



Child beggary in India: Child labour or slavery?

Gurdeep Singh, Satnam Singh Deol

Department of Political Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, India

Abstract

The study examines the child beggars in perspectives of child labour and slavery. The study, conducted while applying the empirical-observational approach and the non-participatory observation as well as the unscheduled interview techniques, corroborates the child beggary not merely a form of child labour but a form of slavery. The study argues that children indulged into begging are compelled to beg for very long hours every day. They experience the denial of basic rights with no access to hygienic food, rest, leisure, education and security. Indulgence of children into beggary cannot be perceived as labour activity as children never choose to pursue, rather are compelled by the parents/guardians or the other party. Moreover, child beggars have no claim over their earnings. Since beggary is the sole activity as well as identity that the child beggars carry, they can be recognized as slaves of their psychology and bond-slaves of their parents.

Keywords: Child labour, child rights, deprivation, slavery

Introduction

Childhood is the age that provides the foundational bases to the physiological as well psychological development of human being. Childhood requires particular physical, biological, mental and social conditions. All conditions that are required for human beings during the age of their childhood from the perspective of their survival, physical growth, mental development and adequate socialization are formally acknowledged as child rights (Barnett 2022) ^[2]. The term 'child rights' has multiple connotations. In the context of human biology, a child needs appropriate meals of complete food with nutritious diets, besides the right to health, medical care and proper rest. From psychological perspective, affection from family and society, education and freedom of expression are the primary rights of children. Further, social recognition, social equality, adequate socialization, protection from abuse, exploitation, and access to social relationships as well as institutions are the prerequisite conditions for children while observing childhood from the sociological aspect (Wandenhole et. al. 2019). Unfortunately, only a few fortunate children actually get access to all these rights at the same time and in same manner. Otherwise, those children who belong to the economically deprived and socially marginalized sections experience the scarcity of biological, psychological and social rights (Landgren 2005). The unique vulnerability of the rights of children can be observed from the factor that even the children belonging to the economically prosperous and socio-politically prominent families are more prone to loneliness, emotional abandonment, inappropriate socialization and dearth of familial affection.

Children are the passive victims of human rights violations, passive in the sense that due to their psychological immaturity they are seldom aware of the acts of their abuse and the implications of abuse. The most frequent forms of child abuse include physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse (Sweeney 1995) ^[22]. Physical abuse involves physical injuries caused from beating, slapping, punching, kicking, stabbing, burning, throwing or pushing the child. Corporal punishment given to children at schools, workplaces or other institutions where the students are lodged or detained is also the inhuman type of physical abuse of children (Edwards 2019) ^[4]. Physical abuse may cause bruises, wounds, skin injuries, muscle injuries, broken bones, head trauma and so on. Emotional abuse calling a child with embarrassing vocabulary, comparing disgracefully with others, frightening the child, neglect of the child's questions, desires and creations, lack of affection etc. Emotional abuse results in the lower mental development, abnormal behavior, anxiety, depression, and inappropriate socialization (Larsen, et. al. 2011) ^[13]. Sexual abuse of a child can be defined as any acts that are executed by the parents, relatives, care-takers older children or the strangers that involve using the child as a sexual gratification. These acts may include touching, kissing, grapping, asking the child to take off clothes, touching the genitals, masturbating, rapes etc. Sexual abuse affects the children physically as well as mentally. Children, victims of the sexual abuse are prone to certain neurological ailments, mental trauma, and depression. From socio-psychic perspective, they feel shame, guilt and therefore, lack from the inferiority complex (Gullatt & Stockton 2000) ^[7]. Moreover, sexual abuse, especially the incidents of sexual assaults and rapes not only tarnish the social expression and mental peace of the children but also put negative impacts on their sexual health. Nevertheless, any child belonging to

any socio-economic group or living in any of the socio-political environment may be the victim of all or any of these abuses. However, the children who are indulged into certain economic activities during their tender age of seeking affection, care and resources, are more vulnerable of being abused. The magnitude may vary, but the indulgence of children into economic activities including their participation in the formal wage labour market is a worldwide phenomenon (Humphries 2003) ^[8]. The practice of engaging children in economic or labour-oriented activities for the purpose of earning profit or selling their labour in the wage market is called as child labour. Besides, this commonly perceived definition of child labour, the term includes the engagement of children in family occupations such as agriculture, business, merchantary, manufacturing and processing etc. also as forms of child labour (Jones 2018) ^[10].

