

Movement Rises to Wipe Out Blot

By MAYANK CHHAYA

FIROZABAD, Uttar Pradesh or 10-year-old Shanikar, childhood the last three years has meant spending his days in front of a furnace burning at 700 degrees. His toys have been a red-hot iron rod dripping molten glass. His nights have been sleepless, with unbearable fatigue.

Shanikar is among 50,000 children working in Firozabad's world-renowned glass industry. Like more than 50 million children in India, he is condemned to skip childhood and work in some of the most abject industrial conditions.

But emerging now is the first determined voluntary people's movement to abolish child servitude, which exists in defiance of all social and legal norms. A 1,000-mile march that started Jan. 29 from Bihar, the most underdeveloped state, to New Delhi has signaled the beginning of what the organizers promise will be a nationwide movement against child labor.

An Engineer-Activist

Leading the march was an electrical engineer turned social activist, Kailash Satyarthi, and a politician turned social crusader, Swami Agnivesh, whose work in releasing thousands of bonded laborers has been internationally acclaimed. Both say the march is just the beginning of an exercise in awakening the national conscience.

"How can a country whose children's backs are broken by burden be calm?" asks Satyarthi.

But going by Satyarthi and his 200 fellow marchers' experience, it seems the people are not so calm about the social ill.

Better Than Expected

"The response to our march has been far beyond what we had anticipated," he told *India Abroad* last week. "People listened to us with a lot of attention and involvement."

Satyarthi spoke while leading the march through a quaint marketplace at Sirsaganj near here. His approach, while addressing scores of meetings along the route, was informal, highly communicative and replete with cinematic language.

At Sirsaganj, for instance, he employed a highly contrasting imagery often used by the Hindi film makers of Bombay. He told his audience of a wealthy woman driving in a car costing "three million rupees" with her "little puppy."

Kiss From Her Puppy

"She would take a kiss from her puppy even while knitting wool," he recounted. "I asked the driver why she had to knit a sweater in Bombay where there is no winter, and he said it was for the puppy."

As his listeners laughed over the irony, Satyarthi continued:

"This madame's children go to a school whose monthly fee is 10,000 rupees, and look at you. You don't even get to wear shoes or eat properly."

The message had already gone home about how child labor was a curse that the parents of the 50 million had to live down.

The march leaders stressed that they were not conducting the campaign for political reasons. Hari Kumar of the Delhi-based Research and Information Services, who traveled with the marchers, said:

"Initially, many thought that it was one more political gimmick. But when they were told that the leaders were not seeking political gains and were doing it purely as a measure of social reform, they began to see them with respect."

"I think the response has been more than what they had expected for an issue which is seen as something so dull."

Still in Early Stage

He believed that an awareness against child labor was building up, but was still in the early stages.

The problem is so enormous and entangled with social-economic links that it will take nothing short of a sustained, mass countrywide movement to solve.

According to "Children of Darkness," a manual on child labor published by the rural labor cell, the practice has existed "in one form or another at all historical times." Even in 1890, thousands of children were forced into working for survival by their parents.

The manual says that India is probably the only country whose Constitution

the rural areas where poverty is often dehumanizing. Millions of families see children strictly as a potential source of enhancing family income.

If the government does enforce the ban, it will face the problem of guaranteeing compulsory primary education. So in a way, it is convenient for the government that the practice continues amid low-key protests, even while it professes to oppose it officially.

"It is a societal view of what childhood is all about," said Eimi Waranabe, India country representative if the

have gone halfway through university, but have consciously chosen to stay in the glass business because it is better paying," he added.

His industry, he said, welcomes a movement such as the present one, "which compels industries to treat the existing child laborer with as much dignity as possible and avoid employing more children in future; it is a difficult social and economic issue, but it has to be sorted out."

Taking part in the march some children who were freed from forcible em-

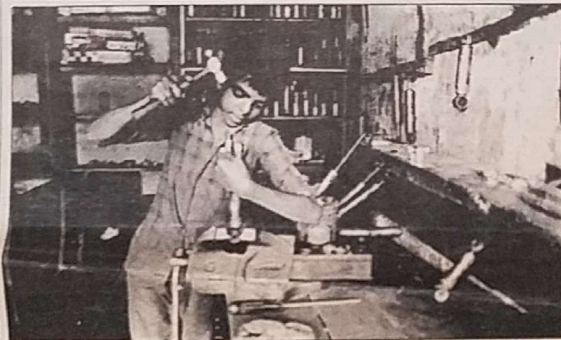
its children for short-term social-economic compulsions, or begin to evolve a long-term strategy to abolish child labor.

Nandana Reddy, a founder member of the Bangalore-based Concerned for Working Children, called child labor an "Asian phenomenon" and said the West "cannot even begin to fathom to what extent it exists here." She said the problem arose from a "faulty model of development."

