own drinking water to schools.

**Table 5.2**  
**Engagement of Child Labour in Collection of Products from Common Property Resources (CPRs)**  
**in the Study Villages of Dry Regions of India (1982-85)**

District and State	No. of Villages	Per Household Average Number of Hours Spent on CPR-Product Collection during Three Weeks by			
		Labour + Small Farmers		Large Farmers	
		Total Hours (No.)	Share of Child Labour (%)	Total Hours (No.)	Share of Child Labour (%)
Aurangabad, Maharashtra	2	120	42	40	47
Mehsana, Gujarat	2	174	39	72	32
Sabarkantha, Gujarat	2	191	63	78	46
Mandasaur, Madhya Pradesh	2	129	59	34	51
Raisen, Madhya Pradesh	2	200	71	65	62
Jalore, Rajasthan	2	141	49	51	55
Nagaur, Rajasthan	2	163	54	65	43

Source: N.S. Jodha, *Common Property Resources and the Rural Poor*, Patancheru, Resource Management Programme, ICRISAT, 1986.

Note: Data on collection of fuel, fodder, fibre and food items from CPRs (like village forest, pasture, wasteland, ponds and rivers) were collected for one week during each of the seasons. Data not reported in the table indicated that child labour accounted for 73 to 86 per cent of total labour hours spent on animal grazing in different areas.



Table 5.3  
*Details of Children Attending School during Different Seasons in the Study Villages of  
 Selected Districts in the Dry Regions*

District and State	No. of Village Schools	Cropping Season		
		Monsoon	Winter	Summer
Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh	2	58	75	92
Akola, Maharashtra	2	71	83	95
Sholapur, Maharashtra	2	72	63	91
Jodhpur, Rajasthan	2	37	75	81
Jaisalmer, Rajasthan	1	16	63	69
Nagaur, Rajasthan	2	28	70	85

**Source:** Based on records of village schools. For the last three areas the details relate to 1964-65 while for the others they relate to 1976-77. For details of villages see Jodha (1967), Jodha *et al.* (1977).

during the rainy season was more in the arid villages of Rajasthan where the available productive period is still shorter. In Sholapur village, because of the predominance of rabi (post-rainy season) cropping, the decline in school attendance was greater in winter than in the monsoon.

The pressure of adaptive activities interferes with children's attendance at school not only during the rainy season but also often affects the extent of their overall schooling. Absence from school may extend over a whole year when the crops fail. At such times, children are withdrawn from school. This is done to both reduce the current expenses and to exploit the possible means to supplement low incomes during drought. In the former, children are a passive entity in the adjustment process. In the latter, however, they actively contribute to adaptation in a scarcity situation.

Data collected from different drought-prone areas to assess the impact of drought (Table 5.4) revealed that 42 to 73 per cent of the households affected by drought withdrew their children from schools. Furthermore, in 21 to 62 per cent of the households, the children (not schoolgoing alone) had to accompany their parents when the latter migrated for employment or cattle grazing to well-endowed areas. Many such children had to engage in odd jobs during out-migration.

The net result of frequently (both seasonal and annual) interrupted studies is the final stoppage of studies for most of the children. The reduced interest of the pupil as well as parents in the child's schooling,

**Table 5.4**  
**Indicators of Adjustment to Drought at the Cost of Children in Drought Prone Areas**

<i>District and State</i>	<i>No. of Villages</i>	<i>Drought Years</i>	<i>Proportion of Households who during the Drought Year</i>		<i>School Attendance during the Drought Year (%)</i>
			<i>Withdrew Children from School (%)</i>	<i>Took Children while Out-migrating (%)</i>	
Jodhpur, Rajasthan	2	1963-64	42	21	16
Barmer, Rajasthan	2	1969-70	73	62	8
Banaskantha, Gujarat	3	1969-70	65	39	25
Sholapur, Maharashtra	2	1972-73	54	25	30

Source: Based on studies on impact of drought in different areas, see Jodha (1978).

on the one hand, and the maturity of the child into a regular worker, on the other, also contribute to this.<sup>3</sup>

This hypothesis can be partly and indirectly supported by data collected under the village level studies (VLS) project of ICRISAT.<sup>4</sup> The information relates to heads of sample households. They numbered 80 in each district and they included 20 households from each of the household categories, namely, labour, small, medium and large farm households. Despite the presence of schools for at least three or four decades in these villages, the literacy ratio in the case of heads of panel households was less than 30 per cent in half the villages. More importantly, of the literate heads of households, 35 to 68 per cent could not complete their primary schooling (i.e., up to fifth standard).<sup>5</sup> The

Table 5.5  
*Distribution of Literate Heads of Sample Households by Number of Years of Schooling in the Study Villages of Selected Districts*

District and State	No. of Villages	Proportion of Heads of Households by No. of Years of Schooling				
		Upto 4	5-6	7-9	Above 9	
Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh	2	40	35	15	10	(20)
Sabarkantha, Gujarat	2	35	7	49	9	(43)
Raisen, Madhya Pradesh	2	41	34	15	11	(27)
Sholapur, Maharashtra	2	68	8	12	12	(25)
Akola, Maharashtra	2	46	14	22	19	(36)
Average		44	17	26	11	(38)

**Source:** ICRISAT's village level studies (VLS), see Jodha *et al.* (1977), Singh and Singh (1982) and Singh *et al.* (1984).

