The Unseen Reality: Exploring the Impact of Invisible Child Labor in Coastal Kerala

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the issue of invisible child labour in the coastal region of Kerala, India. Despite Kerala's reputation for high literacy rates and inclusive social development, child labour though it is not hazardous, continues to persist, often hidden from public view. The article explores the underlying causes, consequences, and factors contributing to this problem. A multi-dimensional socio-economic intervention of all government and non-government agencies is essential to combat invisible child labour and protect the rights of children in the region. Socio-economic empowerment of the coastal community, awareness and sensitisation of child rights, effective implementation of legal framework and rehabilitation is essential to eradicate the issue.

Keywords: Article 21-A, Dropout Rates, Invisible child labour, Poverty, The Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act

Introduction: Child labour remains a grave concern globally, with children being subjected to hazardous work conditions, denied education, and robbed of their childhood. While efforts have been made to combat visible forms of child labour, such as those in factories and agriculture, the issue of invisible child labour in coastal areas has received inadequate attention. This article focuses on the specific context of coastal Kerala, where children are silently subjected to child labour practices. Even though it is often not so hazardous, it will affect their childhood, physical development and educational upliftment.

Understanding Invisible Child Labour in Coastal Kerala

Invisible child labour refers to the exploitation of children in work that often goes unnoticed or is hidden from public view. These children are engaged in various labour-intensive activities, often part-time, such as domestic work, fishing, casting nets, sorting fish, mending nets, or working on fishing boats, which adversely affect their schooling and childhood.

Causes and Factors:
- **Poverty and Inequality:** Disparity in household income contributes to the vulnerability of families in coastal Kerala, compelling children to engage in part-time labour to supplement household incomes.
- **Migration and Displacement:** The influx of seasonal migration and displacement due to natural disasters force families to relocate, often leading to precarious living conditions and limited opportunities for children, increasing their susceptibility to child labour.
- **Informal and Unregulated Work Sectors:** The prevalence of informal nature of work in fishing and fish processing creates an environment conducive to child labour, as these sectors often lack proper regulation and oversight.
- **Social and Cultural Norms:** Deep-rooted social and cultural norms, such as assigning domestic chores to children or considering child labour as a part of skill-building, perpetuate the acceptance of child labour within communities. This inhibition among coastal people still persists as justification for child labour.
- **Lack of Education and Awareness:** Limited access to quality education, low awareness of child rights, and inadequate enforcement of existing laws also to this situation.

Forms and Prevalence

The prevalence of child labour in these regions can be attributed to a combination of economic, social, and cultural factors. Some of the common forms of child labour observed in the coastal areas of Kerala:

- **Fishing Industry:** Fishing is a significant economic activity in coastal Kerala, and children are often involved in various tasks associated with fishing. They may assist their family members in casting nets, sorting fish and mending nets. The hazardous nature of this work exposes children to risks such as drowning, injuries, and long working hours.
- **Agriculture and Plantations:** Children are engaged in tasks such as planting, weeding, and harvesting crops, with their families to support their agricultural plantations.
- **Domestic Work:** Child labour in domestic settings is prevalent in coastal areas, where children, mostly girls, are employed as domestic helpers. They perform household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of younger siblings.
- **Small-Scale Industries:** Coastal areas in Kerala have small-scale industries such as coir-making, manufacturing of handicrafts etc. Children are engaged in these industries, assisting their parents. It involves tasks like yarn spinning, weaving, and crafting, depriving them from formal education.
Tourism Sector: The growing tourism industry in coastal Kerala also contributes to child labour. Children are engaged in activities such as beach vending, selling merchandise, and assisting their parents. Although exact statistics are challenging to ascertain due to the hidden nature of invisible child labour, it is estimated that a significant number of children are engaged in labour-intensive activities. Government initiatives, such as the enforcement of child labour laws, awareness campaigns, and educational programs, have contributed to reducing child labour in recent years. However, challenges such as inadequate enforcement, lack of awareness, and limited resources hinder the effective eradication of child labour in coastal areas.

Legal Framework:

- **The Constitution of India:** The Constitution guarantees the right to education under Article 21-A, which was further reinforced by the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, making education a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14 years. It emphasises the state's responsibility in providing free and compulsory education to all children and promotes inclusive education by ensuring equal opportunities for children from marginalised communities.
- **The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act:** This Act aims to eradicate child labour and protect the rights of children. It prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 years in hazardous occupations and regulates their working conditions in non-hazardous occupations. The Act provides for penalties and punishment for violators.
- **The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act:** This Act focuses on the care, protection, and rehabilitation of children in need of care and protection, including child labourers. It establishes Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Welfare Committees to address the issues of child labour and ensure the welfare of children.
- **The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act:** This Act seeks to abolish bonded labour and addresses the issue of child labour in various sectors. It provides for the release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers, including children, and prohibits any form of forced labour.

Impact and Factors:

Child labour in the coastal areas of Kerala has a profound impact on the lives of children and carries significant consequences for their well-being and development. The following are the key impacts and consequences of child labour in the Kerala coastal area:

- **Impact on Education**
  - **Limited Access to Schools:** Child labour deprives children of the opportunity to attend school regularly, as they are often required to work long hours, sacrificing their educational development.
  - **High Dropout Rates:** Children engaged in labour face significant challenges in continuing their education, leading to high dropout rates and limited prospects for future opportunities.
  - **Irregular School Attendance:** The demanding nature of labour-intensive work, such as fishing activities, often leads to irregular school attendance. Children may be required to assist their families during peak seasons, leading to frequent absences and interruptions in their education.
  - **Lack of Educational Support:** Insufficient access to educational resources, such as books, journals and transportation, further widens the education gap for children engaged in labour.
  - **Long-term Consequences:** Children who are denied education due to child labour are more likely to remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and exploitation, perpetuating the problem for future generations.

