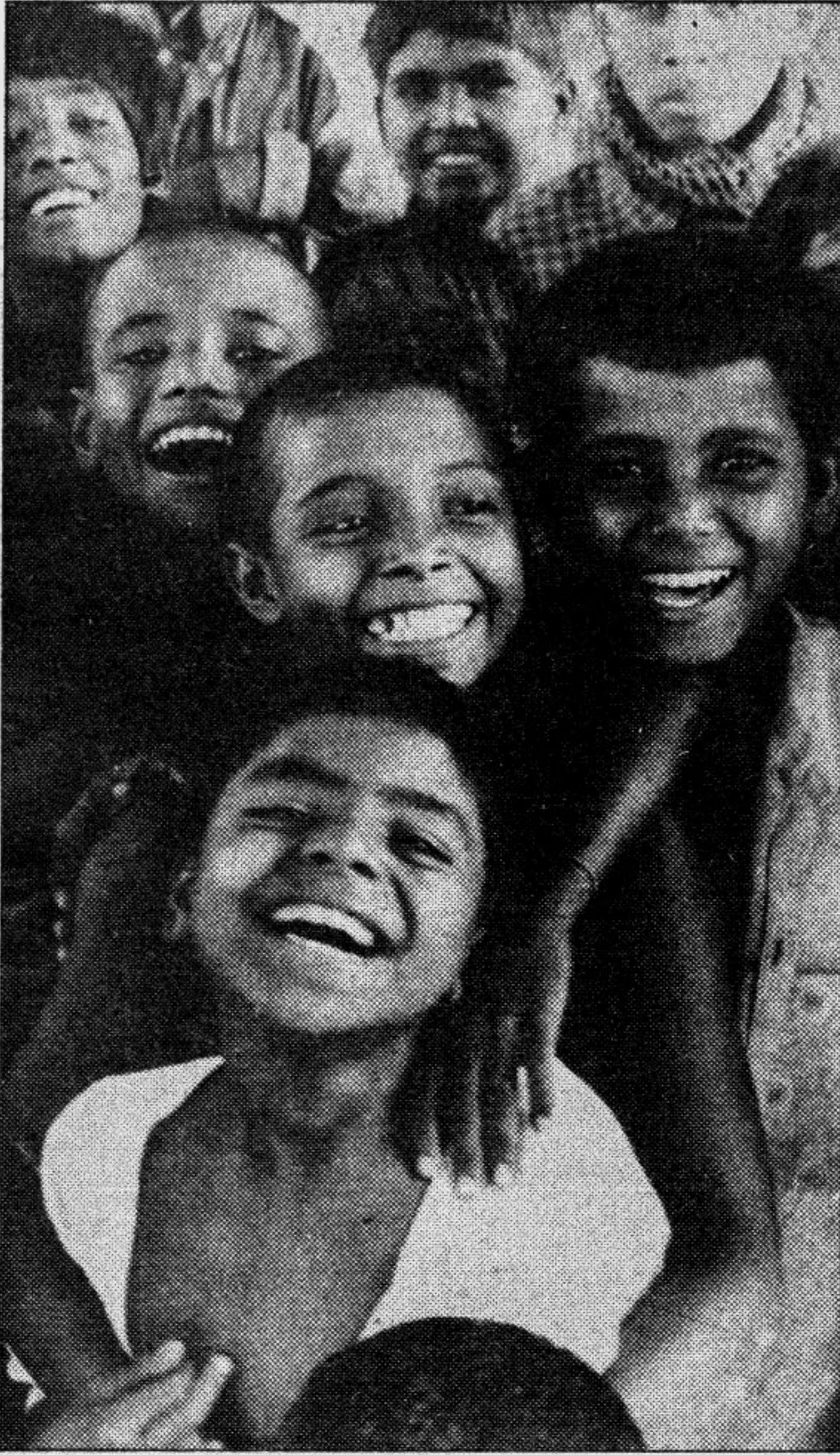


Child Labour: A Necessary Evil?

Navine Murshid and Ekram Kabir analyse the state of child labour in Bangladesh.



They know not what the future beholds...

— Star Photo

THE Convention on the Rights of the Child appears to have broken all records as the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. Work on its drafting began in 1979 -- the International Year of the Child -- by a working group established by the Commission on Human Rights. After the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention on 20 November 1989, it was opened for signature on 26 January 1990. That day, 61 countries signed it, a record first-day response.