**Note:** Figures in parentheses indicate the literacy ratio (i.e., % of literates amongst the total heads of sample households).

<sup>3</sup> A few parents reported that they prefer to continue with the schooling of those children in the family who are too weak or insufficient at farm work.

<sup>4</sup> For details on the methodology and coverage of ICRISAT's VLS conducted in five agro-climatic zones of the dry tropics in India, see Jodha *et al.* (1977), Singh and Singh (1982), and Singh *et al.* (1984).

<sup>5</sup> It is quite possible that, despite their years of schooling, these household heads were literally illiterate as there were no activities which could help them to retain what they learnt during the often interrupted 1 to 4 years of schooling.

proportion of heads of households who could reach or complete high school (indicated by 9 or more years of schooling) ranged between 9 to 12 per cent in most of the studied areas.

What has been described in the foregoing reflects two things. First, it indicates the significant role of child labour in farmers' adaptive strategies in dry regions. Secondly, it indicates dryland farmers' low priority to human capital formation through the education of children. The latter again could be due to greater pressure of current requirements as well as low returns expected from the type of education imparted to the rural children. Moreover, at times, rural parents are quite aware of their inability to educate the child up to a level when he becomes eligible for even a petty clerical job.

### ***Child Labour as Wage Earner***

In contrast to the engagement of child labour in informal activities (that is, peasants' adaptive strategies in dryland agriculture), its engagement in formal (that is, wage earning) activities is much lower. This is discussed below. The discussion is based on data from panel households, collected regularly with an interval of 20 to 30 days. The data were gathered by resident investigators in the 10 villages covered by ICRISAT's village level studies (VLS).

Tables 5.6-5.9 contain relevant information (on an average of three years) separately for different economic classes. Labour and small farmers representing the rural poor are grouped together. Information on large farm households is presented separately to highlight the difference between the rural poor and rural rich regarding the different dimensions of child labour. Information on 'all households,'—which includes medium farmers along with the above two categories—is also presented to provide a general picture.

Table 5.6 gives the general profile of the situation. Besides indicating the average number of children per family, it indicates the proportion of children attending school and working as child labour. Large farm households had a greater number of children than the poor households. For understandable reasons, irrespective of the area, a higher proportion (33 to 59 per cent) of large farmers' children attended school and a much lower proportion (2 to 7 per cent) worked as child labour. The situation of the rural poor was in complete contrast to this. If all classes were put together, Table 5.6 reveals that 6

**Table 5.6**  
***Details of Child Population in Different Classes of Households in the Study Villages of Selected Districts***

District and State	No. of Villages	Details by Household Classes											
		A. Labour + Small Farmers						B. Large Farmers C. All Classes					
		Children Per Family (No.)			Attending School (%)			Proportion of Children			Working as Child Labour (%)		
		A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh	1	2.3	2.2	2.3	5	33	15	11	4				8
Sabarkantha, Gujarat	2	1.7	2.1	2.0	38	59	54	19	4				11
Raisen, Madhya Pradesh	2	2.0	2.5	2.3	14	52	25	10	2				6
Akola, Maharashtra	1	1.8	4.0	2.5	16	38	26	16	2				10
Sholapur, Maharashtra	1	1.8	2.6	2.3	14	35	22	16	7				13
Average		1.9	2.7	2.3	17	44	29	14	4				10

Source: ICBI SAT, willow leaf studies (VI S); the data represent an average of three years, 1980-81 to 1982-83.

Source: ICRISAT's village level studies (VLS); the data represent an average of three years, 1960-61 to 1962-63.

Note: † Category C (i.e., all classes) includes medium farm households also. Sample included 10 households from each category of household classes (i.e., labour, small, medium and large farm households) from each of the selected villages.

to 13 per cent of rural children worked as child labour in different areas.

Further details about child labour for all households put together (see Table 5.7) indicate that child labour got formal employment for 6 to 13 days per year. However, for the poor households, it ranged from 11 to 28 days per child worker in different areas. The average earning worked out to be between Rs 4-5 per day. In the drought-prone area of Sholapur and the relatively backward area of Raisen, the employment days for child labour were lower than other areas. Incidentally, the involvement of child labour in self-provisioning and other informal activities was much higher in these districts.

When examined in relation to the overall situation of wage earners in the household, the data (see Table 5.8) revealed that for all households put together, child labour constituted 19 to 30 per cent of the total wage earners in different areas except Mahbubnagar. However, their share in the wage earning of the household was only 3 to 9 per cent, which resulted from relatively lower wages to child labour. Child labour often shared the tasks given to adult workers and they were given a lower wage rate compared to the adult worker.

