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**Deprivation, discrimination and delivery:  
competing explanations for child labour and educational  
failure in South Asia**

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## Summary

The high incidence of both child labour and out-of-school children in the South Asian region has given rise to competing explanations. Broadly speaking, these can be categorised as those which focus on poverty and under-development and those which focus on policy failure and poor implementation of educational services. This paper reviews the empirical evidence put forward for each of these explanations, focusing primarily on India and Bangladesh, and concludes that they mutually reinforce, rather than contradict, each other. While poverty clearly has a role to play in explaining the incidence of child labour and the absence of a demand, or the inability to pay, for education, it does not constitute an insurmountable barrier. There are many poor families who make the sacrifices necessary to send their children to school. Instead, the relationship between poverty and the twin problems of child labour and poor educational outcomes has geographical, economic and social dimensions. Across the South Asian subcontinent, the problem tends to be greater in those regions where demographic transition has been slow or which have had poor rates of growth in the economy and labour productivity. Within specific regions, it tends to be greater in more isolated villages which are characterised by agro-climatic uncertainty and reliant on traditional, rain-fed agriculture. Finally, both problems are exacerbated when poverty combines with other forms of disadvantage, such as caste, gender, ethnicity and livelihood insecurity. At the same time, ambivalence at policy level towards the eradication of child labour and the universalisation of education have contributed to the persistence of these problems. Moreover, it is evident that the design of educational services as far as their norms, content and procedures are concerned discriminate against precisely those children who are at the greatest geographical, social and economic disadvantage. It is those governments at national and local level who have demonstrated the greatest commitment to countering these biases who have managed to make the greatest progress, regardless of the incidence of poverty. There are clearly important lessons to be learnt from their efforts. However, in the absence of changes in the broader policy climate, the paper identifies a number of programmatic interventions which might achieve similar results but at the micro-level and in the short-run.



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Statement of the problem

While child labour and poor educational outcomes are both problems which occupy a central role in social policy debates today, they have risen to their present prominence through somewhat different trajectories. Education has always been acknowledged as an important aspect of development policy, but its perceived significance has changed over time. In the early decades of development planning, it was attributed an instrumental role in the creation of a skilled labour force to manage the capital-intensive technologies which formed the basis of the prevailing strategies for growth. Today, however, there is a growing recognition of its importance, not only in relation to current strategies for pro-poor, labour-intensive growth but also to a wide range of social development goals (Colclough 1982; Summers 1993). This new significance is evident in a variety of international policies and conventions, including the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UNDP's human development approach and the OECD International Development Targets, all of which give priority to the achievement of universal primary education and all of which have been widely ratified.

The problem of child labour has taken somewhat longer to surface in the international agenda and there is far less consensus on the nature of the problem and hence the measures necessary to tackle it. It is worth noting, for instance, that the ILO convention against child labour (the minimum age convention) was the *least* ratified of 7 core labour standards. Only 46 countries had ratified it in 1995 compared to 125 who had ratified the right to collective bargaining (Raynauld and Vidal 1998). Globalisation processes are also seen to have played an important role in increasing the prominence of child labour in international debates. Some see globalisation as directly responsible for an increase in child labour because of intensified competition over wage costs (Vidyasagar 1999; Gulrajani 2000; Meillassoux, 2000). Others suggest that the existence of child labour preceded the opening up of economies in most of the poorer countries of the world today, but that increasing competitiveness in international trade has led to greater attention being paid to sources of 'unfair competition', of which child labour is seen as a primary example (Basu 1999a and b; Chaudhri 1997a). Certainly, this was the case in Bangladesh where the attempt by US Senator Harkin in 1993 to ban all imports made with child labour led to the widespread dismissal of children from its export-oriented garment sector and propelled the issue onto the national policy agenda. In India, however, policy attention to the issue of child labour preceded its growing prominence on the international stage, and reflected an internal debate about caste, class and gender inequalities (Chaudhri 1997; Mishra 2000).

The aim of this paper is to review the explanations given for these twin phenomena in the context of South Asia and the empirical evidence advanced in support of these explanations. The main focus of the paper will be on India and Bangladesh. The aim of the discussion is to take stock of what we know and what we still need to know in order to develop more effective approaches to the elimination of child labour and the universalisation of education. In the rest of this first section, we provide some estimates of

the magnitude of these problems and consider a number of alternative explanations and approaches that have featured in the South Asian literature.

## **1.2 Estimates of child labour and educational under-achievement**

Estimates of the magnitude of child labour and educational failure in South Asia can only be approximate because of methodological and conceptual limitations in data collection efforts. Official calculations of child labour tend to be underestimates because they exclude forms of work in which children are likely to predominate while official estimates of enrolment ratios tend to grossly exaggerate actual achievement because they take no account of drop-outs, absenteeism, failure to complete and the deliberate inflation of estimates. However, bearing these qualifications in mind, what the available statistics do illustrate is the sheer magnitude of both problems in this part of the world.

As far as education is concerned, UNICEF (1999) calculations suggest that South Asia alone accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the estimated 130 million children of school age with no access to basic education in the developing world. Girls make up around two of every three of these children. While gross enrolment ratios at the primary stage have increased from 83 per cent in 1980 to 105 per cent in 1993 in India and from 62 per cent to 111 per cent in Bangladesh, they provide a deceptive picture. As Govinda (forthcoming) points out, 'provisions have been unable to keep pace with the growing requirement in quantitative as well as qualitative terms'. Only 47 per cent of children registered for primary school in Bangladesh, and 62 per cent in India, completed their primary education in 1995.

As far as child labour is concerned, ILO estimates (1996) suggest a quarter of a billion working children aged 5-14 throughout the world (about half in full-time work) of whom 61 per cent (153 million) are to be found in Asia. Estimates from India vary according to source of data. It was 17 million according to the 1983 National Sample Survey, 44 million according to the Operations Research Group and anywhere between 40-100 million according to activists from the Campaign against Child Labour (cited in Swaminathan 1998: 1513). 1991 Census data suggests 11.29 million working children while the ILO (1996) puts the estimates at 12.67 children in full time, and 10.5 million in part-time, work.

Conceptual and methodological limitations in data collection have also given rise to a category dubbed 'nowhere' children (Chaudhri 1997a), i.e. children who were neither at school (and hence excluded from enrolment data) nor at work (and hence excluded from labour force data). According to the 1991 census, there were 92 million of such children (see Bhatta 1998 for microlevel evidence on this category of children). Closer investigation suggests that they were often engaged in forms of productive work which are not counted as 'economic activity' by formal data collection efforts (e.g. fuel collection, rag picking, paid and unpaid domestic work) or else in socially stigmatised forms of occupations (prostitutes, beggars, vagabonds etc) which tend to go unreported (Chaudhri 1997a). There is a strong gender bias in these omissions. According to Duraisamy (1997), nearly half of girls in the school-going age are engaged in such work and hence get excluded from both work and educational statistics. Microlevel studies also suggest that there are many children, often girls, who are indeed neither at work nor in school (Bhatta 1998).



In Bangladesh too, official estimates of child labour have been plagued by definitional and conceptual problems. According to the 1990–91 Labour Force Survey, there are around 5.8 million working children in Bangladesh, viz. around 18 per cent of the child population (Delap 1996). However, such estimates exclude both participation in the informal sector as well as in unremunerated but expenditure-saving activities which are of particular importance to poorer households (Rahman 1995). The gender bias in these omissions is illustrated in a study by Ahmad and Quasem (1991) who found major discrepancies between economically active children recorded by the 1983–84 Labour Force Survey and the estimates recorded by their household survey of four villages; the discrepancy was largest for girls.

An analysis of the empirical data from both countries suggests that in place of a simple dichotomy between children at work and children at school, what exists is a much more complex range of categories comprising, in the first instance, children in full time education; children in full-time work; children who are neither at school nor at work; and children who are engaged in both school and work. Out-of-school children can be further sub-divided into children who never enrolled and those who enrolled but dropped out. Children at work can also be subdivided on the basis of the regularity of work (full-time, part-time, seasonal); working conditions (degree of hazard or exploitation), social relations of work (bonded labour, family-based farm or enterprise, wage employment) and nature of returns to work (e.g. unpaid family labour, payment in kind, piece-rate, time rate).