The movement against child labor is still nascent, but given an efficient networking of nongovernmental organizations, activists are confident it is poised for nationwide growth. Be it the potentially lethal fireworks industry of



Left, children in bonded labor rescued in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, by the Bonded Liberation Front, are seen having tea during a press conference last September. (Photo: L. M. Joshi) Below left, one of the under age child at work. Below right, at a press conference at the Press Club, New Delhi, some of the bonded labor children in the carpet industry rescued by the Bandhua Mukti Morcha. (Photo: L. M. Joshi)



specifically prohibits child labor. An article of the Constitution says, "No child shall be employed to work in any factory or mine, or engaged in any other hazardous employment."

Additional Articles

Two other articles say: "The tender age of children should not be abused and citizens should not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age and strength."

"Children should be given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity, and childhood and youth protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment. The state shall endeavor to provide, within a period often years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14."

Forty-three years after the Constitution was drafted and over a dozen laws against child labor enacted, the problem has multiplied fivefold. According to Agnivesh and Satyarthi, from 10 million child laborers in 1947, there are now over 50 million. They see a direct connection in that the number of unemployed in the country is nearly as high as the employed children.

'They Come Cheap'

"Industries prefer children because they come cheap, can be exploited easily and cannot unionize," Satyarthi said. Agnivesh believed that the unemployment problem could be solved if the laws against child labor were enforced strictly.

However, why the laws are nearly impossible is easy to see. More than 80 percent of the child labor force is in

United Nations Children's Fund. "For these families, childhood is all about supporting families with relentless work."

In India, she added, child labor is seen as a welfare issue. "We think the welfare palliative approach condones the issue," she continued.

In her assessment, which is independently supported by activists against the system all over the country, compulsory primary education is the only answer.

"Universalization of primary education, which we at Unicef have been constantly fighting for, will help significantly in dealing with the problem," she insisted.

But that argument is easier made than enforced in a country where millions of families have to pinch pennies for daily survival. In scores of towns such as Firozabad, Mirzapur, Sivakasi, Moradabad, Jaipur and Khujira, where child labor predominates, the argument stands impossibly challenged.

Millions of children are employed in the glass, lock, firecracker, carpet, brassware and pottery industries. These industries thrive on children almost invariably at the permanent cost of their future.

Kulwant Singh of the J.K. Glass and Crockery Center, which employs many children, said: "Unfortunately, the tendency among both the parents and children is to think, 'What good is education if it is going to mean unemployment? Then one might as well get children employed early.'"

"This is a short-sighted logic, but for the poor, there is nothing like long-term plans."

He said he encouraged his child employees to study simultaneously. "Many

employment in Mirzapur's carpet industry. A particularly moving story was that of Shankar Kailash, 7, who lived in the village of Jamua in Bihar. By the time the activists freed him, he had bleeding fingers because of the tough weaving he had to do.

Most of those freed by the movement had been either abandoned by their parents or "taken away" by the carpet industry as cheap labor. Many were given only two meals a day as wages.

According to Watanabe, Western pressure is building up against the use of child labor in India's flourishing carpet industry. The U.S. is drafting a law banning the import of goods produced by child labor. Apart from the U.S., Germany and Britain are major importers of Indian carpets.

In 1991-92, India exported carpets worth Rs. 7.45 billion (nearly \$250 million), which was 20 percent of her total exports, according to Watanabe. She said that Unicef was "mobilizing its networks among industrialists" to look at the carpet industry and find ways to phase out child labor.

The focus is not on India alone, she added, but also on Pakistan and Nepal, other major carpet centers.

"We have been talking of some kind of standards like Ecomark as part of the strategy," she said. "Maybe we can call it child labor-free product."

Watanabe, Agnivesh, Satyarthi and many others see signs of change for the better among the industries that depend on child labor. The change has come from a sustained grass-root mobilization of the kind seen during the march.

Activists say that as a nation, India must decide whether it wants to sacrifice

Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu or the carpet industry in Mirzapur, the movement has made its focus generally against child labor.

Predictably, professional politicians have never seriously concerned themselves with the issue. Never has it been made into an issue on which elections are fought, although the numbers involved are larger than entire populations of many countries.

The answer lies in the people's initiative, which has begun to emerge clearly.

(Arun Sinha contributed to this report.)

Devout Industrialists Accused by Activist

By a Staff Writer

SIRSAGANJ, Uttar Pradesh Devout Hindu and Muslim industrialists who support the movement for a Ram temple or a mosque at Ayodhya are accused of having no compunctions about exploiting children.

Kailash Satyarthi, an anti-child labor activist, told a meeting here last week he knew some industrialists "who stuff their coffers riding the backs of children," even as they professed to be worshippers of Ram or faithful to Allah.

Satyarthi spoke of two boys, Shankar and Suleman, who were freed from bondage in the carpet industry during his campaign march.

"They (Hindu activists) are claiming that 'every child is a child of Lord Ram,' but see how they treat them," he said. "Similarly, they pretend to be devout Muslims and see what they do to children."