

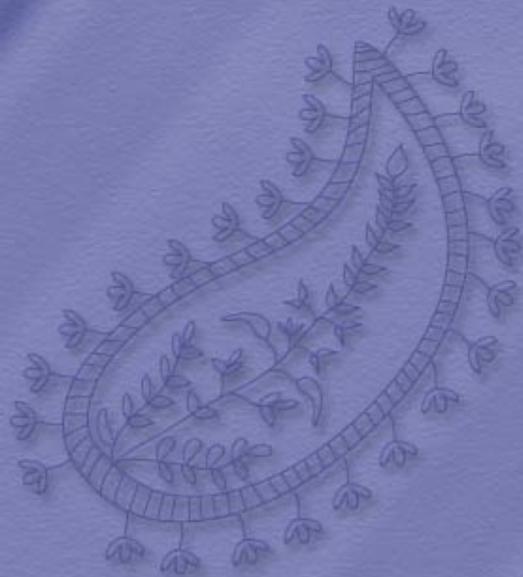


# Childhood Labor in India: Issues and complexities

Radhika Viruru, Texas A&M  
University, USA.

# My questions

- Why do images of the sacred child persist in discourses about childhood. Whose concept of sacred are we talking about and why? Is childhood sacred in India? How does such a view contribute to the objectifying of children around the world? Why are children who defy such objectification penalized?
- Why are children, especially from “developing countries” such as India denied participation in the world of value.
- Why theories of child development are increasingly harnessed to the idea of children developing as consumers and how this impacts the minority world’s view of children and work, particularly from India ?



# Some statistics about India

- *Three hundred million Indians live on less than \$1 a day--a quarter of the world's utterly poor--yet since 1985, more than 400m (out of a total population of 1bn) have risen out of relative poverty--to \$5 a day--and another 300m will follow over the next two decades if the economy continues to grow at over 7 per cent a year. Population growth, even at a slower pace, will mean that there will still be millions below the poverty line, but the fall in number will be steady. At the other end of the scale, India has the largest number of dollar billionaires outside the US and Russia*
- Chakravarti Ram-Prasad, Prospect Magazine, Issue no. 138, September 2007.

# Some statistics about children in India

- 40% of India's population is below the age of 18 years which at 400 million is the world's largest child population.
- Less than half of India's children between the age 6 and 14 go to school.
- A little over one-third of all children who enroll in grade one reach grade eight.
- There are 17 million child laborers in India [Government of India Census, 2001]
- 30-40% of the India's population, which is largely economically deprived, spends over 70% of their total expenditure on food.
- [www.cry.org](http://www.cry.org)

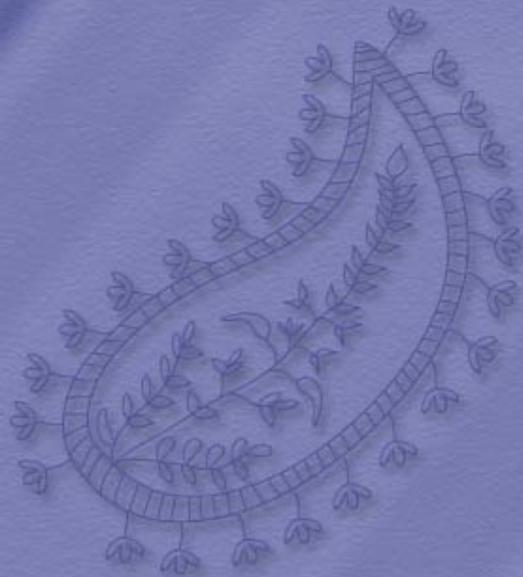


# A government of India statement on child labor

- According to the Indian census of 1991, there are 11.28 million working children under the age of fourteen years in India. Over 85% of this child labor is in the country's rural areas, working in agricultural activities such as fanning, livestock rearing, forestry and fisheries. This labor is outside the formal sector, and outside industry. Moreover, nine out of ten working children work within a family setting. Working in family-based occupations, these children also develop skills in certain traditional crafts, thus augmenting the human capital formation of India's developing economy.
- [http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Child\\_Labor/childlabor.htm](http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Child_Labor/childlabor.htm)

# Working children worldwide

- World wide, an estimated 352 million between the ages of 5 and 17 are engaged in economic activities (paid and unpaid market production, ILO 2002, World bank report).
- About 60% of the world's children live in “developing” Asia, and about 19% of those are victims of child labor practices. (Herath and Sharma, 2007).
- India has the largest child population in the world (Subbaraman and von Witzke, 2007).
- 80.8% attend school, 0.9% are economically active.
- 28.3% of children in India are classified as “unreported”; neither do they attend school, nor are they classified as working (National Sample Survey Organization, Government of India, Report No. 473)