As per the report of the UNICEF published in 2021 there are estimated 160 million children including 63 million females and 97 million males were engaged in child labour worldwide. This data corroborates that approximately 1 out of 10 children worldwide are engaged in this practice. More worryingly, estimated half of these children indulged into child labour (79 million) were engaged into hazardous jeopardizing their physical and mental health (UNICEF 2021) ^[23]. Majorly, the practice of child labour is found in the agrarian sector. Children are engaged agriculture by the family members, particularly parents as contributors in the family subsistence. Besides that, children are compelled to work in the commercial plantations, agro-industries, fisheries, aquaculture etc. Children are also engaged as workers in the sectors of industry and services, though comparatively in smaller number (Schrage & Ewing 2005) ^[21]. Children are also involved in the work related to mining, manufacturing, processing and construction. Children are also found working at the eateries, repair-shops and vendors of goods and groceries (Humphries 2013) ^[9]. Among all forms of child labour, the most inhuman and abusive is the indulgence of children into the practice of beggary.

An Overview of Child Begging

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, beggar is “a poor person who lives by asking others for money or food”. The Encyclopedia of Social Work in India (1968) describes the beggars “people seeking charity, who can be recognized as they survive while seeking alms or money as a means of their survival; majority of them are impoverished, they are either homeless or reside in the slums or huts.” (Rengasamy 2013)). International labour organization characterizes begging as, “A variety of socio-economic activities where an individual prays for money while exposing his poverty and stimulating the mercy of the person on religious or other subjective grounds. Both parties, the person asking for money and the person giving money, know that the money given will never be reimbursed or returned (McCabe 2018) ^[14]. Besides this formal display of begging, the same practice is also practiced in latent manner that includes selling any routine items such as flowers, pens etc., cleansing the windshields of the cars at the traffic signals, singing in the streets and so on. (Gillin 1929) ^[6]. Undoubtedly, begging is a social problem that not only manifests that poverty of particular individuals or sections but also exposes the undignified attitudes of those particular individuals and sections who seldom understand the difference between dignified and undignified work and in spite of choosing a dignified profession, they prefer pursuing an undignified practice of begging for them and their children. (Ramanathan 2008) ^[18].

Children are not only very common but also most vulnerable actors involved into beggary. Children are forced or falsely socialized for pursuing beggary by their parents, family members, relatives or any other parties with the selfish intention of getting money or other benefits (Regional Report on Child Begging 2011). The child beggars, mostly residing at the footpaths, railway stations, bus stands or streets, are always prone to be physically tortured, economically exploited and sexually abused. These unfortunate children lead their childhood while combating various physical, social, economic and psychological challenges (Pande 1986) ^[17]. They are deprived of their basic human rights that are recognized for them by the international humanitarian law as well the legal arrangements at the levels of specific countries.

Child Begging in India

The issue of child beggary is present in almost every country, though the nature and the magnitude may vary. In India, the country with largest population of children, countless number of children are deprived of their basic rights including the right to food, shelter, security and education. Reportedly, India is the residence of the largest number of child beggars in the world (Sailaja 2016) ^[20]. As per the Census of India 2011, reportedly 413,670 beggars and vagrants were recorded in India. In case of child beggars, the data of the Thomson Reuters Foundation published in 2016 reveals that there are 300,000 child beggars in India (Nagaraj 2016) ^[16]. Child beggars are the common victims of the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, besides being sufferer of the economic exploitation (Bajpai 2017) ^[1]. As a result, the children involved into the practice of begging have least opportunities and chances to develop as physically, psychologically and socially sound citizens (Menka 2014) ^[15]. In order to control begging in India, the Union government has taken initiatives that mainly include:

- The Government of India passed the Indian Railways Act, 1941 that prohibits beggary at the railway, platforms, and premises and in trains.
- The Section 109(6) Criminal Procedure Code 1868 can be applied to forbid begging.
- The Section 363 (A) of Indian Penal Code (IPC) has the provision for the punishment that can exceed up to 10 years (for kidnapping, abducting or maiming a minor including for the purpose of beggary)
- The Section 42 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986 has also made provision of envisaging punishment including the imprisonment for the person found guilty of forcing minors for begging.
- The Abolition of Begging Act Bill, 2010, passed by the Parliament of India is a formal legislation for prohibiting beggary. The provisions of this bill authorise the Union government to constitute a special fund for the purpose of the rehabilitation of beggars (including children).
- As per Section 85 of the Children Act, 2013 the homeless, destitute children who are identified as beggars will be provided appropriate clothes, access to education, and adequate shelter by the state.