A number of implications that flow from this heterogeneity in the relationships between work and education in children's lives. First of all, it suggests that while there is a typically inverse relationship between child labour and poor educational outcomes, they are not literally two sides of the same coin.<sup>1</sup> The closer the correlation between them in any particular context, the more likely it is that the same set of factors (e.g. poverty) simultaneously explain a high supply of one (viz. child labour) and a low demand for the other (viz. education). However, the weaker the correlation, the more likely it is that each of the two phenomena are independently influenced by other factors as well. In policy terms, this implies that where there is a strong correlation, measures addressing one aspect of the problem will also succeed in addressing the other: thus improvements in the supply of education is likely to both increase the demand for education and simultaneously reduce the supply of child labour. Where, however, the correlation is weak, such improvements may succeed in increasing the demand for education, but not necessarily reducing the incidence of child labour. They would therefore have to be preceded, supplemented or strengthened by strategies aimed more directly at the causes of child labour.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Indian context, Kumar (1993) found a weak negative correlation between the statewide incidence of child labour in India and percentage of children aged 5–9 attending school, together with a stronger positive correlation between incidence of child labour and drop out rates at primary and secondary school levels. In Bangladesh, 89 per cent of working children had no education suggesting that work and education were seen to be antithetical options (BBS 1996). However, as we shall see, there was also evidence that many children at school continued to be economically active.

### **1.3 Explanations and approaches**

Most contributors to the debates about child labour and poor educational outcomes recognise the relationship between the two, but differ in how they explain the relationship, which aspect of the problem they prioritise and hence what should be done about it. Two broad categories of explanation can be distinguished: (a) those which explain child labour, and, by extension, poor educational outcomes, in terms of poverty and underdevelopment and (b) those which explain poor educational outcomes, and, by extension, child labour, in terms of policy failure.<sup>2</sup> These explanations have, in turn, given rise to a number of different approaches for addressing these problems, with very different roles ascribed to economic and social policy (Ramanathan 2000; Mishra 1997).

At one end of the spectrum is what has been described as the ‘realist’ position which views child labour as a harsh but unavoidable reality for poor countries like India and Bangladesh and eschews the idea that there can be any major achievements on this front until poverty itself has been eradicated. Priority is therefore given to ameliorating the worst aspects of child labour which includes prohibition of hazardous forms of work for children, regulation in non-hazardous forms of work and the provision of non-formal education as a means of allowing working children to acquire some form of education. Such a position therefore countenances the possibility that many children will continue working, while others will seek to combine work and school. The Indian Child Labour Act of 1986 is believed to exemplify this view (Chaudhri 1997a).

At the other end of the spectrum is what has been described as the ‘idealist’ or ‘purist’ position (Arvind 1999; Dhagamwar 1999). This sees child labour as a violation of the rights of the child and a reflection of the failure of society, and of policy-makers, to act on behalf of its most disadvantaged citizens. It stresses the need to ban *all* child labour and to make education both compulsory and justiciable. Distinctions between various kinds of work, whether hazardous or non-hazardous, are regarded as irrelevant because the denial of anything short of full-time, formal education is considered hazardous to the future development of children.

Although such viewpoints generally lack practical focus, they have an important function because, as Ramanathan points out, ‘while unreal expectations may negate the value of prescribed processes, it is yet possible that the statement of the objective may itself lend it an acceptable morality’ (2000: 153). Similarly, Grootaert and Kanbur note that while a ban on child labour may have adverse implications for children and their families from a welfare economics point of view, there are valid arguments for a non-welfarist framework which views certain rights as ‘self-evident, natural and given’ (1995: 198). Such rights are

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<sup>2</sup> To some extent, these positions echo those which characterise the debate about the decline of child labour in the course of industrialisation in the advanced industrial countries, in which authors like Bolin-Hort (1989) and Weiner (1991) have stressed the importance of the political will to both legislate and enforce compulsory education and a ban on child labour while others like Nardinelli (1990) and Cunningham and Viazzo (1996) have argued that rising incomes and technological change were causally prior to legislation in changing the economics of child labour and increasing attendance at school.

regarded as inviolable, regardless of whether the consequences of violations are welfare-improving from an efficiency or distributional perspective.

Finally, there are a variety of ‘pragmatic’ approaches, all offering practical responses to the problem of child labour, but varying according to whether they favour the idealist or the realist end of the spectrum. Closer to the idealist position are those who believe that offering non-formal education merely perpetuates both child labour, by allowing children to combine work and school, as well as social inequality, by offering inferior forms of education to the children of the poor. Priority has to be given to tackling both child labour and poor educational outcomes through efforts to both change the hearts and minds of parents and policymakers and to improve the educational system so as to ensure universal, formal education for all (see, for instance, Sinha, forthcoming and CINI-ASHA, forthcoming).

Pragmatic perspectives at the ‘realist’ end of the spectrum give greater weight to the economic circumstances which lie behind children’s participation in the labour market. They argue that the promotion of a single, formal system of education which makes no allowances for these circumstances would force parents to choose between school and work to the detriment of the former. Consequently, non-formal interventions which allow children to ‘earn and learn’ are seen as a way of educating otherwise hard-to-reach children and helping them into the formal system. BRAC in Bangladesh and Lok Jumbish epitomise this greater flexibility of approach (Chowdhury, forthcoming; Rajgopal, forthcoming).

In the rest of the paper, I will be considering in greater detail the empirical evidence supporting these different explanations for child labour and educational failure in the South Asian context. Section 2 explores the evidence for poverty-based explanations for child labour while Section 3 examines the evidence for explanations which emphasise policy and provision. Section 4 summarises the basic findings and draws out some of their practical implications.

## **2 Poverty-based explanations for educational failure: the empirical evidence**

### ***2.1 Aggregated levels of analysis***

The evidence for poverty-based explanations for child labour and poor educational outcomes is not particularly persuasive at highly aggregated levels of analysis. For instance, Bangladesh, with lower levels of per capita GNP than Pakistan (\$260 and \$480 respectively in 1996), has nevertheless made much greater progress in expanding primary education: GERs of 111 per cent and 65 per cent respectively (see Govinda, forthcoming). However, the fact that they have similar incidence of child labour suggests that increased school attendance in Bangladesh has been combined with work rather than replacing it.

Within the Indian context, there is a weak correlation between the incidence of poverty and child labour at the state level (Sharma, Kumar and Padmadeo, 1993). This had led Chandrasekhar (1997) to conclude that while poverty may provide the seedbed for child labour, it does not constitute its proximate cause. However, before rejecting poverty as a primary, rather than secondary, cause in the explanation for

child labour, it is necessary to consider some alternative possible reasons for the weak correlation observed at state level. One major reason is that poverty intersects with other forms of disadvantage at this level in ways which complicate its effects on the incidence of child labour.

Caste is one example of such disadvantage, serving to exacerbate the effects of poverty. This is evident if we examine the social composition of agricultural wage labour, one of the poorest paid occupations in the economy. 64 per cent of the scheduled caste labour force, and 50 per cent of the scheduled tribe labour force, in rural areas worked in agricultural waged labour compared to just 30 per cent of 'other' groups. Both groups were also disproportionately represented among bonded labourers: according to government survey data, 66 per cent of bonded labourers belonged to the scheduled castes and a further 18 per cent to scheduled tribes (cited in Burra 1995). Not surprisingly, such groups also account for disproportionate share of child labourers as well as of children out of school. Using 1993–94 NSS data, Thorat (1999) found that the proportion of child labour was 2–3 times higher among scheduled caste and scheduled tribe groups than the rest of the population.

The high incidence of child labour among SC/ST groups has predictable implications for their educational attainments. According to the 1993–94 NSS data, there was very little difference in gross enrolment ratios between different caste groups but large variations in dropout rates (Thorat 1999; Shariff and Sudarshan 1996). It is worth noting that, unlike the state-wise incidence of poverty, caste *does* emerge as a significant factor in explaining variations in child labour: Duraisamy (1997) found that higher levels of SC/ST groups within the population of a state significantly increased child labour force participation rates.

Gender is the other major form of inequality in the Indian sub-continent, with implications for a variety of outcomes, demographic, economic as well as social (Dyson and Moore 1983; Dreze and Sen 1995). Girls make up a disproportionate percentage of out-of school children and drop-outs from all social classes (Nambissan 1995). In addition, they are less visible in the official child labour force statistics and over-represented among 'nowhere' children (Chaudhri 1997b). However, unlike the effects of caste, which are consistent with, and exacerbate, the consequences of poverty, the relation between poverty and gender is not straightforward. Indeed, as Nambissan (1995) points out, cultural constraints against girls' education are likely to be more pronounced among upper caste groups, particularly in rural areas, where such constraints apply with greater force. Gender inequality, including inequalities in education, has also been found to have a distinct regional pattern in the Indian context, much higher in the northern states than in the south. Consequently, there is unlikely to be a clear cut relationship between gender-discriminatory outcomes and poverty at state level (Dreze and Sen 1995).