- **Physical and Mental Health Risks:** Engaging in labour-intensive activities at a young age exposes children to various physical hazards and health risks. They may endure long working hours, harsh environmental conditions, and physical strain, leading to long-term health problems. The strenuous work and lack of proper rest also impact their mental well-being and emotional development.

- **Interference with Normal Childhood:** Child labour disrupts the normal course of childhood. Instead of engaging in play, social interactions, and other age-appropriate activities, children are burdened with adult responsibilities. They miss out on essential aspects of childhood, including socialisation, creative expression, and personal growth.

- **Cycle of Poverty:** Child labour perpetuates the cycle of poverty. When children are engaged in work at an early age, their educational opportunities are curtailed, limiting their chances of escaping poverty in the long run. They may grow up with limited skills and knowledge, making it difficult to secure better-paying jobs and break free from the cycle of poverty.

- **Increased Vulnerability to Exploitation:** Child labourers are more susceptible to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking. Their young age and lack of awareness about their rights make them easy targets for unscrupulous individuals who exploit their vulnerability. These children are at risk of facing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, further compromising their overall well-being.

- **Limited Future Opportunities:** Child labour significantly hampers the future prospects of children. Without access to education and proper skill development, their career options remain limited. They often find themselves trapped in low-paying, hazardous jobs with limited opportunities for upward mobility.
• **Social and Economic Consequences:** Child labour not only affects individuals but also has broader social and economic consequences. It perpetuates societal inequalities, contributes to a less-educated workforce, and undermines efforts towards sustainable development. It also hinders the overall progress and prosperity of the affected communities.

**Addressing the Complex Challenges**

Addressing the issue of invisible child labour in coastal Kerala requires a comprehensive approach involving multiple stakeholders. Some of the key solutions to combat this problem:

- **Strengthening Legislative Frameworks:** Review and amend existing labour laws to specifically address the challenges of invisible child labour. Ensure stricter enforcement and harsher penalties for violators to serve as a deterrent. Additionally, specific provisions should be developed to address the unique challenges faced by children in coastal areas.

- **Access to Quality Education:** Universal access to quality education is crucial in combating invisible child labour. Initiatives should focus on eliminating barriers to education, such as improving school infrastructure, providing transportation facilities, and addressing gender disparities.

- **Providing Financial Support:** Implement programmes and schemes that offer financial support to families in need, allowing them to meet their basic needs without relying on child labour. Scholarships, subsidies, and income-generation opportunities can reduce economic pressures and encourage families to prioritise education.

- **Awareness and Sensitisation:** Raising awareness among communities, parents, and employers about the negative consequences of child labour is essential. Sensitisation campaigns can help shift attitudes and perceptions, fostering a collective commitment to protecting children's rights.

- **Social Welfare and Support Mechanisms:** Establishing social welfare programs, including financial assistance, vocational training, and rehabilitation services, can provide alternatives for families engaged in child labour and support the holistic development of children.

- **Skill Development and Vocational Training:** Create opportunities for skill development and vocational training for parents and children to enhance their employability. Promote sustainable livelihood options that can provide adequate income for families, reducing their reliance on child labour.

- **Empowering Communities:** Encouraging community participation and empowering local stakeholders can create a supportive environment for preventing child labour. This can involve sensitising fishermen and their families about child rights, and encouraging responsible business practices in the fishing industry.

- **Promote Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Encourage businesses, especially those operating in coastal areas, to adopt responsible labour practices and refrain from employing child labour. Promote CSR initiatives that focus on supporting education and combating child labour in the local community.

- **Improve Access to Social Services:** Ensure access to essential services, including healthcare, nutrition, and psycho-social support, for children, with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into formal education.

- **Monitoring and Rehabilitation:** Implement robust monitoring and inspection mechanisms to identify instances of child labour. Provide appropriate rehabilitation and support services to rescued child labourers, including access to education, healthcare, counselling, and skill development opportunities.

- **Foster Economic Opportunities:** Promote sustainable livelihood options for families through skill development programs, vocational training, and income-generation initiatives, thus reducing the reliance on child labour.

- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Effective solutions require collaboration between various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, civil society organisations, educational institutions, and local communities. Coordinated efforts can maximise resources, share best practices, and develop holistic strategies to combat invisible child labour and promote schooling.

**Existing Interventions and Challenges:**

Various governmental and non-governmental organisations have implemented interventions to address child labour in Kerala. These initiatives include awareness campaigns, rescue operations, rehabilitation programs, and strengthening legislative frameworks. However, several challenges persist, such as limited resources, insufficient coordination among stakeholders, lack of effective monitoring, and the invisibility of child labour in certain industries.

**Conclusion:**

The right to education and child rights are interlinked, and addressing the issue of invisible child labour in coastal Kerala requires a comprehensive approach that includes legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, access to education, social support systems, and collaborative efforts. It takes various forms and persists due to their economic, social, and cultural backwardness. The prevalence of child labour highlights the need for continued efforts to protect children's rights, ensure access to education, and create alternative avenues for their holistic development. Combating the issue requires a multi-faceted collective effort from government authorities, civil society organisations, and local communities to raise awareness about the gravity of invisible child labour and its detrimental effects on children's well-being. By addressing the root causes and implementing comprehensive strategies, society can strive towards a future where children in coastal regions are free from the shackles of child labour and can fully embrace their right to education and a bright future.
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