

POVERTY ARGUMENT

**In the context of
total elimination
of child labour**

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Mamidipudi Nagarjuna

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The late Mamidipudi Nagarjuna who co-authored the present work was an IAS officer and an activist, who was regarded as a moving spirit that animated the movement against child labour. He worked as part of the SPD DPEP and inspired hundreds of thousands of school teachers, and officials of the Education Department to work towards the elimination of child labour and adoption of the Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). During his tenure, the Andhra Pradesh government announced the definition of child labour as “all children out of school” and the link for programmes of abolition of child labour along with that of UEE. The government declared that the right place for every child is to be in school and several circulars and government orders were issued to make it easier for first-generation learners to continue attending school without facing any difficulty. Mr. Nagarjuna was also recognized for his contribution made towards formulating of the back to school programme as a collector in Chittoor District and visualized the total literacy campaign and for taking the public stand in favor of the victims of caste-based violence in Chundur as the District Collector in Guntur. He imbued in himself the best elements of an activist and a bureaucrat.

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One of the most commonly held beliefs in the area of child labour, especially in an under-developed economy's like India, is that it exists because parents who are unable to make ends meet put their children to work to ensure that the family is able to survive. In brief, this is what can be termed as the Poverty Argument in regards to the existence of child labor. So overwhelming is the influence of this argument that many do not even realize the extent to which they subscribe to it. As a result, one finds that even those who stress the role of other factors, to sustain the presence of child labour, ultimately succumb to the temptation of identifying economic circumstances as the 'real' factor. It is this that makes it crucially important to understand not only the implications of the poverty argument but also its limitations.

The plausibility of the poverty argument arises from the single fact that any family with a critically low level of income and need to struggle to survive with a mindset of 'keeping the wolf from the door'¹, must, in order to survive, send their children to work. Child labour in this situation is not only inevitable, but also logical and hence, a 'harsh reality.'² Figures relating to the enrollment show that more than 95%³ of children are enrolled into school in the age group of 5 to 6 years, when they are too young to work. However, this figure drops dramatically once the threshold age of 9 years⁴ is crossed. Figures also show that an overwhelming majority of children engaged in work today come from families who belong to the lower strata of economic development. In the poverty argument therefore, one apparently has the explanation to all the observed facts. It simply is obvious. Parents belonging to the lower economic strata of the society are neither willing nor able to send their children to school.

The compelling logic of the poverty argument and its automatic implication of the inevitability of child labor has always exerted a tremendous influence on all programs seeking to either eliminate child labour or provide for universalized elementary education. In terms of the elimination of child labour, it demands that any program seeking to achieve this objective must have an in-built mechanism for compensating the family for the loss of income earned by the child. Most schemes involving the elimination of child labour therefore have cash incentives to the family as a basic component. As far as the universalization of elementary education is concerned, the poverty argument implies that one has to reckon with the "harsh reality" of child labor and incorporate components that provide for education outside the working hours of the child. Elaborate structures such as non-formal education and open schools are a result of this perceived need to cater to working children without affecting their work schedule.

¹ Ministry of Labor, GOI, Report of The Committee on Child Labor (December 1979)

² Ministry of Labor, GOI, Status Note on Child Labour Policies (1995)

³ Selected Statistics on School Education (1997-98), Commissioner and Director of School Education, Andhra Pradesh, India

⁴ Ibid

As plausible as the poverty argument sounds, concrete evidence in favor of it is not always easy to find at the field level. In the first place, while it is in general true that the economically deprived sections tend to engage their children in work more often than those who are better off, there is no evidence to show a direct correlation between the level of poverty and the tendency to send a child to work. If one were to extend the logic of the argument, one should find that in any given situation, it is the poorest who drop out first, while those who are relatively better off, are able to allow their children to continue in school for a longer time. Similarly, in terms of school enrolment, especially pertaining to higher classes, the poverty argument predicts that the relatively better off would have greater representation than the economically backward. Field level studies⁵ do not reveal what this situation claims. On the other hand, what is found is that not only are literacy rates similar between groups having dissimilar income levels, but also vary widely between groups with the same income levels. In other words, situations where better off families have engaged their children to work while parents with lower incomes have retained their children in school are not uncommon.