The other factor which weakens the relationship between poverty, child labour and poor educational outcomes at the aggregate level is state policy. The active promotion of universal education by some states, but not others, has made a difference to educational outcomes but they have not necessarily been the wealthiest states. As a result of these various reinforcing, and offsetting factors, we find that, once social discrimination (caste and gender) and educational policy (adult literacy and schooling facilities) have been controlled for, poverty plays very little role in explaining inter-state, or indeed, inter-district variations in child labour (Labenne 1995). Instead, as Castle *et al.* point out, the Indian context is

characterised by a bimodal group of states, with one group characterised by extremely slow declines in child labour and the other by extremely rapid declines: 'the leaders and laggards in 1961 retained their relative positions in 1991, suggesting the presence of mutually reinforcing virtuous and vicious circles' (1997: 57).

Chaudhri (1997a) has identified four critical factors, or driving forces, which have combined to produce these 'virtuous' or 'vicious' cycles. 'Virtuous' forces include pace of demographic transition ; educational policy; economic growth combined with rising labour productivity; and physical and social infra-structural development. The virtuous states were Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujerat and Haryana, all of which have performed well on at least two of the four driving forces. These are also states which report greater gender equity in education, in other words, at least 75 girls to every 100 boys in school in the 5–14 group.

At the other end of the spectrum are Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa, all states which are trapped in a vicious cycle in relation to child labour. They also perform badly in terms of getting girls into school, with 50 or fewer girls for every 100 boys in school in the 5–14 age group. Along with West Bengal, these states account for over 75 per cent of the out-of-school children in India. They are also among the poorest states in India. Andhra Pradesh is unusual in being the only southern state in this category. However it has consistently reported the highest incidence of child labour since 1971 census. It has performed well in terms of the demographic criteria for virtuous change, but poorly on educational policy.

## **2.2 Area/industry based analysis**

Explanations of child labour and educational outcomes at lower levels of aggregation use agro-ecological zones, cities, villages and specific industries as their units of analysis. Many of these have stressed the role of poverty in creating the conditions which give rise to child labour. For instance, Chaudhri points out, 'a good example of such a situation is dry-land farming with traditional cropping patterns – this form of farming can be found over most of Central India, particularly the adivasi belt. The average productivity in these enterprises is stagnant or declining. Output or income variability is very high and etching out an existence is a major challenge' (1997a: 13).

As Chaudhri's comment reveals, the conditions of endemic poverty and static technology which give rise to child labour often go hand-in-hand with entrenched patterns of social exclusion and high levels of livelihood insecurity. This is borne out by Reddy's comparison of a developed region in Andhra Pradesh (i.e. one using modernised agricultural technology) with a less developed one which used traditional technology (Reddy 1997). He found that labour force participation rates for children aged 10–14 were lower in the developed region (29 per cent) than in the backward (34 per cent). This relationship did not prevail among 5–9 year olds, but it should be noted that labour force participation rates in this age group was in any case very much lower in both regions (3.5 and 1.7 respectively) and clearly did not constitute a major component of the overall supply of child labour. Reddy's findings resonate with other studies from Andhra Pradesh which suggest that high levels of child labour tend to exist in those areas with limited

irrigation facilities, where the productive period in the dry season is very short (Reddy 2000).

A similar relationship between poverty, development and child labour is reported by studies of working children in rural Bangladesh with children generally reported as working longer hours in less-well developed areas ( Khuda 1991; Mannan 1990; Ahmed and Quasem 1991). In Ahmed and Quasem's study of four villages, the level of development was proxied by closeness to administrative and industrial centres, adoption of modern agricultural technology and diversification into non-farm activities. They found a negative relationship between the level of development of a village and labour force participation by boys (there was no consistent relationship for girls). Mannan also found a larger percentage of both boys and girls went to school, and a fewer percentage worked, in the more 'progressive' of the three villages he studied where 'progressiveness' was measured by the level of technology, infrastructure and communications.

Other explanations have focused on certain small-scale, geographically-concentrated forms of manufacturing which appear to be intensive in their use of child labour: carpets, bidis, glass, matches, gem-polishing, pottery and garments. They have pointed to the poverty of their surrounding area to explain the availability of such labour. Thus Chandra (1997) and Gupta and Voll (1999) both explain the high incidence of children in the match industry in Sivikasi district, Tamil Nadu in terms of its proneness to drought, the absence of irrigation facilities and the resulting dearth of regular employment in agriculture. Similarly, it has been pointed out that the carpet industry belt in the Mirzapur-Bhadohi area of UP recruits children from agriculturally impoverished areas within its own boundaries as well as in the neighbouring states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (Gulrajani 2000). All three states are among the poorest in India and fall in the 'vicious cycle' category referred to earlier.

These explanations stress the role of poverty in creating a *supply* of child labour. A different perspective is provided by authors who put the emphasis on *demand* factors in creating a pool of child labour: as Swaminathan put it, 'At the microlevel, poverty ensures a supply of child labour. It is the structure of demand, however, that ensures that the supply is forthcoming (1998: 1514). The structure of demand reflects the segmentation of local labour markets along lines of caste, class, age and gender and the tendency of employers to exploit these divisions (Chandrasekhar 1997).

Empirical support for this view can be found in a number of studies. For instance, Reddy (2000) points out that while the drought-prone nature of agriculture in parts of Andhra Pradesh explains why households in these areas may seek work outside the agricultural sector, it is the structure of opportunities in the non-agricultural sector which explains the high concentrations of child labour in some areas rather than others:

Traditionally, certain districts have been identified with some cottage and small-scale industries. Most of the traditional industries are family-run and are labour-intensive with tie-up arrangements with either a co-operative or a marketing agency. Payments are made by the agency at the piece-rate by providing raw material. Hence the objective is to finish each unit of the saleable product as early as possible. As hiring of adult workers is not affordable, children in the families are drawn in for help.

Other authors have suggested that increases in the demand for child labour can be linked to policies of economic liberalisation and the concomitant deregulation of labour markets. One example of this view is to be found in Swaminathan's study of Bhavnagar city in Gujarat (1998). Comparing data on child labour in Bhavnagar estimated from the 1981 census and survey data collected in 1995 by SPARC-Shaishav, she estimates that a considerable rise in the incidence of child labour occurred during a period which had also been characterised by rapid industry-based economic growth.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this finding, Swaminathan concludes:

... (A)n important lesson from this survey of Bhavnagar is that when economic growth is accompanied by deregulation of the labor market, the labor market can make ruthless use of children. Economic growth in the study region has been associated with an expansion of the informal labour market, and of different forms of unregulated wage labour... The prevalence and absolute expansion of child labor in a period and region of relatively high growth of aggregate output indicates that the nature of economic growth is flawed, and that aggregate economic growth is not a sufficient condition for the reduction of child labor (p. 1526).

The relationship between economic liberalisation and the increased demand for child labour has also been linked to the effects of global competition. According to Mathur and Bhargava (2000), the gem industry in Jaipur has survived in an increasingly competitive international market by its increasing reliance on child labour and they suggest that there has been a rise in child labour with the increasing export-orientation of the industry. A similar point is made by Gulrajani (2000) in relation to the carpet industry: 'the carpet industry in India, like many Indian export industries, gets its cutting edge from very low labour costs. Without making any precise claims about the increase in labour costs that may result from the elimination of child labour, it is possible to say that it would be enough to reduce the (already low) degree of competitiveness of the carpet industry, and may indeed present a serious threat to its very survival' (p. 63).

The idea that economic liberalisation, internal as well as external, can lead to expansion of child labour is by no means implausible. Deregulation of labour markets and the opening up of economies, particularly labour-surplus economies, is highly likely to lead to a shift into labour-intensive forms of production and into cheaper, unprotected forms of labour (such as child labour) which would help employers to minimise their labour costs and remain internationally competitive.<sup>4</sup> However, there is also

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<sup>3</sup> It should, however, be noted that the official data for urban Gujarat cited by Swaminathan, do not support the idea of an unambiguous, let alone rapid, rise in child labour during this period. NSS data on urban Gujarat between 1987/88 and 1993/94 do show a rise among children aged 5–9, but at extremely low rates: from 0.2 to 0.6 among boys and from 0 to 0.2 among girls. In the 10–14 age group, which account for the bulk of child labourers, there was a *fall* during this period from 5.0 to 4.3 among boys and from 2.5 to 2.4 among girls. Similarly, data from the 1981 and 1991 census for urban Gujarat (one of sources used by Swaminathan in her own estimates) also suggest a *fall* from 2.94 to 2.48 for boys in the 5–14 age group while participation rates for girls remained the same at 0.77. In other words, both data sets support the idea of an overall *decline* in child labour during the period in question.

