

# State, Civil Society and the Eradication of Child Labour in Karnataka

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The combined effort of the Karnataka state government and civil society to eradicate child labour in the state is an interesting phenomenon. After a Herculean effort to rescue and rehabilitate child labourers, both the above actors attempt to “mainstream” them, i.e., admit them to regular government schools. The “mainstreaming” becomes the ultimate goal of the entire attempt to eradicate child labour. This is often of limited impact and of uncertain outcome.

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Public-private partnership (PPP) has become the buzzword in policy discourse today. These partnerships are defined as those between the state (public) and private (corporate) sector. By a curious twist the “private” in the definition also includes non-profit, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since these NGOs actually do not fall in the private domain. They fall in the space between the private and the public. The point is that in the present discourse on PPPs the state (government) actively seeks and enlists the support of NGOs even in the sphere of welfare programmes.<sup>1</sup> How far these practices of partnerships are successful is questionable. There is a lively discourse on the partnership between government and NGOs in the literature on Karnataka. The *Karnataka Human Development Report* of 2005 has an entire chapter devoted to the NGO-government partnership and is upfront about the advantages as well as limitations of such partnerships. In the first place the report acknowledges that there is a role for partnership in the human development of the state, while noting that Karnataka was the first state to enter into such partnerships in the country. It says:

Karnataka enjoys the distinction of fostering a healthy relationship between the government and NGOs. Such partnerships are established in the hope of greater synergy, and even

though they may bring conflicts in their wake, Karnataka has chosen to manage these tensions rather than abandoning NGO partnerships altogether.

There are at least two views regarding the partnership in Karnataka in the related literature. Rajasekhar and Birader (2004) see it as “reluctant partnerships” while Kudwa (2008) conceptualises these collaborations as “uneasy” and fluid. The report also deals with these issues. What emerges from these discussions is that not all is smooth and even in these collaborations and partnerships.

## State Programme

The State Child Labour Eradication Programme (SCLP) is an ambitious project of the government which had aimed at abolishing child labour all over Karnataka by 2007 with the help of the NGOs. The partnership between NGOs and the government is the fulcrum of the programme and is envisaged in three stages: the identification and rescue of child labourers, their rehabilitation and their “mainstreaming”. The programme is run basically through the department of labour and envisages enlisting of local NGOs all over the state.

The department issues a public notice to enlist NGOs with at least two years of experience in child labour-related work. These NGOs are supposed to be situated at the district or sub-district (taluka) level. Once they are selected all the line departments of the government are supposed to assist them in identifying, rescuing, rehabilitating and admitting the child workers in the schools. There are four tiers of implementation involved in this.

While selecting NGOs the department of labour also selects a project director in each district from outside its bureaucracy.

Usually these project directors are selected from either a social work or legal background. Once the project director is selected she/he in collaboration with NGOs is supposed to conduct a comprehensive survey in his/her town/district to be followed up by the rescue effort. The rescue is supposed to be done with the help of all the line departments such as labour, police, health, education, social welfare, etc.

There are many problems in the identification and rescue of child labourers; the employers are antagonistic; the line departments lack coordination; some of the line departments do not participate at all: e.g., the health department; finally parents of the children too are unwilling. The identification and rescue is the basis on which child labourers are brought in by NGOs for rehabilitation. We have conducted the study in three districts (Kolar, Davanagere, Bellary) and found that in Kolar district some of the employers of child labour had beaten up the project director and the two police constables who had accompanied her in the identification and rescue work. In Bellary district the local illegal mining network is so widespread that no one

knows the exact magnitude of the child labour there. The illegal mining lobby there employs local children and children of migrant families and is so powerful that considerable complicity of local officials in the process is not ruled out. In Davanagere district the presence of child labour in the puffed rice industry is pervasive and the industry mobilises local politicians on its behalf whenever the rescue of child labourers is attempted. Physical assaults on NGO and project staff are not uncommon. The NGOs take up rescue work nonetheless because they are committed and need the project money to work and survive.

Despite these hurdles the NGOs with the collaboration of line departments do succeed in rescuing child labourers. They rehabilitate child labourers in special rehabilitation centres. Each NGO is allowed and funded to rehabilitate up to 50 child labourers. In the process of identification some NGOs choose to concentrate on localities where the child labour is likely to be concentrated or where the communities in which child labour is concentrated. These are working class communities often

consisting of dalit and minority children, girls and boys. The government gives sufficient freedom to the NGOs to choose their strategies and the ideology and vision of the NGOs matter to some extent. Some of them concentrate on dalit children, some on children from the minority communities, and some exclusively on girl children. Some NGOs told us that work related to women's self-help groups led them to identifying the child labourers.

Rehabilitation of child labourers is done through temporary hostels and bridge schools. These hostels usually host around 30 to 50 children – the upper limit allowed by the government – and provide food, shelter and education to the children rescued by the department of labour.