# Defining terms: what does it mean to be a child?

- the “child” has been “thought” differently across discourses (Dunn, 2006).
- the idea of studying children as a “science” can be traced back to the work of Darwin in 1877. This beginning has much to do with how infants and children are defined as biological organisms, that are independent from their familial and cultural contexts
- childhood revolves around three discourses: those of innocence, evil and rights.
- The ILO's Convention No. 138 specifies fifteen years as the age above which, in normal circumstances, a person may participate in economic activity



# Children and work contd.

- A child is classified as a "laborer" if the child is "economically active" (Ashagrie 1993)
- Straight forward definitions and simple answers are also hard to find in the relationship between work and economic status.
- For a long time the mission of the ILO has been to ensure that no child anywhere in the world should work any more. Although the ILO identified child labor as a problem since its inception 1919, it is from the 1970s onwards that it has paid continuous and increasing attention to the problem

- .



# Children and work

- In 1999, with the ILO Convention No. 182, a policy was created, which was to direct efforts towards abolishing child labor in its 'worst forms'. The new convention was seen as the beginning of the definitive abolishment of child labor, as provided for in Convention No. 138. Up to the present, for the ILO, economic growth and the enforcement of school attendance have remained magic formulas which will eradicate child labor altogether.
- World wide, child labor participation rates declined from 27.57 percent in 1950 to 19.91 percent in 1980 and to 13.02 percent in 1995. Particularly in India the rates declined from 35.43 percent in 1950 to 14.37 percent in 1995.
- The paradox of child labor is that blanket bans reduces the place of the child to a position of dependency and passivity. This denial of their capacity to legitimately act upon their environment by undertaking valuable work makes children altogether dependent upon entitlements guaranteed by the state



# Child labor and schooling

- The most important finding that seems to emerge from different context is that the two are not only not mutually exclusive activities but there may be important complementarities between them



# Kinds of work

- Save the Children fights for children's rights. As part of this goal, Save the Children seeks to ensure that girls and boys are protected against harmful work. Implicit in our goal is a belief that children's work is not a uniform activity and we must recognize that, while some forms of work violate children's rights, other forms of work do not. Most forms of work have both good and bad elements, and for this reason, can be both harmful and beneficial to children's development and well-being. Therefore, we accept neither blanket bans of all child work, nor an approach which unequivocally promotes children's work. We believe that different responses are appropriate for different forms of work and for different working children. (Save the Children's position on children and work, 2003).



# Moral perspectives on child labor

- Surprisingly few. Perhaps more implied than explicitly stated.
- Many international organizations exhibit a moral preoccupation with abolition through legislation and a zealous belief in the desirability of extending Western childhood ideals to poor families worldwide.
- Their agenda seems to lie in having staked out child labor as a new and legitimate field of global political and academic concern



# Moral perspectives contd.

- As a global solution to eliminate child labor, development experts are now proposing a standard based on the sanctity of the nuclear family on the one hand and the school on the other as the only legitimate spaces for growing up. If this becomes a universal standard, there is a danger of negating the worth of often precious mechanisms for survival, and penalizing or even criminalizing the ways the poor bring up their children. This criminalization is made more malevolent as modern economies increasingly display their unwillingness to protect poor children from the adverse effects of neoliberal trade policies. (Woodhead, 2000)



# Postcolonial perspectives

- It embodies the recognition of the western imperialist project, including current imperialist political and economic domination, that is spreading to include power over identity(ies) and intellect – contemporarily infused with active critique and innovative interventions that would challenge oppression, objectification, and “othering” (Young, 2001)
- It is based on the assumption that political change is possible when disciplines are engaged in active discussion with one another, particularly when the discussion is between different intellectual traditions, and when activism is employed
- The concept of viewing “reality as resource”: a lens through which existing social and economic arrangements are appropriated and reinterpreted for competitive advantage, a feature which guided many colonial enterprises (Mir, Mir and Upadhyaya, 2003)



# Economic arguments against child labor

- The labor market dysfunction model: which says that “uncoordinated” decisions by parents cause children to be sent to work. Since children earn low wages, that perpetuates poverty. The low productivity of children further perpetuates poverty. The solution provided by this model is for developing countries to given aid, that would create better conditions that would remove the need for child labor (Herath, 2005).