<sup>4</sup> Although it should be noted that the export sector accounts for less than 10 per cent of child labour in both countries.

an alternative scenario regarding the effects of economic liberalisation on child labour which needs to be factored into the picture.

This can be illustrated with evidence from the export-oriented garment industry in Bangladesh, an industry which came into existence as a result of economic liberalisation and drew in large numbers of young women workers. While an estimated 10 per cent of the labour force was made up of children (i.e. under 15 years of age), there is no evidence that they were essential to the competitiveness of the industry or that employers deliberately sought them out (Bissell and Sobhan 1996). In fact, many younger children were in the factories because of lack of child care at home (Bissell and Sobhan 1996: around 80 per cent of child labourers in the factories were found to have relatives within the same factory (Paul-Majumder and Chowdhury 1993). However, the preoccupation with the incidence of child labour in the garment industry has obscured another, and more positive, effect in terms of children's education.

My own research on the garment workers found that, in a country where women have traditionally worked from home, many of the women I interviewed gave the need to educate children as one of their main reasons for breaking the norms of female seclusion by working in the garment factories (Kabeer 2000). A survey of garment workers carried out in 1990 found that older sisters were taking on the responsibility for educating younger siblings (Zohir and Paul-Majumder 1996). In addition, labour force data suggests that while the number of children in urban households involved in the manufacturing sector remained the same between 1983/84 and 1990/91, a period characterised by rapid expansion in the garment industry, but that there was a decrease in number of working children (i.e. 14 years or less) per household, accompanied by an increase in numbers of working adults, male as well as female. In particular, there was a rapid increase in the labour force participation of adolescent and young women (i.e. aged 15 or more) from about 17 per cent to 45 per cent.

Such findings suggest, first of all, that the growth of a labour-intensive export sector in the course of economic liberalisation had brought a young, largely female labour force into employment, reducing their chances of completing secondary education or going on to higher education (which were in any case not very high, Amin *et al.* (1997), but also delaying their age of marriage. At the same time it has also reduced the need for younger children to go out to work and enabled many to go to school.

The other cautionary note with regard to the employment effects of liberalisation and economic growth is the need to distinguish between genuine increases in the incidence of child labour and changes in its sectoral composition. Working children have long been a part of the Indian economy but as long as they worked on family farms and enterprises under the supervision of parents, attracted little attention. Even today child labour in India has been described as a 'largely pre-industrial, pre-capitalist labour force' (Weiner 1991: 33). The growth of industry may sometimes merely serve to transfer children, and their parents, from the rural, agricultural work force into the unregulated urban sector without necessarily increasing the overall numbers of child workers in the state.

Many of the older children in the garment industry in Bangladesh were found to be 'hard-core' child workers, in other words, children who had been working in various informal sector occupations prior to their entry into the garment factories, and who returned to it after they were sacked as a result of threat of



protectionist legislation by the US (Bissell and Sobhan 1996). Blanchett's study (1996) of children in the bidi factories in rural Kushtia in Bangladesh also found evidence of this 'recomposition' effect: many had previously worked in home-based weaving, an industry which had suffered a major collapse in the early 1990s; others had been engaged in agriculture but left for better-paid factory employment in the bidi industry. Concern here is therefore not with the absolute increase in child labour, but with the nature of work implied by the recomposition of the child labour force.

### **2.3 Household based analysis**

At yet lower levels of analysis are studies which focus on households as their unit of analysis. Here again, the relationship between poverty and child labour/educational outcomes is not clear-cut. On the one hand, data from the 1993–94 round of the National Sample Survey in India supports the view that child labour is a reflection of household poverty: it reveals a negative relationship between monthly per capita expenditure and the incidence of child labour in urban as well as rural households (Thorat 1999). Nearly half of the working children in rural areas came from households with less than Rs. 210 per capita expenditure (the rural poverty line was Rs. 205). The incidence of working children varied between 12 per cent among those with less than Rs.120 per capita expenditure to around 5.4 per cent among those with more than Rs. 560. Educational outcomes were also related to household poverty. 30 per cent of children attended school and 57 per cent dropped out of school among households with less than Rs. 120 monthly per capita expenditure compared to enrolment rates of 81 per cent and drop out rates of 16 per cent among households with more than Rs. 560.

However, where household economic status is measured by its wealth rather than its income, a different relationship may prevail. While 21 per cent of households covered by the 1995 national sample survey on child labour in Bangladesh reported at least one working child, this showed little variation by landholding. 28 per cent of households with more than four acres of land reported at least one working child compared to 31 per cent of those with 0.50–0.99 acres. *Landless* households were least likely to report a working child. A study by Ravallion and Wodon (1999), using the Bangladesh Household Expenditure Survey 1995–96, also found that land ownership was positively associated with the incidence of labour among male (but not female) children while a number of studies from the Indian context similarly show that ownership of land and productive assets increased, rather than reduced, the demand for children's labour (Kanbargi and Kulkarni 1991; Bashir 1994; Vlassoff 1979; Srivastava 1997). As Bhatta points out, such studies 'qualify the notion that child labour is simply a reflection of poverty' (1998: 734).

One reason why land ownership might be positively associated with child labour is the nature of productive opportunities involved. It has been observed that child labour tends to be high in contexts where farming is important, and to increase with farm size in such contexts, because land and labour are complementary inputs in agricultural production (Cain 1977; Sharif 1994). However, the adoption of labour-replacing agricultural technology and diversification into the off-farm sector can disrupt the positive relationship between wealth and child labour by reducing the need for child labour or increasing returns to adult. Thus, technologies associated with the Green Revolution are believed to have reduced

child labour and increased school attendance in the Indian context (Rosenzweig 1981) as did the mechanisation of Egyptian agriculture (Levy 1985).

This may help to explain some of the observed variations in the relationship between child labour and poverty across different agro-economic zones. For instance, earlier we noted Reddy's finding that child labour was higher in the less developed, than in the more developed, villages in his study. He also found that the incidence of male working children was considerably higher among the non-poor, than either the moderately poor and the very poor, in the less developed region where it reflected the importance of agriculture for such households. However, in the more developed region, there was consistent decline in numbers of male children in work with increases in household economic status. Returns to child labour were also relatively higher in the less developed area where children earned around 74 per cent of adult wage rates compared to earnings of 59 per cent of adult wages in the more developed area.

The relevance of local opportunities in mediating the relationship between household economic status and child labour is also suggested by a number of studies in rural Bangladesh. Thus, while Ahmed and Quasem (1991) found that the incidence of child labour was lower in the more developed of the villages they studied, they also found that it tended to be higher in households which relied primarily on farming and had larger cultivated holdings, characteristics associated with the more traditional village. It was not only lower in the more developed villages, but also declined with increases in the size of owned land holding and percentage of household land under high-yielding variety seeds. There was also a very clear inverse relationship between children's participation in the labour force and enrolment in school.

These findings together suggest while child labour may indeed be high in agrarian contexts, it declines with rising levels of development. They also suggest that, within villages, the relationship between child labour and household wealth (land and other assets) tends to vary according to overall development and the resulting structure of local opportunities, positively in poorer villages and negatively in more developed ones. Child labour is likely to be higher among wealthier, land-owning households in more traditional, agrarian contexts with few links to the wider economy; it tends to be lower among the better-off in situations of modernised agriculture and diversified livelihoods.

We have already noted the social differentiation of the poor by caste, ethnicity and gender. Lower-level analysis also helps us to appreciate their economic heterogeneity. Recent declines in poverty levels in Bangladesh have drawn attention to the existence of a 'hard-core' of poor households whose conditions have been slower to respond to improvements in overall standards of living. They make up the bottom 30–40 per cent of the population below the poverty line: they earn less than three-fifths of the poverty line, suffer from chronic food deficits and own less than 15 decimals of land (Rahman 1998; Sen and Begum 1998). They are differentiated from the moderately poor by the insecurity of their livelihoods. In the Bangladesh context they are generally made up of day-labourers, beggars, maidservants, the disabled and female headed households (Rahman *et al.* 1998). In the Indian context, the extreme poor are made up of marginal farmers with not enough land to meet subsistence needs over the year; small tenants and sharecroppers, assetless wage workers in agriculture, trade and industry; the petty self-employed, unable to

seek wage employment by virtue of health, caste or status, beggars, foragers and scavengers, mobile, rural-to-rural migrants and transients (Harriss 1992).

