

Children behind South Indian looms

Camilla Roman with Barbara Harriss-White

7.30 am. Chilli red and cobalt blue silk threads are stretched out on a small road of a South-Indian town. They are ready to be placed on the looms and become the fine sarees for which this region of Tamil Nadu is famous. Two lines of concrete houses line the road, some children in uniforms are leaving for school. Then through a small square window, the huge eyes of a young boy sitting at a loom. Soon he disappears from view.

Child labour is now a sensitive issue in many regions and many industries of southern India. National and international campaigns, as well as controls by local labour officers have made it difficult to discuss. And yet this secrecy seems the *only* effect of such measures. In almost every house in that street, at least one child is working behind the loom.

The youngest weaving children are nine year olds, boys and girls. Some work for relatives or neighbours, many weave within their own household. Their wage ranges from 150 to 450 Rs a month. Sangeeta, an 11 year old, makes a drawing of her favourite activity: playing with dolls. When asked whether she plays every day, she says 'no, I don't play anymore. I don't have time since I started helping with the weaving'. Ravi, 13, works 10 hours a day, then comes home and looks at his old school books, practicing the same writing exercises over and over again. There is no chance for him to be given new homework.

In the silk industry children do 'helping work': they prepare the thread that is to be used and they assist the weaver at the loom by taking care of saree borders. Child labour in silk weaving is associated with a certain type of saree, the *korvai* or 'contrast'. In this intricate saree, the design and often the colour of the borders are different from those of the main body of the cloth. Three shuttles are needed: the weaver operates two, and the assistant the third. In this labour-intensive industry, children are often employed as assistants. A child is able to perform the tasks required as efficiently as an adult, can be paid much lower rates, and is likely to remain with the weaver for longer than a mature counterpart, who will acquire skills only to start his own business. On the demand side of the labour market, the reasons for a weaver to prefer a child rather than an adult assistant appear clear enough.

What about the supply side of the picture? A puzzling feature of the families of many children employed in the silk industry is the fact that they do not seem to live in poverty. In the press and in child labour campaigns the link between child labour and poverty is asserted over and over again. Yet, the factors causing children to work are often left unexplored. The term poverty has come to cover a number of related phenomena. Among weaving households the most prominent issue is *not* income poverty - the income of a family with a single loom ranges from 3,000 to 4,000 Rs, and that of a family with 2 looms can reach the 6,000 Rs a month. More important to the family economy of child workers is their extreme vulnerability to crises. Crises, taking the form of an accident, incapacity or illness overtaking one of the parents are the most common cause of children having to work. The weaver usually the father - as well as his assistant - usually the mother - are both essential for *korvai* weaving. The former cannot work without the latter, and vice versa. A shock, such as illness, jeopardises their only source of income. The coupling of medical expenses with the suspension of the main economic activity of the family fractures the fragile equilibrium that allows children to attend school. Under these circumstances, one or more children in the family have to be withdrawn from their studies and put to work. The same forces swing into action not only when the main breadwinner- the weaver- is victim of a shock, but also when a shock strikes the assistant. In the latter case, the child is withdrawn from school and kept at home to assist to her\his father. 'At the time, it was more important for us to have a helper than sending Usha to school', the father of the a 10 year old, whose mother had fallen sick with malaria said, and 'in order to work I needed her, and in order to eat she needed me'.

In many cases, the shock is temporary, and the parent could resume her \his work after recovering. But the children remain behind a loom. Why? A fundamental reason is simply that *there are no educational facilities for older children who want and could go back to school.*

Something can be surely done about this. The problem is likely to occur in other household based activities. There is now plenty of other evidence from rural field research that health-related

shocks 'disable' entire households by pitching them into debt, while directing to nursing (or 'care') the energies of other family members, which could otherwise be devoted to income-earning or to school.

Interventions to address this persistent problem might take two forms. A first response, would be a preventive one, tackling the issue at its roots. Weaving families lack the means of access to prompt and adequate social security benefits for health emergencies. Sickness benefits would prevent the vicious link between adult life crises and child labour. A second response would involve establishing, publicising and popularising a state sector or a voluntary teaching assistance service that helped children taken away from school to get back into the curriculum.

Child labour is the fate lying in wait for vulnerable members of society. But it does more than that: it seizes and then fails fully to develop the most important resource for India's future - her children.

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