It could, of course, be postulated that a critical level of income exists below which all families are compelled, in order to survive, to send their children to work and supplement the family's income. In fact, the poverty argument implicitly assumes that all working children belong to such families and hence cannot be withdrawn from work without financial compensation. However, what exactly this critical level of income is below which a family is compelled to send the children to work and, whether it is a fact that the particular family under scrutiny does have an income below the critical level, are two things that need to be established. On the other hand, there is some evidence that a number of families with an income below the normally defined poverty line send their children not to work but to schools, instead. The real danger in blindly accepting the poverty argument is that every case of a child working tends to be seen as one more instance of the 'harsh reality', of child labour without all factors being examined. It is in this context that the empirical evidence which M.V. Foundation⁶ project has generated, is of enormous significance. The success of this project which seeks to eliminate child labour without, in any way, attempt to increase family income, clearly suggests that the critical level of income is quite low and that most families who put their children to work have incomes in excess of this. Clearly, therefore, there are other factors, other than the purely economic compulsions arising out of poverty, which dictate whether a child is sent to work or to school. Factors such as parents' literacy status, their levels of motivation, social background, accessibility to schools, and so on, have to be invoked to make sense of the behavior pattern of parents and children. The poverty argument in these circumstances then becomes only one of the many factors, which govern the situation. The question that remains to be resolved is how important a factor it really is. This is not

⁵ Profile of school-going and non-school-going children and their families, a study of Mominpet mandal, Research & Development Society.

⁶ MVF, Annual Report (1997)

just a debating point but infact is of considerable significance in deciding the strategy to be adopted in dealing with the problem of child labour:

Some Results

The results from a recent study initiated by MVF are relevant in this instance. The main purpose of the study was to understand if, and to what extent, even in circumstances prevailing today, the economic factors that influence parents' decisions to send their children to work. In order to focus attention on those who are most likely to be affected by the limitations imposed by economic conditions, the sample that was surveyed involved only scheduled caste families. Further, the sample was from an areas not currently covered under any special program of either the government or MVF. In brief, therefore, the sample involved families belonging to the most vulnerable sections of the economic spectrum and who were taking decisions regarding whether their child should go to work or to school on the basis of their judgment alone.

The selected sample included one set of families where at least one child was going to school and another that had at least one child labourer. Given the fact that enrollment figures especially in the lower classes are notoriously incorrect and exaggerated, only those families where a child was in the 5th class and above were selected as representatives of families where a child was in school. To ensure greater accuracy, the children were selected at school itself, laying to rest all arguments on whether they were actually in school or not. The selection of child labour families was made by visiting the villages concerned and identifying the child while they were at work. In all, 79 cases (Group I) were selected to represent families sending in at least one child to work, and 138 families (Group II) to represent families sending at least one child to 5th class or above.

As a first step, it was sought to understand if there was any significant difference in the economic status between the two categories of families. The status was worked out on the basis of points allotted to the various economic attributes of the family which included the type of dwelling, the availability of facilities (such as drinking water, and electricity), the availability of farm implements and land, as well as cattle holding of the family. The relative status of the two groups is indicated below in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILIES ON THE BASIS OF ECONOMIC STATUS

Economic Status	Group I		Group II	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
0-8	51	64.5	90	65.0
9-16	24	30.5	40	29.0
>16	4	5.0	8	6.0
TOTAL	79	100	138	100

An obvious feature of this table is that there is little to distinguish the two groups. The distribution of the two groups into the three categories each representing a different level of economic status is almost identical. The only conclusion that one can draw from the table is that there is little difference in the economic status of those families sending their children to school and those who are not.

One method of explaining this is to postulate that in most families while some of the children are sent to school some are sent to work also. The economic status of the families sending their children to school and those that send their children to work would therefore tend to be the same. However, the figures in Table 2 in this context are extremely revealing, and suggest otherwise.

TABLE 2: OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN IN THE 5-14 AGE GROUP

Economic Status	Group I		Group II	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
AGRICULTURE	37	21.3	8	2.4
ANIMAL HUSBANDRY	27	15.6	5	1.6
HOUSEHOLD WORK	38	21.8	29	9.0
BONDED LABOUR	4	2.3	1	0.3
STUDENTS	68	39.0	279	86.7
TOTAL	79		322	

Of the 174 children belonging to Category I, only 68 (i.e. 39 percent are in schools). On the other hand, out of a total of 322 children, as many as 279 (i.e. 87 percent are in school). This implies that a family habituated to sending one child to school tends to send the other child to school also.

In the normal course, all families sending their children to work would be treated as families suffering from severe economic constraints resulting in the need to supplement the family income through child labor. What the figures above show is that there is little to choose between the economic statuses of the families sending their children to school and sending them to work. Conversely, the fact that some of these families are being able to send their children to school without facing cataclysmic

economic consequences indicates that other families can do so as well and that sending a child to school has much more to do with factors other than economic. The poverty argument has a tendency to collapse once subjected to closer scrutiny.