These are all groups who face major fluctuations in their income streams and whose attempts to minimise their exposure to risk are likely to impinge on children's ability to attend school. Survey data from India tells us that poor households with few savings, assets or opportunities to borrow are most likely to send their children out to work (World Bank 2001). Jacoby and Skoufias (1994) found that children's school attendance declined with increased variability of income (i.e. difference in income from peak to low season), particularly when variability reflected some external shock. Child labour helped to smooth the incomes of such families (Jacoby and Skoufias 1997). In urban Bangladesh, while working children tended to come from poorer households, the incidence of child labour was highest for households headed by casual unskilled labourers with irregular income flows. (Delap 1998).

The reasons given for children's entry into the work force testify to their role as a buffer in times of crisis. Mathur and Bhargava (2000) found that the illness or death of the father or of the main breadwinner was an important factor behind the entry of children into the gem polishing industry in Jaipur. Blanchet found that children often came into the biri factories in rural Kushtia in response to loss of household livelihoods in the aftermath of floods and other crisis. Bissell's study of the children who were sacked from the garment factories also found that reasons relating to various kinds of household 'shocks' (desertion, illness or death of main breadwinner) explained why children had to go to work (2000).

Where dearth of local opportunities force parents to migrate seasonally in search of work, there may be little motivation to send children to school (Burra 1995). Subrahmanian's study (1999a) of two drought-prone villages in Karnataka found that the dearth of local opportunities, and its effect on livelihood strategies of the landless poor, led to economically differentiated educational outcomes. While children from better-off families attended school, uncertainty of income flow, the need for all family members, including children, to play a role in contributing to family livelihoods and domestic chores and a pattern of seasonal migration in search of employment among poorer families helped to explain the low levels of school enrolment and attendance.

The use of children in a variety of ways to help counter the insecurity of livelihoods, as collateral to secure consumption loans or as labour to smooth out income flows, serves to draw our attention to the institutional failures which underpin such behaviour, imperfect or absent capital and insurance markets (Purkayastha 1998) and inadequate social safety nets (Duraisamy 1997). However, interventions which help to compensate for these market failures and contribute to greater security of livelihoods among the poor may be able to counter their effects. This is supported by a number of studies of micro-credit programmes in Bangladesh which suggest that household access to non-governmental credit can lead to higher levels of educational attainment among children (Pitt and Khandker 1995; Ridao-Cano forthcoming).

An alternative approach, which contributes to household food security, is the Food-for-Education programme in Bangladesh. This provides monthly food rations to poor rural families in economically

backward areas who send their children to primary school and ensure their attendance for at least 85 per cent of all classes each month. Ravallion and Wodon found that the stipend did indeed significantly increase the probability of children being at school as well as reducing the likelihood of them working. However, the reduction in child labour was smaller than the gain in schooling, suggesting that many children continued to work while attending school: 'parents (were) clearly substituting other uses of their children's time, so as to secure the current income gain from access to the program with modest impact on earnings from their children's work' (1999: 16).

#### **2.4 Intra-household analysis**

Finally, at yet lower levels of analysis, are studies which explore the intra-household factors leading to child labour and poor educational performance. Such studies provide micro-level explanations of the decision-making processes which lead to the gender inequalities observed in nationally aggregated data. They also suggest that inequalities of this kind can be highly income and price responsive. For instance, using Indian data, Sipahimalani (1999) found that a 1 per cent increase in household income increased probability of boys' enrolment in school by 7 per cent, but girls' by 9–13 per cent while data from Rajasthan analysed by Basu (1997) suggests that a 1 per cent increase in per capita household income raised boys' probability of enrolment in middle school by 0.9 per cent and girls' by 3.7 per cent. Such findings suggest that, regardless of contrary caste effects, rising income at household and at more aggregate levels will lead to a reduction in gender inequalities in access to education.

Intra-household analysis has also pointed to the existence of inequalities in access to schooling on grounds other than gender. Birth-order is one example of this. In their study of rural Pakistan, Sathar and Lloyd (1994) found that earlier born children had a distinct educational advantage over those born later while Jejeebhoy (1992) found the same pattern in rural Maharashtra with eldest sons most likely, and eldest daughters least likely, to be educated.

Parental attempts to diversify household livelihoods as a way of minimising risk can introduce intra-household inequalities in education if it leads to selective investment in schooling. Some of the families who featured in Subrahmanian's study of rural Karnataka followed this strategy, sending one child to school to equip them to compete for particular kinds of jobs while others were prepared for farming. Similarly, Basu (1992) found that Tamil migrant families in urban India often discriminated between their children so that, while sons were more likely to go to school than daughters, there was evidence of further discrimination between sons, with some held back from school in order to ensure that others got a good education.

Along with helping to explain inequalities in access to education, intra-household analysis suggests that gender is relevant in other ways to the understanding of educational outcomes. Earlier studies had suggested that labour force participation by women often brought about a reduction in children's education, particularly girls', as a result of the greater substitutability between women and girls' time in domestic tasks. Skoufias's study (1994) of the differing effects of male and female wages in six semi-arid rural villages in India illustrates this. He found that higher male wages increased children's time at school,

but that higher female wages tended to have a negative impact. A similar finding was reported by a study using rural household data from India (Rosenzweig 1981). He found that increases in adult female wage rates reduced the likelihood of children attending school and reduced the likelihood that daughters (but not sons) were employed in the labour market. Inasmuch as women from poorer households were more likely to work for wages, the reduced likelihood of schooling could be seen as a 'negative income effect', while girls' ability to substitute for adult women in domestic chores explained the greater reduction in their labour force participation.

However, there is a growing body of evidence which suggests the existence of competing preferences within the household, with women demonstrating stronger preference for investments in children's welfare, including their education, than men. It is significant, for instance, that CINI-ASHA, a Calcutta-based NGO seeking to reduce child labour by promoting children's access to school, found that mothers were generally easier to persuade to send their children to school than fathers and generally more willing to make the necessary sacrifices for this to happen (CINI-ASHA forthcoming; see also Haddad *et al.* 1997; Jejeebhoy 1995). The evidence further shows that improvements in women's access to resources which might help to strengthen their ability to enforce their preferences, can lead to improvements of various kinds in children's welfare.

For instance, using data from Bangladesh and Pakistan, Montgomery *et al.* (1999) found that, while educational levels of both parents played a role in increasing the likelihood of children's education, women's education was far more important than that of their spouse. In a separate study using household data from Pakistan, Sathar and Lloyd (1994) also found that mother's education was more powerfully associated than that of fathers with the likelihood of children going to school, but also of girls going to school. We have already noted that women workers in the garment factories of Bangladesh often used their wages educate their children or younger siblings. In addition, studies of micro-credit programmes suggest that loans to women has a more significant impact and it may also reduce the gender gap in education (see, for instance, Kabeer 2001; World Bank 1995).

Ridao-Cano's analysis of 1996 data from 8 villages in two districts in Bangladesh corroborates many of the findings we have discussed in this paper (forthcoming). Overall, he found that levels of child labour were higher, and school attendance lower, in the less developed than in the more developed of the two districts. At household level, he found that households in chronic poverty were more likely to report child labour as were farming households, although child labour was lower among farming households which had adopted modern agricultural technology. Households which had experienced some form of crisis or shock also reported lower levels of educational participation by children.

In addition, his study throws up a number of intra-household effects. First of all, he found that while the education of both mother and father increased the likelihood of children going to school, the effect of mother's schooling was statistically higher. Secondly, only the mother's education had the effect of reducing the likelihood of children working. Thirdly, women's access to loans also significantly increased the likelihood of children going to school while men's access to loans had no such effect. In fact, a 10 per cent increase in female credit increased the probability of a child going to school by between 10–11 per

cent and decreased the probability of full time work among children in work by 10 per cent. Fourthly, however, Ridao-Cano also found that for many children, school attendance did not necessarily reduce work: many combined both. As we have already noted, this finding was also reported by Ravallion and Wodon.

