

India takes small steps to end child labour

By Aletta André

Published in Dutch national newspaper *Trouw* on 28 October 2018

Children in India have the right to free education. Legally, child labour has been restricted. However, this does not help children from the age of 15.

Venkat Reddy has been active in combating child labour in India since the 1990s. He acts on behalf of the MV Foundation and is also a member of the advisory board on child labour in the Indian Ministry of Labour & Employment. He sees a cautious shift from child labour to the school classroom.

There is confusion about the number of child labourers (aged between 4 and 14) in India. According to a population study in 2011 there are 4.35 million children involved. However, organisations such as Save the Children state that there are 31 million child labourers, based on a sample survey carried out in 2006.

“Child labour does not reduce poverty in a family. It actually leads to more poverty.”

Venkat Reddy, MV Foundation

Why this significant difference in numbers?

“It depends on how child labour is defined. A very limited definition is used in the population study: only children who do not go to school and who work fulltime are included in that figure. In the other, much larger number, all children are included who worked a number of hours in the week before the survey was conducted. It was not taken into account whether they also attended school. Children who work in the household or in the family business were also counted.”

Child labour in India has decreased considerably in recent decades. Why?

“The Indian government has done a great deal of work to increase the number of children who attend school. For example, by visiting all villages and by promoting adult education. This means that the demand for education has increased. Serving free lunch at state schools has also played an important role.”

How important has the Right to Education Act (2010) been in the battle against child labour?

“The Right to Education Act has helped enormously to improve access to education. There is a school with a teacher in most villages now and it has become easier to enrol for pupils. This means that more than 95 percent of all children up to the age of 14 are enrolled in a school.

The next step is to measure and improve the attendance rates and the school results of pupils, because that is still a challenge. It is also important to get the group of children aged 15 to 18 to attend school. Education is not compulsory for them yet, and it should be because child labour in that age bracket is actually increasing.”

Many state schools are suffering from a lack of teachers and a lack of space. Is there enough money available?

“The budget is not the problem. Inefficient use or abuse of the budget does occur, however. It is often the case that there is less money available for the classes in the upper school compared to the classes in the lower school. This means that the government has decided that not all children will complete their education. Long-term planning is needed to change this.”

What has the effect of the new Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act (2016) been?

“The best thing about this new act is that our definition of child labour has been accepted. All children who do not attend school are child labourers. This means that the poverty argument has disappeared. This is the argument that child labour is essential because the parents are poor. We have always battled against that idea. Child labour does not reduce poverty in a family at all. It actually increases poverty.”

“Other than that, the amendment is disappointing. For the first time, the Act recognises that children aged 15 to 18 are also children. But child labour in that age group is only prohibited if the work is dangerous. The Act also allows children to work within the family. These exceptions mean that there is room for malpractice. For example, many girls get married before they turn 18 and are no longer seen as a child but as a daughter-in-law. These are invisible child labourers working at home.”

It seems as if parents are not motivated to send their children to school...

“In our experience, parents *are* motivated. You cannot shift the responsibility to the parents. There are 160,000 enrolments in state schools in the state of Telangana, where there are only 35,000 places. This makes it very difficult for parents to find a school that they can afford near their home. Even if they really want to.”

What the children say



Mohammed © Ruhani Kaur

‘Not many children went to school in the village where I used to live’

Mohammed Nasseem (14)

“Five years ago I came to Panipat with my father. He’s a bricklayer. My mother stayed in the village, but I really wanted to go with my dad. First I worked in a textile factory for 5 months. I operated a machine that turned spun yarn into a ball. Five or six other children were working there too. When I was not at work, I simply stayed at home or played with other children in the neighbourhood. Then I started going to school in Panipat.

Not many children went to school in the village where I used to live. They mainly made a lot of noise. The teacher didn’t do anything. But going to school in Panipat is good fun. The teachers are kind and I have made new friends. I am learning how to read and write now. My father hopes that I will become a doctor one day.”



Rajender © Ruhani Kaur

‘We took Pooja out of school to take care of me’

Rajender (46) is the father of Pooja (11)

“Until five years ago I worked as a security guard in a factory. But I fell and broke my hip. Well, at least that’s what the doctors say now. I thought that painkillers would cure me, but I never recovered and I still can’t walk very well. That’s the reason why we took Pooja out of school. I needed someone to take care of me at home. Her two older brothers were working in factories, and my wife and 16-year-old daughter worked as domestic helps.

It’s fine that Pooja has now gone back to school. She can easily combine it with her household chores. She cooks two meals a day, that’s all. Now she wants to become a doctor. Surely that should be possible, if she continues to study?”