Along with the abovementioned initiatives, legislative measures have also been taken at the levels of states to preventing (child) begging. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (BPBA) 1959 also offers certain guidelines for the accused and recommends executing maximum punishment for 3 years and/or monetary compensation to the victims from the accused. Noticeably, twenty States and two Union Territories of India have incorporated and implemented the Anti-Beggary Legislations, but unfortunately, beggars, including the child beggars can be found at the traffic signals, roadsides, and religious places of almost every city and town of the country (Chopra 2015) ^[3]. Unfortunately, the efforts made at the Constitutional-legislative as well as policy-making level in India have been insufficient and practically unrealized to counter the problem of child beggary (Gangrade 2013). The children indulged into begging face the deprivation and denial of their basic rights (Kaushik 2014) ^[11].

Child Begging in Punjab

Beggary, including child beggary is a very common practice in Punjab, quite similar to other parts of India. The religious enthusiasm augmented by economic prosperity of the state provides a yielding and favorable socio-economic climate for the growth of beggars including the child beggars. Realizing the gravity of the issue, the state government passed and implemented 'The Punjab Prevention of Beggary Act, 1971. The Act prohibits child beggary while acknowledging it as illegal. According to the Act, every child below the age of sixteen years, if involved into beggary, the strict legal action would be taken against the person or party found accused of indulging the child into begging. Moreover, if a child is found practicing begging, he/she would be safely lodged and detained into the Certified Home or the Special Home for a period, not less than one year, and not more than three years. Further, as per the section 9 of the same Act whosoever employs any person (including children) to solicit or receive alms, shall be convicted and imprisonment for maximum three years and minimum one year can be announced by the competent court. In addition to this, the Punjab State Commission for Protection of Child Rights has also given directions to all Child Rights Protection Officers at the level of each district to strictly execute the Punjab Prevention Beggary Act, 1971, to curb the practice of beggary in the state. Unfortunately, despite the application of the specific laws, the child beggars very usually can be traced in all urban segments of Punjab, especially the major cities. Noticeably, huge number of child beggars can be frequently traced in the major cities of the state. In fact, several socio-economic and socio-religious features of these major cities attract the beggars. Therefore, the beggars, including children from the peripheral areas of the cities as well as from other states reside in these cities, finding begging as a lucrative practice there. Amongst the entire state of Punjab, the three cities i.e. Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Amritsar can be traced as the major cities, where majority of the child beggars have been reportedly found (Khaira 2013) ^[12].

Methods and Techniques

Research Design

For conducting a precise study, the empirical-observational approach was adopted. It was a challenging task to identify the selected child beggars and obtaining the queries relevant for the purpose of getting the findings and developing the theoretical perspective. To make the sample of the subjects universal and representative but concise, it was decided to select three million-plus cities of India's Punjab state (as per the Census 2011). Besides, population, the determinants of urbanization, transportation correspondence to the railways as well as roadways connectivity considered while selecting the three cities. The cities of Amritsar, Jalandhar and Ludhiana were decided on. Amritsar was selected due to its religious character and visits of thousands of pilgrims in the city every day. Jalandhar was selected for its rich economy and a noticeable number of populations settled in the developed countries. Ludhiana was selected for its recognition as an industrialized city and vast settlement of inter-state migrated labour.

The other challenge was to determine the type of methods and techniques to obtain the required information. Due to the complexities of reaching the respondents (child beggars) and convincing them to give time to the field investigator and reply the questions, it was decided to opt for the qualitative method of research. Reasonably, the unscheduled interview technique was applied. The field investigator informally interviewed the selected child beggars. In addition to this, the technique of focused group discussions was taken into consideration and the selected child beggars, their family members as well as the shopkeepers, vendors and neighbours of the child beggars were consulted. The investigator purposefully focused the discussion on the issues relevant for the purpose of the study. Besides these qualitative methods and techniques, the conduct of the study was largely observational in nature.