### ***2.5 Parents, children and worldviews: the qualitative picture***

Qualitative studies of intra-household relations and decisions help to spell out in greater detail some of the causal mechanisms behind the quantitative findings reported in this paper. They also help to uncover evidence of changes in these causalities. By providing insights into the motivations and preferences which underpin the persistence of child labour and poor educational outcomes, such studies highlight the importance of the norms and beliefs which make up the worldview of parents in different contexts and which have a powerful influence on what they aspire to for their children and what they rule out. They tell us that among social groups where children have traditionally learnt occupational skills from an early age in order to obtain employment in adulthood, involvement in economic activity was, and still is, perceived by many as a normal aspect of growing up rather than as a denial of childhood.

However, while the acceptance of past norms and customs may make sense from the point of view of those who hold them, it does little to disrupt the principles of social reproduction in a highly unequal society. The association of higher castes with labour of the mind and the lower castes with labour of the body has not only allowed access to education to be far more easily accepted among the former but has also helped to entrench a mind-set among the latter which does not envisage education as a feasible option for themselves or for their children. For households from very poor or despised caste groups, for whom the returns to education are extremely distant and uncertain, there is little incentive to attach any greater value to it than they had in the past. As Dreze and Gazdar point out, ‘the ability of parents to assess the personal and social value of education depends, among other things, on the information they have at their disposal. If their entire reference group is largely untouched by the experience of being educated, that information might be quite limited. Even if some aspects of the general value of education (e.g. the economic returns to male education) are relatively obvious, they may be perceived as alien to certain groups and relevant only to “others” ’ (1996: 86).

Findings by CINI-ASHA (forthcoming) that child labourers were most likely to have parents who were themselves child labourers; by Burra that children in bonded labour usually had parents who had been bonded labourers; by the 1995 survey of child labour in Bangladesh that working children were generally illiterate and had parents who were also illiterate and its corollary, reported by Ravallion and Wodon that educated children tend to have educated parents: these findings are all indicative of the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage that such worldviews help to perpetuate.

At the same time, qualitative studies are able to pick up on some of the changes in values which underpin the recent spread of education, even among poorer families. Thus, while both Subrahmanian (1999a) and Delap (1998) testify to the lower value attached to girls’ schooling as a product of both material considerations (the economic returns to schooling are perceived to be low or non-existent or that

girls are needed to assist in domestic chores from an early age) as well as social ones (anxieties about their reputation, there is evidence that this might be changing. My own research from Bangladesh (Kabeer 2000 and 2001) suggests that mothers in particular appear to be attaching greater value to their daughters' education than their own mothers had done in the past. In an era when marriage appeared to be an increasingly fragile institution, education is increasingly seen as providing daughters with a greater ability to stand on their own feet rather than being totally dependent on husbands. Such changing values may help to explain the changes in quantitative relationship between women's access to resources and investment in daughters' education noted earlier.

Finally, it is important to note that while the concerns and voices of children themselves have been less explored in the literature, they too have a role to play in explaining both the persistence of child labour as well as children's absence from school. They tell us that children, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, exercise far greater agency in the decisions which affect their lives than is conventionally recognised. They also suggest that, while children may regret their lack of educational opportunities, many valued their ability to make a contribution in situations of poverty (Bissell 2000; Subrahmanian 1999a). They saw their own needs and priorities as congruent, rather than conflicting, with those of their parents. In other cases, it was children's agency rather than parents which explained their absence from school. Interviews with children provide some of the reasons for their action, pointing to the dreariness of the curriculum and teaching methods, abuse by teachers or bullying by other teachers.

Finally, children provide insights into intra-household relations which parents might be unwilling to provide. Intra-household relationships are not equal and parents exercise a great deal of power over their children. Such power is not always used in benevolent ways. It is often through the voices of children that some of these inequalities come to light. Studies of street children suggest that a significant proportion have run away from home in response to ill-treatment within the family (Punalekar 1997). Blanchet's interviews with working children in Bangladesh as well as Burra's in India reveal the extent to which the neglect, indifference or outright callousness of parents are often the factors which lie behind presence of these children in extremely hazardous as well as exploitative forms of work. Such testimonies serve as a reminder that parents cannot always be relied on to uphold the best interests of their children and that it is to the state that children may have to look for protection.

### **3 Access, quality of provision and public action: delivery based explanations of educational failure**

#### ***3.1 Policy related failures***

However, it is the failure of the state to discharge this obligation which underpins the second broad category of explanations which has dominated the literature on child labour and poor educational outcomes. The most influential case to this effect has been made by Weiner (1991). The starting point of his analysis is that the familial, legal, social, political and economic institutions of a society all contribute to

the processes by which it either reproduces or transforms itself. The South Asian context, which is characterised by extreme inequality, shows little evidence of transformation. While the spread of education could have played an important role here, widespread adherence to beliefs and attitudes which justify these inequalities, combined with the apathy of the state, have instead ensured that educational provision has disproportionately benefited the privileged and reproduced inequality. For Weiner, therefore, the failure to universalise primary education in India is a failure of political will:

India's low per capita income and economic situation is less relevant as an explanation than the belief systems of the state bureaucracy, a set of beliefs that are widely shared by educators, social activists, trade unionists, academic researchers and, more broadly by members of the Indian middle class... At the core of these beliefs are the Indian view of the social order, notions concerning the respective roles of the upper and lower social strata, the role of education as a means of maintaining differentiations among social classes, and concerns that 'excessive' and 'inappropriate' education for the poor could disrupt existing social arrangements (p. 5).

These views, and the priorities they engender, are evident in various forms of state action and inaction. They are evident in the meagre allocation of budgetary resources to the social sectors, as well as in the disproportionate amount of the educational budget going to higher education where the poor are least well represented. They are evident in the government's failure to spend even those funds allocated to primary education, evident in the under-utilisation of large grants provided by central government and international agencies for the promotion of primary education (Dreze and Gazdar 1996; Subrahmanian 1999b).

They are also evident in the ambivalence displayed by the state towards the principles of universal education as well as the abolition of child labour. Weiner suggests that countries that achieved universal education had usually passed legislation making education compulsory before their child labour laws. It was the enforcement of the former which led to the successful implementation of the latter. Although the Indian constitution upholds compulsory education, it is left to each state to uphold this principle. As our earlier discussion has made clear, states have upheld it very unevenly.

A similar ambivalence is evident in relation to child labour. There are legislative prohibitions against child labour in both India and Bangladesh but these are confined to employment in the formal sector where in any case, they have been only sporadically enforced. Despite the recommendations of the Committee on Child Labour in 1979, the government of India declared that it accepted child labour as a 'harsh reality' for poor countries like India and would not seek to abolish it. Instead, the Child Labour Act sought to ameliorate child labour, banning it only in certain hazardous processes, and regulating its working conditions elsewhere. The act was met with a great deal of hostility from those who concur with Weiner's analysis of the duties of the state. They interpreted the conclusion that child labour was a harsh reality which it was neither 'feasible nor opportune' to abolish at the present level of the country's economic development as further evidence that the state was prepared to tolerate the intolerable.



Similarly, while the New Policy on Education in 1986 reiterated the commitment to universal primary education, it offered voluntary non-formal education as the solution for working children and for children of the weaker sections (scheduled castes and tribes, those in hilly areas, urban slums and economically backward rural areas). However, not only is NFE widely seen as an inferior second track of educational provision, which reproduces existing inequalities, but it also appeared to legitimise children's work (Dreze and Sen 1995).

In Bangladesh, similar ambivalence on the part of the government has been pointed to by Blanchet. While Bangladesh ratified the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1991 in an attempt to achieve universal primary education, and has increased the budgetary allocation to this sector, resources remain far short of what is necessary to achieve this goal. Similarly, while there is an official ban on child labour, it applies only to certain industries and there is little attempt to enforce it.

Evidence supporting this policy-based explanation for educational failures is provided by the point made earlier that sound educational policy was one of the 'driving factors' differentiating states with rapid declines in child labour from those where the decline had been extremely slow. It is further supported by evidence that states within India with similar levels of poverty, such as Kerala and UP, nevertheless demonstrated very different levels of commitment to the social well-being of their citizens and consequently achieved very different levels of educational performance (Dreze and Gazdar 1996). In UP, 73 per cent of rural boys and 32 per cent of girls in the age group 12–14 had been ever-enrolled in school in 1986/87; in Kerala, the equivalent estimates were 99 per cent and 98 per cent. Finally, Bhatta cites 'anecdotal' evidence to the effect that poverty need not constitute a barrier to education e.g. a study by Narayan *et al.* (1984) which found near universal literacy rates in a harijan village in Tamil Nadu which was characterised by extreme poverty, widespread landlessness and few employment opportunities.