It was further observed that even though child labour played an important role in crop production activity, most of its engagement was informal, irregular and part of the adaptive mechanisms of the peasants. The share of child labour in wage employment in crop production was only 1 to 3 per cent of the total labour used in different areas (see Table 5.9). The operation-wise employment details indicated that bird-scaring and pod-picking processing were the only crop production related activities where child labour was employed. For heavy work (like ploughing, harvesting and even weeding), child labour did not get much employment. There was no clear indication of other factors influencing the employment of child labour in crop production although, in some areas, the small size of farm, dominance of dryland cropping, and rabi (post-monsoon season) cropping marginally favoured the employment of child labour.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Our discussion may be summed up with the following broad conclusions/implications.

Child labour is an integral part of peasants' adaptive strategies to

**Table 5.7**  
**Average Number of Wage Employment Days and Earnings Per Child Worker in the Study Villages of Selected Districts**

<i>District and State</i>	<i>No. of Villages</i>	<i>Average Employment Days and Earnings Per Child Worker Belonging to Different Classes of Households</i>					
		<b>A. Labour + Small Farmers</b>		<b>B. Large Farmers</b>		<b>C. All Classes†</b>	
		<i>Employment Days (No.)</i>	<i>Earnings (Rs)</i>	<i>Employment Days (No.)</i>	<i>Earnings (Rs)</i>	<i>Employment Days (No.)</i>	<i>Earnings (Rs)</i>
Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh	1	26	130	0	0	13	59
Sabarkantha, Gujarat	2	23	136	8	54	13	77
Raisen, Madhya Pradesh	2	16	84	1	2	8	43
Akola, Maharashtra	2	28	114	1	3	11	45
Sholapur, Maharashtra	2	11	51	2	9	6	34
<b>Average</b>		21	103	9	14	10	52

Source: ICRISAT's village level studies (VLS); the data represent an average of three years, 1980-81 to 1982-83.

Note: † Category C (i.e., all classes) includes medium farm households also. Sample included 10 households from each category of household classes (i.e., labour, small, medium and large farm households) from each of the selected villages.

Table 5.8

Contribution of Child Labour to Wage Earnings of the Household in the Study Villages of Selected Districts (Percentage)

District and State	No. of Villages	Proportion of Child Wage Earners and their Earning to Total Wage Earners' Wage Earnings of the Households in the Case of:					
		A. Labour + Small Farmers		B. Large Farmers		C. All Classes†	
		Wage Earners	Wage Earnings	Wage Earners	Wage Earnings	Wage Earners	Wage Earnings
Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh	1	12	5	6	3	8	3
Sabarkantha, Gujarat	2	26	7	26	16	25	9
Raisen, Madhya Pradesh	2	21	4	18	2	21	4
Akola, Maharashtra	1	19	4	16	1	19	3
Sholapur, Maharashtra	1	31	4	34	1	30	4
Average		22	5	20	4	21	4

Source: ICRISAT's village studies (VLS); the data represent an average of three years, 1980-81 to 1982-83.

Note: † Category C (i.e., all classes) includes medium farm households also. Sample included 10 households from each category of household classes (i.e., labour, small, medium and large farm households) from each of the selected villages.



**Table 5.9**

***Contribution of Child Labour to Total Labour Used in Crop Production in the Study Villages of Selected Districts (Percentage)***

<i>Particulars</i>	<i>Proportion of Child Labour to Total Labour Engaged in Different Farm Operations in the Villages of:</i>				
	<i>Mahbubnagar (Andhra Pradesh)</i>	<i>Sabarkantha (Gujarat)</i>	<i>Raisen (Madhya Pradesh)</i>	<i>Akola (Maharashtra)</i>	<i>Sholapur (Maharashtra)</i>
<i>Farm Class</i>					
Small farm	1.5	5.5	3.2	2.6	1.0
Large farm	0.5	2.7	4.0	0.7	0.4
<i>Irrigation</i>					
Dry land cropping	2.2	2.8	3.7	1.5	1.0
Wet land cropping	0.2	3.0	2.8	0.4	0.6
<i>Season</i>					
Monsoon cropping	1.2	3.0	0.7	1.4	0.6
Post-monsoon cropping	1.0	6.1	5.0	0.4	1.2
Average	1.9	0.9	1.9	3.3	3.4

Source: ICRISAT's village level studies (VLS). The number of villages was two in Raisen and Sabarkantha and one each in the rest of the districts. The data represent the average of three years, 1980-81 to 1982-83.

make fuller use of the production environment in the dry tropics. This is more so in the case of the rural poor.

To be realistic, child welfare and development activities cannot be detached from the above reality. Hence, the technological and institutional interventions directed towards the stability and growth of dryland agriculture can also help the welfare of the child in these areas. The difference between the child labour situation of the rural poor and rural rich will support this.

Because of children's primary engagement in informal activities (which are seldom recorded), the extent of child labour in the context of dry areas is likely to be under-reported.

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