Only seven months later, on 2 September 1990, the Convention entered into force after the 20th state had ratified it. Since then as in just six years it has been ratified by all states with the exception of only two, namely Somalia and the United States.

Its uniqueness stems from the fact that it is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights -- children's civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights -- thus giving all rights equal emphasis.

The Convention defines as a child every human being under 18, unless national laws recognise the age of majority earlier.

The Convention sets minimum legal and moral standards for the protection of children's rights. Nothing in the Convention affects any provisions that contribute more to the realisation of child rights and that may be found in the law of the state party or in other international laws in force in that state -- the higher standard shall always apply.

People who know their rights are better able to claim them. Making the Convention and its provisions widely known is therefore an essential step in promoting children's rights.

Different countries have publicised the Convention in different ways. Vietnam organised a 'Get to Know the Convention' contest that drew 250,000 entries from school children. The Jamaica Coalition on the Rights of the Child has conducted an island-wide public education campaign on child rights. Mozambique staged 'national elections' on child rights in 1994.

In Nicaragua, a children's movement is attempting to educate children as well as adults about child rights. In France, a media campaign is informing young people of their right to consult a lawyer. In Sweden, copies of the Convention have been distributed throughout the country, including translations for immigrant communities in Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Spanish, and Turkish. Many other countries have also translated the Convention into local languages.

In Poland, non-government organisations have organised media crusades, including a regular television show that educates the public about the Convention and targets abuses. Namibia has launched a set of family law booklets that are a popularised version of the rights of children. In Colombia, the government's public awareness campaign conducted through the media, the bureaucracy, and the schools is called 'There Are No Small Rights'.

The notion of children having rights is a relatively new concept, and many countries are running training programmes for teachers and social workers. Thousands of educators in the Dominican Republic are now using the 'Teachers' Guide on the Rights of Children'. In Swaziland, child rights have become an integral part of the training curriculum for rural health motivators, the country's largest group of social workers.

However, in Bangladesh, there is hardly any campaign for awareness. Although Bangladesh has been one of the first ones to sign the treaty, as far as implementation goes, it has failed rather miserably. Child labour is prevalent in all sectors of the economy. In fact those who preach the rights of children are the very ones who utilise child labour for their manual needs.

Today, children's rights are one of the 'popular' topics that sell well. Suddenly it has become fashionable to talk about children and how much deprived they are. It holds true for both at national and international levels. However, when it requires something to be done, no one can be seen doing something concrete for the children.

Bangladesh has a total population of 120,073,000 with a GNP per capita of 240 US dollar. The population under 18 is 57,200,000 and it is on the rise. Infant mortality is 83 per thousand children while the under-five mortality is 112 per thousand children. The primary net enrolment at school is 82 per thousand of which Primary Gross Enrolment is 69 and Secondary Gross Enrolment is 21 per thousand.

Only 47 per cent of children reach grade five. Therefore it is quite apparent how many children are in labour.

Child labour is certainly not compulsory. In the socio-economic backdrop of poor countries like Bangladesh, it is, in most cases, a necessity. "Children should not have to work," so say child experts of the developed countries.

The reality, however, is different. An International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimate says at least 120 million children between 5 and 14 years of age work in developing countries. The number rises to 250 million when part-time child workers are counted. According to the ILO, Africa has the highest incidence of child workers -- some 40 per cent. The figure for Latin America and Asia is about 20 per cent. In absolute figures, Asia has the largest number of child workers, approximately 61 per cent, with 32 per cent in Africa and 7 per cent in Latin America.

In an effort to mobilise a world-wide campaign to protect and promote the rights of all children, and to raise awareness about some of the most abusive child labour practices, a 'Global March Against Child Labour' was launched in January last year that spanned five continents -- Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe.

The marchers reached Los Angeles, US, on May 1, 1998. When they were welcomed by the US Labour Secretary Alexis Herman, and had to listen to the gospel-like speeches of senior US officials, lawmakers, ILO officials, and American labour leaders in Washington, there were some interesting reactions.

"It is an honour to welcome the Global March to our nation's capitol, and to see so many young people here today," Herman said, adding: "I believe it is fitting that we meet today in a museum. Because that's where the issue of abusive child labour belongs -- in museums and history books -- not in the daily lives of the world's children."