### Drawbacks

There are significant problems in this mode of rehabilitation. First the per capita food allowance is Rs 5 per meal, on which food, leave alone nutritious food, is hardly affordable. The NGOs scrape through their finances to provide food. Second the shelter requires sufficiently spacious halls to house the children and which need to be



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hired. The rent amount allowed by the government to hire such shelters is Rs 1,000 per month, a sum that is inadequate even in small towns such as Kolar, Bellary or Davanagere. Most NGOs do not have their own infrastructure for this purpose. Finally, the bridge schools provide crash courses based on the material provided for such purpose by the department of education. This is most of the times not sufficient. The other problem is that different children come to the rehabilitation centre with different levels of learning capacities. This complicates the bridge course. There is very little vocational training barring some centres where girl children are rehabilitated and where they learn work like knitting, tailoring, etc (as in Kolar district). In the other cases even this does not exist.

A serious problem that the government should pay attention to is the duration of rehabilitation. The official policy of the SCLP was to have the children stay in the rehabilitation centre for more than a year. The government then reduced the period of rehabilitation to one year. This is too short a time period. A child labourer cannot acquire sufficient learning skills in one year to join a regular school. While the NGOs argue that the children need more time government officials suspect that the demand is meant to sustain their own survival. From our field observations we have no hesitation in pointing out that the NGOs have a solid case in their favour. The period of rehabilitation ought to be longer to show any success. Resource mobilisation by the NGOs on their own is one option towards supplanting the efforts of the state. But often these NGOs are small town bodies without any infrastructure of their own. Nor do they have the clout to mobilise resources. Therefore, NGOs depend on the government to run the programme.

This dependence on government support brings out the unequal quality of the PPP in the entire programme.<sup>2</sup> Often not only for the NGOs but for the government too, eradication of child labour becomes a one-off programme. This means that while the problem of child labour is deep-rooted, the efforts of the government are short term and episodic. Even in the short-term programmes, however ambitious and progressive, the attitude of the

government towards the programme is a patronising one.

### Failure Formula

The ultimate aim of the SCLP is to “mainstream” the child labourers. Mainstreaming means putting them in regular government schools and taking them out of work permanently in their childhood. This can work only if the child after spending one year in the rehabilitation centre joins a regular school at the appropriate standard of education and the schools have hostel facilities too. Even this minimal notion of mainstreaming is still a far cry. Our study report (Rajasekhar, Gayathri Devi and Anil Kumar 2007) on mainstreaming came to the following conclusions:

– The bridge schools and rehabilitation centres lack good lodging and boarding facilities, the attention and follow-up from the teachers is insufficient. Here the NGOs played an important role and provided considerable attention to these aspects thus succeeding in chalking up a good retention rate (Rajasekhar, Gayathri Devi and Anil Kumar 2007: 73-74).

Of the children dropping out, a majority (i.e., 52%) did so after they were actually mainstreamed. Some children joined the regular schools with the hope that they would get hostel facility; when they did not, they simply dropped out. The skills obtained in the bridge schools were not adequate to continue in regular schools. Due to difficulties involved in securing admission into public schools some children were admitted into private schools and since the parents had to comply with the rules of the private schools such as uniform, tie, etc, they could not afford private school education and dropped out (pp 73-74).

– Our study of the SCLP clearly notes in the conclusion that

the mainstreaming requires the availability of hostels and residential school facilities in relation to the number of children completing the bridge school education. This hampered the success of the project in terms of mainstreaming. *This is a major problem and unless the Government and Department of Education see to it that the mainstreaming is successful and sustainable the entire effort goes waste* (Rajasekhar, Gayathri Devi and Anil Kumar 2007: 79-80, italics in the original).

Household poverty is the most important reason for dropping out of rehabilitation

centres and government schools more so, in the case of the latter. In the SCLP rescuing and rehabilitation were to some extent successful; whereas mainstreaming in the way we have witnessed was not. Child labour eradication programmes such as the SCLP thus have limited goals and limited scope in dealing with this social problem.

### NOTES

- 1 The *Karnataka Human Development Report* for example notes: “The sheer diversity of NGO activity is testimony to the range, professionalism and expertise of these organisations. NGOs have been instrumental in the provision of healthcare, literacy, poverty alleviation through sustainable development, rehabilitation, women’s rights, engendered human development programmes, environmental protection, HIV/AIDS support programmes, agriculture extension services, to name a few. They supplement government services in a significant way although their methodology is different” (p 279).
- 2 The KHDR says this in the following manner: “The ability to influence policy is also conditioned by the bidding process. NGOs argue that bidding for contracts to implement programmes announced by the government ties the hands of the bidding agency and puts it at a disadvantage if it were to question the contents and implementation strategies and programmes. However NGOs do bid for contracts and the government then deals with NGOs as contractors” (KHDR 2005: 282-83).

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