### **3.2 Failures at delivery level**

Along with failures at the policy level, failures at the level of implementation have also come in for trenchant criticism. One aspect of this relates to basic physical access. Only 84 per cent of habitations in rural areas of India have a primary school within a kilometre of the habitation while over 70 per cent do not have a secondary school within 3 kilometres (Nambissan 1995). The consequence of poor physical access is likely to be more acute for girls because of greater limitations on their mobility. Studies from India suggest that while boys may be sent outside their village to attend school, girls rarely are (Subrahmanian 1999a; Dreze and Gazdar 1996). Indirect evidence of the importance of 'physical access' is also provided by an evaluation of CARE's food-for-development projects in Bangladesh which found the improvements in the conditions of roads increased the likelihood of girls attending schools to a far greater extent than boys (Langworthy 1999)

Other aspects of educational provision which contribute to poor levels of attendance include mechanistic and joyless forms of learning and the lack of imaginative or relevant curriculum (Nambissan 1996). Inflexibility in the school timetable have often led to conflicts with the agricultural calendar, resulting in high levels of absenteeism among pupils during busy periods of the agricultural cycle. There

are questions about the effectiveness of teaching, given recent findings that students who had completed their primary schooling could barely read (*The Times of India* 1994 cited in Nambissan 1996; see also Yadav and Bharadwaj 1999).

There is also evidence that, in part at least, responsibility for poor educational outcomes lies with the teachers themselves. Teaching appears to be widely regarded by teachers as a part-time, secondary and relatively secure element of their livelihood strategies, one which offers steady returns without requiring a great deal of effort and time and hence which can be combined with other economic pursuits (Dreze and Gazdar 1996; Acharaya 1987; Probe Team 1999). Perverse forms of teacher behaviour include widespread absenteeism, often to work on their other economic activities; drunkenness during schools hours and pressure on pupils to supply them with liquor; using children to run errands and do their domestic chores; keeping the educational aids locked up for fear they might be blamed for their loss or damage; keeping toilets locked up or only for the use of the teacher; inflating enrolment ratios, making school registers 'singularly inauthentic' sources of information. Even where teachers were present, it was not clear how much of a contribution they made to the spread of education since as the Probe team documents, 'inactive teachers were found to be engaged in a variety of pastimes such as sipping tea, reading comics or eating peanuts when they were not just sitting idly... teaching activity has been reduced to a minimum, in terms of both time and efforts. And this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers – it has become a way of life in the profession' (Probe 1999: 63).

Many of these problems can be traced to the protected status of teachers as government employees. As Kingdon points out, 'Government-paid teachers have little incentive to do their job seriously since their appointment is permanent and since their salaries are not related to work performance (1996a: 19). In addition, teachers are a powerful organised group and wield considerable political clout. In the UP, for instance, their representation in government is ensured by the state constitution, which provides that one-twelfth of all Members of the Legislative Council should be elected from teachers' constituencies. In 1993, 8 per cent of all MLCs and 11 per cent of MLAs in UP were teachers who remained in their posts and continued to draw full pay, even if they did not have time to take classes. In West Bengal, where teachers are often cadres of the ruling Communist Party of India, successful decentralisation has resulted in the politicisation of teaching right down to the grassroots level since teachers operate as important agents of party presence in the villages. Their links with government have made the teaching unions particularly strong in this state. Any attempts at unwelcome transfers in response to complaints by parents or school authorities are taken to court and accompanied by a block on new recruitment till the case has been heard.

Exacerbating the more general exclusionary effects of these failures in the functioning of the educational system are others which reflect the social and economic differentiation of society. Many of the problems noted here are intensified in relation to scheduled caste/scheduled tribal groups. According to the NCERT survey in 1994, around 54 per cent of primarily tribal rural habitations did not have a primary school (cited in Nambissan 1996). Dreze and Hazdar also note discrimination against scheduled caste settlements in decisions about school location. There are also additional exclusionary pressures which reflect the growing social distance between teachers, who are still disproportionately recruited from the

upper castes, and pupils who are increasingly drawn from lower status and caste groups, partly because of the expansion in enrolment rates and partly because better-off parents are increasingly sending their children to private schools (the Probe Team 1999).

Such discrimination manifests itself in educational provision in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. As Nambissan points out, the official curriculum is silent about the experience of scheduled caste communities as well as to the 'hidden curriculum' operating within school processes which conveyed the distinct message of social inferiority to scheduled caste children. The Probe team came across villages where scheduled caste children sit separately from others, or must sit on the floor while the rest sit on benches. Higher caste teachers continue to consider scheduled caste children 'uneducable', refuse to touch them, make them feel unintelligent and inferior, target them for physical and verbal abuse, use them for menial chores (the Probe Team 1999). Harassment from upper caste children is also common.

### **3.3 Alternative forms of provision: private provisions**

Parents have responded to the poor quality of state provision in a number of ways. Some have taken their children out of school or not sent them to school in the first place. Others have opted for alternative forms of schooling. The growing demand for private schools signals the growing dissatisfaction with state provision. Along with the growth in private schools, private provisioning also takes the form of private tuition or coaching, often by the same teachers whose poor performance within public school sector has given to rise to the demand for private tuition in the first place.

Comparisons of private unaided schools (PU) with public schools and private, but government-aided schools (PA) have highlighted differences in delivery which might explain why the latter have higher rates of attendance and lower drop out rates (Kingdon 1996b). Although PU schools charge substantial fees and their teachers tend to be more poorly qualified, trained and paid than teachers in PA schools, they turn up regularly. The absenteeism which undermines the quality of education in public schools is not an issue. Their earnings are linked to their performance and there is a chain of accountability which stretches from provider to intended recipient. As a result, PU schools appear to be more responsive to parents' needs. They are also more cost-effective.

Kingdon contests the widely-held view that private schools are elite, fee-charging institutions catering only to the children of the rich in urban areas. Instead, she cites studies which point to considerable heterogeneity and spread in private educational provision (1996a). Monthly tuition fees varied considerably (from RS. 20 to RS. 240 in Lucknow city for instance). Based on a survey of schools in New Delhi, Chadha and Singh comment 'what is incredible are the absolute (low) levels of income at which the demand for private schooling exists. It is incredible because government schools are virtually free' (cited in Kingdon 1996a: 6). Reddy notes the existence of a demand for private education in rural areas: 'even at the primary level, many children from rural schools attend private schools in urban areas. Because of the deterioration in the quality of publicly financed schools, private schools are spreading even in remote areas' (Reddy 1991: 374). Indeed, Reddy (2000) suggests that recent reduction in educational disparities in the more backward areas of Andhra Pradesh, despite the greater concentration of state resources in the

more developed regions, is likely to reflect the much greater role of the private sector, particularly the unrecognised private sector, in the more backward areas. More than 50 per cent of villages with unrecognised schools are in the backward Telangana region.

However, it remains the case that private provision does not offer equity in access to education, but reproduces pre-existing forms of inequality. This is particularly obvious at the primary level, given so few children from disadvantaged groups make it into the secondary level. Thus Kingdon's study (1996b) based on data from urban UP, a state with higher than average percentages of children in private schools as well as with particularly poor public provision, reported that children from wealthier households were significantly more likely to attend private schools, and less likely to go government schools, than those from poorer households. Boys were also more likely to go to private schools, and less likely to go to government schools, indicating the greater willingness on the part of parents to invest in their sons' education than in their daughters. Children from low caste households had a lower probability of attending both government and private schools than the rest of the population.

If these patterns are typical for the rest of India, it is clear that reliance on the private sector will not compensate for failures of access in the public provision of schooling. Instead, Kingdon suggests that equity might be better served by allowing the private sector to meet rising demand for secondary education, a demand which comes largely from better off households. This would release funds to improve public provision in the primary education.

### ***3.4 Alternative forms of provision: between state and market***

Performing better on the equity front are the voluntary and NGO sectors. Their efforts differ both from the government, in that they are not subject to same governance structures and can be more responsive to locally expressed need, as well as from private provision, in that they are not driven by commercial imperatives and can reach out to poor and excluded groups. Indeed, many non-governmental efforts have been set up precisely to compensate both for the lack of responsiveness of the government system as well as the exclusionary implications of private provision. However, non-governmental efforts do not share a uniform approach. Rather, their goals and strategies reflect the nature of their analysis of the problem and the extent to which they subscribe to the competing explanations described in this paper.