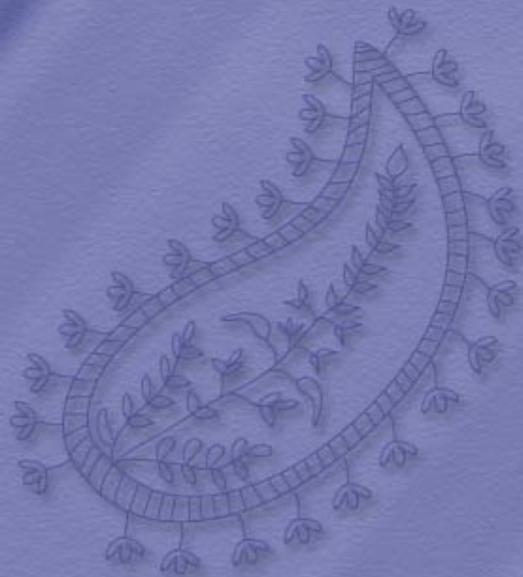
# Questioning labor

- The concept of labor also seems to be under attack, as not only does technology eliminate jobs, but also due to current economic strategies, financial manipulation rather than jobs seem to generate wealth.



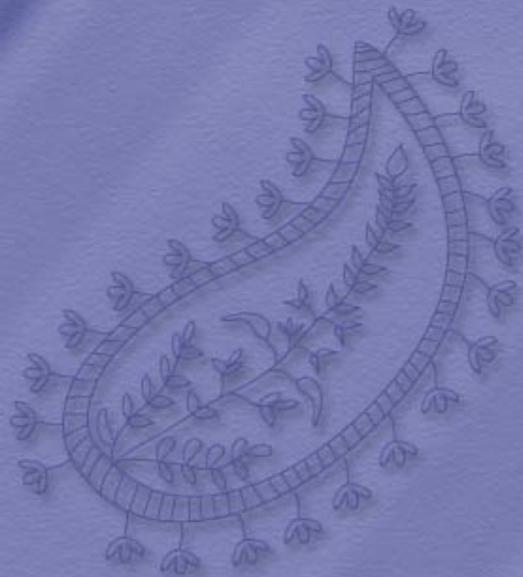
# The “sacred” child

- Sacredness and innocence
- Meyer (2007) uses the example of the internet to illustrate how the discourse of innocence reconstructs itself in contemporary Western contexts: on the one hand, children are seen as being more adept at using technology than their parents, who often have to ask their children for help in this regard. Simultaneously however, there are widespread concerns about making the internet safe for children, and protecting them from its influence.



## The sacred child contd.

- Sacralization is a representative ideal referring to the child today being *valued exclusively* in emotional terms. This ideal includes a belief that economic and emotional values are incompatible, which encourages a tendency to downplay economic values.
- The basic premise that children are innocent and vulnerable beings seems to reveal its origins of Euro-American privilege. Numerous studies of children in India for example have shown that in many cases, children are not protected from the world in this sense. One comment that seems to carry multiple meanings comes from a woman in a research study in the 1950's in rural India, who told the researcher "you raise your children, we live with ours"



# Labor and value

- Economic arguments against child labor :
  - children yield poor value (in that they do not perform upto adult standards of work),
  - protecting children's value as future workers (banning child labor allows children to grow into fully developed adults, who yield better value as workers)
  - moral value: it goes against fundamental moral values to allow children to work, and to contradict that stand, adversely affects economics as well (as seen by the outrage corporations seem to express when any of their plants are discovered to have employed child labor)
- Children then have no place left that assures them of value, than to assume a role of dependence and passivity



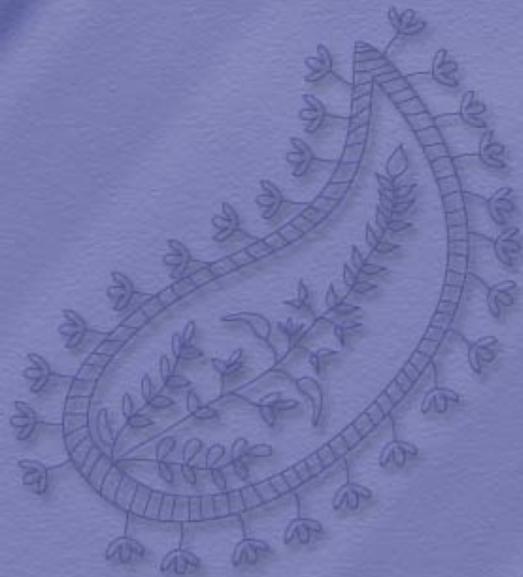
# Children and value

- Setting up children as precious and valuable commodities, whose value is purely emotional, also sets up education as the only acceptable option for children to engage in.
- Schooling has also been shown to increase the cost of child care for families, and it also reduces both the time and the inclination of children to participate more fully in family life



# Value and objects

- Such a limited definition of value, ultimately seems related to a materialistic way of viewing the world. When we place children in the separate category of child, it seems to create them as objects rather than as human beings and from a Hindu perspective, objects create the need for other objects, which distance us from our spiritual selves.



# Children as consumers

- Dominant views of childhood, grounded as they are in the so called scientific study of childhood, have lent themselves very conveniently (and perhaps there is more than convenience involved here) to the construction of children as consumers
- The That's So Raven line of tween clothing is now available in India.