While conducting a pilot survey in case of each city, five places with most dense and vibrant presence of child beggars were identified. Five each child beggars males and females were selected from each site comprising the total number of 10 child beggars from each site. The cumulative number of child beggars from one city comprised of 50 child beggars. Accumulatively, total 150 child beggars from all three selected cities were examined. The field investigator, after selecting the places for the field study, identified the selected child beggars. Maximum one or two beggars at a time were possible to be observed thoroughly. Afterwards, the timings of arrival at the places of begging and the departures from those places of the selected child beggars were noted. Then, the researcher started reaching at the spots before the arrival of the selected child beggars, kept on observing them. To earn acquaintance of the child beggars, they had been frequently offered tea, breads, snacks, ice creams and other eatable available on the sites. Several child beggars were served food by the researcher to earn their reliance. There were plenty of child beggars to whom rupees twenty, fifty or hundred, as per the circumstances, were given to reinforce them speak about the personal, familial and occupational aspects of their lives.

Findings and Analysis

The detailed information regarding various aspects of their economic lives of child beggars including the hours of begging, daily income and utilization of income have been systematically explained and analysed in the following part of the study.

Hours of Begging

For the purpose of obtaining accurate information about the hours spent by the child beggars daily while begging, the selected child beggars were constantly observed for the whole days (prior to their arrival at the spot and till their departure for dwellings). After continuous and rigorous exercises of empirical observations for several days, the patterns of the hours of begging of the child beggars were identified. As per those personal observations, 36 per cent of child beggars spent 08 hours per day on beggary. Approximately, 31 per cent child beggars identified as begging for 06 hours per day. Other 17 per cent of them were found as begging for 04 hours every day while as 12 per cent were observed as begging for approximate 10 hours a day. Interestingly, there were further 04 per cent child beggars, who were found begging for approximate 12 hours per day.

Table 1: Total Hours of Begging

Hours of Begging per Day	Number	Percentage
04 hours	25	17
06 hours	46	31
08 hours	54	36
10 hours	19	12
12 hours	06	04
Total	150	100

As per the data, approximately 48 per cent child beggars consume up to six hours per day while begging. Noticeably, there are 52 per cent children who usually pursue begging for more than six hours every day. More disturbing fact is that 16 per cent children spend more than ten hours every day while begging. The findings reveal the violation of the rights of children. Children, who should spend most of their times at being nurtured physically and mentally at their homes and schools, unfortunately fritter their childhood while begging for their survival. For every occupation, whether organised or unorganised, the working hours are fixed, but not in case of these innocent children. Right to rest during working hours has been recognized as a universal human right for all workers except these child beggars who are compelled to begging continuously for several hours.

Daily Earnings

The study reveals that 35 per cent child beggars earn the daily income in the range of Rs. (Indian Rupees) 51 to Rs.100, followed by nearly 24 percent of child beggars earning Rs.101 to Rs.150. Further, 17 per cent of the child beggars earn 30 to 50 rupees daily; while 13 per cent of child beggars earn rupees 151 to Rs. 200 per day. Noticeably, 11 per cent of child beggars have been found as earning Rs. 201 to 250 per day.

Table 2: Daily Earnings of Child Beggars

Daily Income (in Indian Rupees)	Number	Percentage
Up to 50	26	17
51-100	53	35
101-150	36	24
151-200	19	13
201-250	16	11
Total	150	100

The data confirms that the average income of every child beggars is Rs. 118 per day. Noticeably, 48 per cent child beggars earn more than Rs. 100 per day. Interestingly, 11 per cent of child beggars earn Rs. 201 to 250 per day. These figures establish that beggary, including the child begging is not at all a meager means for survival. Begging has acquired the nature of a full-fledged profession. The actors, even minor as per their age, are able to earn much more than the average per day per capita income in several countries including India. In India, where approximately thirty-six per cent population has been living below the poverty line, which means earning less than Rs. 34 every day, these child beggars are able to earn quite appropriate amount of money. This is the dominant reason that parents, including those who themselves are beggars as well those who pursue any other economic minor activities, prefer their children to indulge into the profession of begging without any reluctance.

Use of Earnings

With regard to the use of the earnings by the child beggars, the study corroborates that 67 per cent of the child beggars hand over their daily earnings to their parents. Besides that, 28 per cent of the child beggars candidly admitted that they utilized their earnings for fulfilling their own basic needs and even without surrendering or sharing the money with their parents. However, the remaining 05 per cent of the child beggars did not reply to the query appropriately, and the same could not be verified through the empirical attempts.