For instance, the approach adopted by MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh is premised on the belief that right to a single universal formal educational system is an integral aspect of every child's right to a childhood and to the realisation of their full potential. Non-formal education and vocational training are not only inferior substitutes, but they serve to reproduce pre-existing inequalities within the population by offering unequal opportunities for education. Because of this starting premise, MV Foundation makes no distinction between the different kinds of work that children might engage in, the spectrum of activities noted in Section 1. Instead it views every child out of school as a potential child labourer. It believes that the only way to eliminate child labour is to universalise education and that the only way to universalise education is to eliminate child labour.

As far as its analysis is concerned, MV Foundation does not accept poverty as an adequate reason for

why children are not in school, pointing to the large number of extremely poor parents who have been willing to make adjustments and sacrifices to send their children to school. The problem instead is one of 'access' created both by cultural norms and beliefs, shared by all sections of society, including parents from poor and socially marginalised groups, as to who is entitled to go to school and who is not, as well as by bureaucratic failures in the delivery of education. Consequently, the main thrust of MV Foundation is seeking to change social norms and individual mind-sets through intensive discussion and interaction with parents of out-of-school children, with teachers and with other sections of the community who can help to motivate parents and follow up on children who miss school. It also works with educational administrators to make the schooling system more hospitable to children from excluded groups and provides 'bridge camps' to motivate them to enrol and remain at school as well as to compensate through intensive training for years missed at school so that they are then able to enter the formal system at the level appropriate to their age. MV Foundation has been able to successfully remove over 100,000 children from work and integrate them into the formal system, thereby providing support for the view that even dire poverty need not constitute an obstacle to children's participation in school, provided there is sufficient support for such action at the community level.

A somewhat different approach had been adopted by BRAC in Bangladesh. While it too is concerned with inequalities in access to schooling along gender and poverty lines, it accepts that children from poorer households are likely to be needed to help out in various tasks. It does not seek to force a choice between work and school. Nor does it insist on access to formal schooling as the only acceptable route for universalising education. Central to its approach is the promotion of a three year programme of non-formal primary education which aims to compensate for some of the deficiencies of the formal educational system. Like MV Foundation, BRAC also considers community participation critical to the success of its strategy but it works with parents-teacher committees to determine the timing of classes and to ensure regular attendance. Bearing in mind children's views on education, BRAC seeks to keep the size of its classrooms small, to train teachers to adopt imaginative ways of imparting learning and to ensure longer contact hours between teachers and students by having shorter vacations.

BRAC began out treating its programme as a terminal one but changed its orientation when it found out first of all that many of those who had completed its programme sought to continue their primary education through the formal system but secondly that many of these children then dropped out of the formal system within two years. It has now extended its programme to five years so that children who graduate from it can enter the formal system directly at the secondary level. In addition to the large numbers of children from disadvantaged groups who have been able to complete their primary education – the drop out rate is only 10 per cent over the three year cycle and attendance rate is over 90 per cent – the quality of primary education offered in BRAC has meant that children who had spent three years in a BRAC school did better than children who had spent five years in a formal primary school, including private formal schools.

## 4 Summary and conclusions

The causes of child labour and poor educational achievements, and hence the likely solutions, have been passionately argued in the South Asian context, with proponents of very differing explanations able to draw on persuasive empirical evidence to support their case. The synthesis of the literature provided in this paper points to the conditions under which these different explanations are likely to prevail and hence why it is possible to support apparently competing accounts of the nature of the problem, and hence of the solution. In this concluding section, I will summarise the main findings of the paper together with the policy implications and research questions which they suggest.

First of all, it is important to note that while the evidence cited in this paper does testify to a broadly inverse relationship between child labour and poor educational outcomes, the two are clearly not mirror images of each other so that it is possible to have an impact on one problem without making an equivalent impact on the other. Two categories of children present a particular challenge in this context. The first are those who are neither at school nor at work. The fact that the majority of these are girls suggests the operation of gender-specific considerations in their exclusion from both markets and education. The second are those who combine work and school. Many of these were drawn into school by specific measures, such as the availability of credit or food subsidies on education, which have served to increase the demand for education without reducing the dependence on children's economic contributions. It is not clear why this is the case and what implication of this 'double burden' is for children's educational achievements or well-being.

Secondly, the evidence supports the view that there is a broad relationship between poverty and child labour, but one that is partly reinforced, and partly offset, by the economic and social differentiation of the poor. Factors like caste, religion, ethnicity and gender act in conjunction with poverty, as well as independently of it, to explain variations in the incidence of child labour as well as children's absence, or irregular presence, in the educational system in ways that complicate their relationship with poverty. The poor are also differentiated by the security of their livelihoods. While many moderately poor people can, and do, send their children to school where the right facilities are available, the same is less true of the extreme poor. A disproportionate percentage of child labour, and out-of-school children are drawn from households characterised by irregular earnings and lack of assets, savings or access to credit.

The relationship between poverty and child labour is also complicated by differences in the nature and pace of economic development which have given rise to the spatial and temporal differentiation of economic opportunities. In rural contexts, in particular, areas which are more remote tend to be characterised by static technologies and the predominance of farming as a source of employment. These also tend to report higher levels of child labour. Child labour tends to be lower in more developed areas, with diversified economies, dynamic technology and higher investment in social infrastructure. Indeed, in the former contexts, wealthier farming households may have higher incidence of child labour than poor, landless households. However, in more developed areas and in urban contexts, child labour is generally associated with poverty rather than wealth.

The third important point to make is that, while the forces of deprivation and discrimination play an important role in explaining the incidence of child labour and poor educational outcomes, there is also persuasive evidence that sound educational policies, backed by political will and adequate resources, can overcome the obstacles that these present. States which have made impressive strides on the educational front are by no means the wealthiest in the region but they are characterised by government commitment to the achievement of universal access. However, not surprisingly, the literature also suggests that sound education policies work most effectively in tandem with policies which protect and promote household livelihoods. There is thus a synergy between economic and social policy which explains why some states have been able to achieve a 'virtuous' cycle of growth and social development while others remain mired in a vicious cycle of poverty and child labour.

Studies carried out at lower levels of analysis add further nuances to this broad-brush picture and to the policy interventions which it suggests. They point to the relevance of gender, not only in differentiating which children go to school and which do not, but also in differentiating the relationship between parental access to resources and the educational achievements of children. They also point to the possibility of local level interventions, both those which address household livelihoods (such as provision of credit) as well as those which deal with educational provision, acting to compensate for failures at the policy level.

Our review of the literature therefore strongly suggests that explanations for child labour and poor educational performance are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. It is not always possible to separate out the extent to which the supply of child labour in a particular context is due to the poverty of households and how much of it is a 'default' option, a response to inadequacies in the provision of education within that context. Equally, it is difficult to separate out the extent to which the relationship between household poverty and the supply of child labour/poor educational outcomes operates primarily through material factors (the affordability of school fees; the need for children's income) or ideological ones (the perceived irrelevance of education for the poor by the poor; the exclusionary attitudes of teachers and others towards the children of the poor). In other words, there is much greater interdependence between these various 'demand' and 'supply' factors which affect child labour and poor educational outcomes than is usually implied by models of 'demand' and 'supply'.

Finally, the analysis in the paper raises some important questions for future research. What has led some states and governments, but not others, to take social policy issues seriously? More particularly, why have some, but not others, demonstrated a commitment to overcoming long-standing social inequalities by creating educational opportunities for all? Other important questions relates to how economic and social policies translate into favourable micro-level impacts, both independently of, as well as in tandem with each other? And where there is neither a favourable economic or social policy environment, how can this be brought about and what intermediate measures are most effective in compensating for such failure at the policy level? Should they be directed at improving the security of household livelihoods and thus reducing the supply of child labour? Or should the emphasis be on improving the quality of provision with a view to increasing the demand for education? What factors explain the existence of categories of

children who are neither at work nor at school as well as those who combine work and school and what can be done to address their needs and constraints?

As we have seen, there are a wide range of different models of delivery in operation in different parts of Bangladesh and India, involving government, non-government and private initiatives as well as various forms of 'hybrid' interventions. While we know that many have been able to achieve what the formal system has not, we do not know what lies behind their success or how much they cost. There is clearly a need to explore how examples of 'good practice' in education perform in the presence or absence of enabling policy conditions in order to understand in greater detail how synergies between economic and social operate at the micro level and what lessons can be incorporated into wider policy efforts.



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