Adjustments

When a child gets out of the labour force and becomes a full-time student, it is clear that the family has to make some adjustments. The poverty argument does not admit of any scope for adjustments since it simply postulates that such adjustments are not possible in view of the severe economic stress that would result. In the MVF project, on the other hand, a number of children who were working have in fact left their work and become students in formal schools. A second study covering a sample of 248 children and families was undertaken to understand the implications of the results of the project. The study specifically covered those families where a child was withdrawn from work and enrolled in school and revealed that the overall enrolment levels in the families covered by the sample stood at 77% as opposed to 7.5% at the beginning of the project. In other words, of the total of 248 children in the age group (5-14) who were out of school at the beginning, 204 are in formal schools leaving a balance of 44 who dropped out and are yet to be covered. The occupational profile of these children in these families prior to the project and after its implementation is indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3: OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN BEFORE AND AFTER MVF PROJECT

Occupation	Before		After	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
AGRICULTURE	52	21.0	26	10.5
ANIMAL HUSBANDRY	57	23.0	5	2.0
HOUSEHOLD WORK	100	40.4	12	4.8
BONDED LABOUR	21	8.7	-	-
OTHERS	-	-	1	0.4
STUDENTS	18	7.3	204	82.3
TOTAL	248		248	

The first aspect that emerges is that there is no relationship between the work engaged in by the child and his withdrawal from work. The work profile in the pre-project situation covers practically the entire range of activities normally engaged in by a child in any part of rural Telangana with bonded labour representing one extreme and domestic work such as looking after siblings representing the other. Notwithstanding the fact that the effort required to withdraw a child from bonded labour is obviously much higher, the study shows that even families 'compelled' to put their child in bondage are in a position to send their child to school. Further, most families are in a position to make internal adjustments and reallocate the work among family members. Table 4 indicates how the work done earlier by 242 children has been reallocated within the family.

TABLE 4: REALLOCATION OF WORK AMONG OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Relation With Child	No.	Percent
MOTHER	100	43.4
FATHER	41	16.3
BROTHER	32	12.7
SISTER	26	10.3
SISTER-IN-LAW	26	10.3
OTHERS	17	7.0

Table 5 gives the relative economic status of the families covered in the sample. As in the previous sample, it is evident that a fairly wide range is covered. It is also apparent that a number of families who are relatively better off were prior to the project, not sending their children to school. Even more significantly, the statement reveals that no cut off point exists in terms of economic status, below which a family has no option but to send their child to work.

TABLE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILIES ON THE BASIS OF ECONOMIC STATUS

Index of Economic Status	No.	Percent
0-8	51	20
9-16	160	65
Above 16 (>16)	37	15
TOTAL	248	100

TABLE 5A: COMMUNITY-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE GROUP

COMMUNITY	No.
SC	146
BC	64
OC	12
ST	26
TOTAL	248

The pattern of dropouts also indicates this. A statement of the economic status of families where a child has dropped out is given as Table 6. Even this reveals the absence of any bias towards the economically vulnerable.

TABLE 6: ECONOMIC STATUS OF 'DROPOUT' FAMILIES

Index of Economic Status	No.	Percent
0-8	6	13.6
9-16	30	68.2
Above 16 (>16)	8	18.2
TOTAL	44	100

TABLE 5A: COMMUNITY-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF DROPOUT FAMILIES

COMMUNITY	No.
SC	28
BC	9
OC	2
ST	5
TOTAL	44

The dropout figures are static in that it is representative of the situation only at a particular point of time. The project has in built mechanisms to deal with the individual cases of dropouts and the same child does not normally remain a dropout for any length of time.

The MVF Project

The fundamental belief on which the MVF project is based on is that parents, even those who are poor, are not only capable of sending their children to formal daytime schools, but are willing to do so. The project rejects the poverty argument and its implication of the inevitability of child labour. Consequently, it also rejects the need to provide for education to working children outside the working hours and has adopted the formal school as the only means to universalize education and simultaneously eliminate child labour. The project, by viewing all children out-of-school as child labour, irrespective of the nature of work done by them, treats the problem of the elimination of child labour and the universalization of elementary education as inseparable processes of one automatically leading to the success of the other.

The project recognizes the crucial, and on most occasions, dominant, role which cultural and other non-economic factors play in influencing parents decisions to send their children to work rather than to school. Consequently, the project places considerable emphasis on the motivations of parents and the mobilizing of the community at large. Processes are built up to bridge the gap between an illiterate household and the school keeping in view, the large number of factors that work to sustain this gap.