Table 3: Utilization of Earning by Child Beggars

Use of Income	Number	Percentage
Giving to Parents	101	67
Utilizing Themselves	42	28
Did not reply	07	05
Total	150	100

The study corroborates that 67 per cent child beggars submit the amount of their earnings to their parents. It further confirms that in majority number of cases, children are forced by their parents to indulge into the practice of begging. In 28 per cent cases, where child beggars utilize the amount of earnings for themselves, these can be observed as those who are homeless, orphaned and abandoned street children and beg solely and independently for their survival. The study further raises another issue of institutionalized beggary where the parents, guardians indulge children into begging for the purpose of money. Further, the possibility of the organised gangs running the practice of child beggary cannot be ignored, where the members of these gangs pretending as parents or guardians of the child beggars, supervise their activities.

Recreational Profile of the Child Beggars

Right to leisure and recreation has been recognized as one of the basic rights for all under the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) passed by the United Nations in 1948 (UDHR 1948). The Convention on the Rights of Child particularly specifies the right to leisure as very important right of every child. Therefore, it was considered as relevant to enquire whether the selected child beggars were getting appropriate time and conditions for their recreation. The data obtained through empirical observations as well as interactions with the child beggars explicates that 14 per cent of the child beggars get ample time and space for leisure and creational activities. Further, 51 per cent of the child beggars do not get extra time and space for recreation but very usually get time to play with each other at the begging sites while begging. Unfortunately, 35 per cent child beggars do not get any time for recreational activities while, before or after the begging hours.

Table 4: Recreation Scenario

Recreational Profile	Number	Percentage
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Getting appropriate time for Recreation	21	14
Recreation while Begging on the Begging Sites	77	51
Not getting any time for Recreation	52	35
Total	150	100

As discussed in the research methodology, the findings of the study are based on the constant observation of the researcher over the selected child beggars for the whole days, i.e. before their arrival to the place of begging and after they left the begging sites. Along with this, the selected child beggars were also interviewed informally. Furthermore, the information was obtained from the shopkeepers, vendors, neighbours, with whom the child beggars or their families had social acquaintances or social associations. Based on these factors, it has been found that very less number of child beggars are able to get appropriate time and space for recreation. Approximately half of them find some time every day for playing with each other at the begging sites while begging. Unluckily, one-third of the child beggars do not get any time for leisure or recreational activities. They spend most of their time while begging and getting additional time for playing is a far dream for them, they do not get time or space to play with each other even during their begging hours. It was observed that the child beggars who pursue begging for 10-12 hours daily starting from the early hours of mornings and till the late evenings, they do not get any time for playing or recreating themselves through other modes. Majority of those who get appropriate time and space for recreation are those who mostly live with their families and beg only for fixed hours.

Concluding Remarks

Involving children in any economic activity for the purpose of earning any income or profit is a form of child labour and hence, prohibited as per the international humanitarian law. In this political-legal scenario, child beggary can be perceived as a form of the deprivation or violation of the rights of children. It should be recognized as violation of the international as well as the domestic laws and treaty obligations. Recognising child beggary merely as a form of child labour will be injustice with the child beggars from the legal as well humanitarian perspectives. Beggary is not only legally prohibited but is acknowledged as disrespectful socially and sacrilegious from the religious viewpoint. Therefore, involving children into begging should be recognized as a form of slavery where the innocent children are compelled to begging for longer hours during early mornings and late evenings and under the challenging circumstances. Reasonably, in the cases of various forms of child labour, the working hours are fixed and children have freedom for their personal space. However, in case of beggary, children are treated as bond-slaves where they have only sole activity to perform and sole identity to carry. With no access to education, appropriate food, leisure, health and parental care, they lead the life of bond-slaves. Moreover, the child beggars have no claim over their earnings and they actually earn for their parents, family members, or any other party. With no quality life at all, they are not more than slaves. If there is a word fiercer than slavery, that can be used for these naive and innocent children. There is a genuine reason for these sentiments. As slaves are enslaved by the persons unknown to them and the slaves are at least aware of the causes and consequences of being enslaved. However, the child beggars are enslaved by their own parents or family members and they seldom identify the causes and consequences of their indulgence into the exercise of begging. In fact, child beggars are slaves of their psychology as they are born and built up as beggars. They are the most passive victims, passive in the sense that they do not recognize that they have been leading the lives of deprivation, neglect and slavery, moreover their age and psychological immaturity does not permit them to assert and agitate against the inhuman treatment. As they are passive, the political institutions, including the political parties and regimes, hardly ever realize their miseries.

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