In terms of strategy, the project recognizes the need to adopt separate approaches for different age groups. Based on the understanding that the problems allowing for a smooth transition to school for an older working child are different from those faced by a 5 or 6 year-old, the project actively advocates bridge courses for older children. The curriculum in the bridge courses makes full use of the greater ability of an older child to grasp concepts and this enables compression of the teaching period. As a result, older children are prepared within a period of three to four months to be enrolled in higher classes more commensurate with their age avoiding the embarrassment of their having to sit in class with children of a much lower age group. Older children are thus given much

greater confidence in their ability to catch up with others of their own age group. This also reflects in increasing confidence of the parents in their wards, which in turn reduces reluctance on their part to send the child to school.

A good part of the expenses relating to the project are expended towards the employment of teachers. Far too often, the existence of teachers is taken for granted without realizing their numbers are too small to deal with the problem in any meaningful manner. Interaction with the teachers has shown how teachers unable to handle large numbers of children have devised various methods to limit their numbers to more manageable proportions. Significantly enough, not one teacher complained of the lack of response from either the parents or the children. A sizeable portion of funds for supporting additional teachers is raised through local contribution through the medium of the parent-teachers association. Mobilizing the teaching community and sensitizing them to the specific requirements of working children is an important ingredient of the project. In the process, a separate issue of child labour and to emphasize its close relationship with the issue of universalization of primary education, has emerged.

MVF has consciously adopted a policy of utilizing existing government infrastructure to the extent possible rather than duplicating its efforts. As a result, government primary schools form the focus of its work. Further, full use is made of other supporting institutions such as social welfare department hostels and other support infrastructure. The government school teacher and representatives of local bodies, wherever they have shown interest, have been co-opted into the planning process of the program. The objective has been to emphasize the positive role that existing institutions can play in eliminating child labour and to come up with a model that is sustainable.

In sum, therefore, the MVF project attempts at filling up a big gap in the existing efforts to universalize education that completely neglects the basic task of getting a child to school. In fact, conventional programs for universalizing education simply ignore this aspect, because of the logic of the poverty argument which propels them. Since working children work because of sheer economic necessity, and cannot be withdrawn, there is no need to build in a component for withdrawing them. Withdrawal of a child from work is therefore not an integral part of existing schemes to universalize education one would necessarily have to cater to the large number of children outside the education system such a strategy is woefully inadequate. The MVF project, on the other hand, recognizes the fact that this logic is flawed and that a number of factors, of which poverty though one is not necessarily the most important, play a role in determining whether a child goes to school or to work. The project therefore lays considerable emphasis on dealing with these factors and in creating conditions that allow for a smooth transition for the child from work place to school. All components of the program are aimed at this specific task.

Some Implications

It is important to understand clearly the implications of the main conclusions that are to be drawn from the studies. If one were to accept the poverty argument, the only way by which a family sending a child to work can be made is to send him or her to a formal daytime school, is to compensate the family for the loss of income. This, as we have already seen, can be done either by providing monetary incentives to the family for each child sent to school or by sanctioning subsidized economic development schemes to them. Schemes of this nature exist in most parts of the country and some are even sponsored by the Government of India. Since universalizing primary education would also involve the withdrawal of children from the workforce, it would also necessarily have to build in a component of financial incentives, if it were to achieve this objective. An alternate for parents with unfamiliar institutions situated outside the boundaries of the village, well beyond their normal area of operation. The simple fact that emerges is that for many parents in the rural area, the process of securing a place for a child as a bonded labourer is considerably simpler than enrolling him as a student. To attribute, under these circumstances, the high incidence of child labour and illiteracy merely to the parent's unwillingness and poverty is to disregard their intense latent desire to seek a better future for themselves and their children.

The relative success of MVF leads one to suspect that as far as the government is concerned, the convenience of the poverty argument has much to do with its acceptance. In the first place, both child labour and illiteracy can now be treated as problems that cannot be solved unless the *basic* problem of poverty itself is resolved. Thus, neither the labour, nor the education department has a decisive role to play and the solution lies elsewhere in the realm of what can be loosely described as overall economic development. Secondly, the poverty argument does away with the need to take hard decisions such as the enforcement of compulsory education legislation. Such a measure, in terms of this argument would only lead to the harassment of parents than any meaningful results in terms of increased literacy levels. Finally, the poverty argument provides legitimacy to low cost 'solutions' such as NFE and open schools making sure that neither the government's repeated assurances of increasing spending on education to 6% of the GDP be increased, needs to be honored. In the name of providing for working children, centers have been provided, which are named by ill-trained, and poorly motivated part-time staff. At the same time, formal schools, which alone are capable of dealing with the problems of both illiteracy and child labour in any significant fashion are left largely not provided for, and no effort is made to get an adequate number of qualified teachers to take up the challenge of primary education.



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**CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION
– A NON-NEGOTIABLE**