She also declared President Clinton's proposal to increase US funding for the ILO's International Programme to Eliminate Child Labour (IPEC) by ten-fold from \$3 million to \$30 million by 1999. Herman said past US investment in IPEC has succeeded in removing 10,000 child garment workers in

"A century that began with children having virtually no rights is ending with children having the most powerful legal instrument that not only recognises but protects their human rights."

— Carol Bellamy
UNICEF Executive Director

Bangladesh from workrooms to schoolrooms, and others in Thailand and Nepal to help girls at risk of being forced into prostitution. Similar projects also have been initiated in the Philippines, Brazil, and most recently, in Uganda.

Senator Harkin echoed Herman's remarks saying: "That's not to say that child labour will cease to exist, but we have to put it behind us, the way we have put slavery behind us."

To this effect, Harkin said he has proposed legislation for the past several years that would ban the import of products into America made using child labour.

But this same person as Senator Harkin appeared cruel to a certain extent later in the year. Buoyed by a federal law passed in October 1998, an advocacy group has asked the US Customs to ban imports of carpets and rugs from South Asian countries -- like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan -- unless the manufacturers can prove they are not made with forced child labour.

Perhaps he was trying to keep aside the fact that "child labour" is a universal problem and not a problem of one country only; it is not strictly limited to developing countries.

The irony in his words is that in the US, an estimated 230,000 children work illegally on farms, picking fruits and vegetables, according to advocacy groups for migrant farm-workers. And tens of thousands of other underage children have been found to be working illegally in sweatshops, according to evidence uncovered by the US Labour Department itself and NGOs.

Bangladesh has 6.3 million child workers. Of them, only five per cent are in the formal sector. Harkin Bill raised in 1993 seems to have mixed implications. After the MoU, designed by ILO-UNICEF-BGMEA, out of 10,000 children, 7,000 were provided literacy by one NGO. In comparison to the 6.3 million children in work, this figure is virtually nothing! Again, when this project is over, the phenomenon of educating the children will die out; so what is the point of the Harkin Bill?

People like Senator Harkin are letting the children dream of a better future, they provide education and let them believe that there is more to life than breaking bricks. But at the end of the day, they shatter their dreams, leaving them to fend for themselves in a world more cruel than they thought. They are going back to more hazardous jobs, often after a massive financial letdown. The girls are the worst victims as parents as they are often discriminated against in addition to the other 'ordinary' risks.

It can be argued that while putting forward such views Harkin was seeking to save jobs rather than prevent child labour for their hazardous effects. He saw that child labour was a major threat to employment for those in the working age group, that is, between 16 to 65, as child labour was cheap and easily available. Therefore, it can again be critically said that his aim was to protect those who were made redundant because of using child labour. His compassion for children was hardly the factor. If a survey is carried out, there is hardly any child who feels Harkin was right.

The consequences of NGO-based education system have to be evaluated. What would happen after programmes they are currently running? Are the children going back to the previous position or has there been an improvement in the standard of living? Is education providing them with sufficient knowledge to be eligible for higher pay and quality of life? After they complete a certain course of study, forgoing salary and the like, are returning to the same pattern of brick-breaking work or, as they are really being ensured with good quality jobs? These are some of the questions that have to be addressed in this respect. It has to be assessed whether the resources allocated to this sector, in educating the poor young, are being properly utilised or wasted.

If all the parents in Bangladesh understood the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that would have been much more useful than the Bill put forward by Senator Harkin. But enlightening the parents with this realisation seems to be an uphill task. Rural poverty, traditional social barriers and lack of awareness about children's rights are major constraints in implementing the provisions to secure the rights of the child.

In developing countries such as Bangladesh, child labour exists because they are assets of the family. They are sent out to work at a very young age to earn for the family. This is prevalent among the poor who are mainly city slum dwellers and rural dwellers. If they are sent to school, for them it is a complete waste of money and the children start becoming the burden. The incidence of poverty increases because if the children are not working, it means that a given family is worse off. Therefore in such circumstances, the children need to earn in order to maintain subsistence level. Children who work at farms, who work as assistants in sweet shops etc., who work as domestic helps are not counted when statistics are prepared for evaluation. These are a more indirect form of child labour.

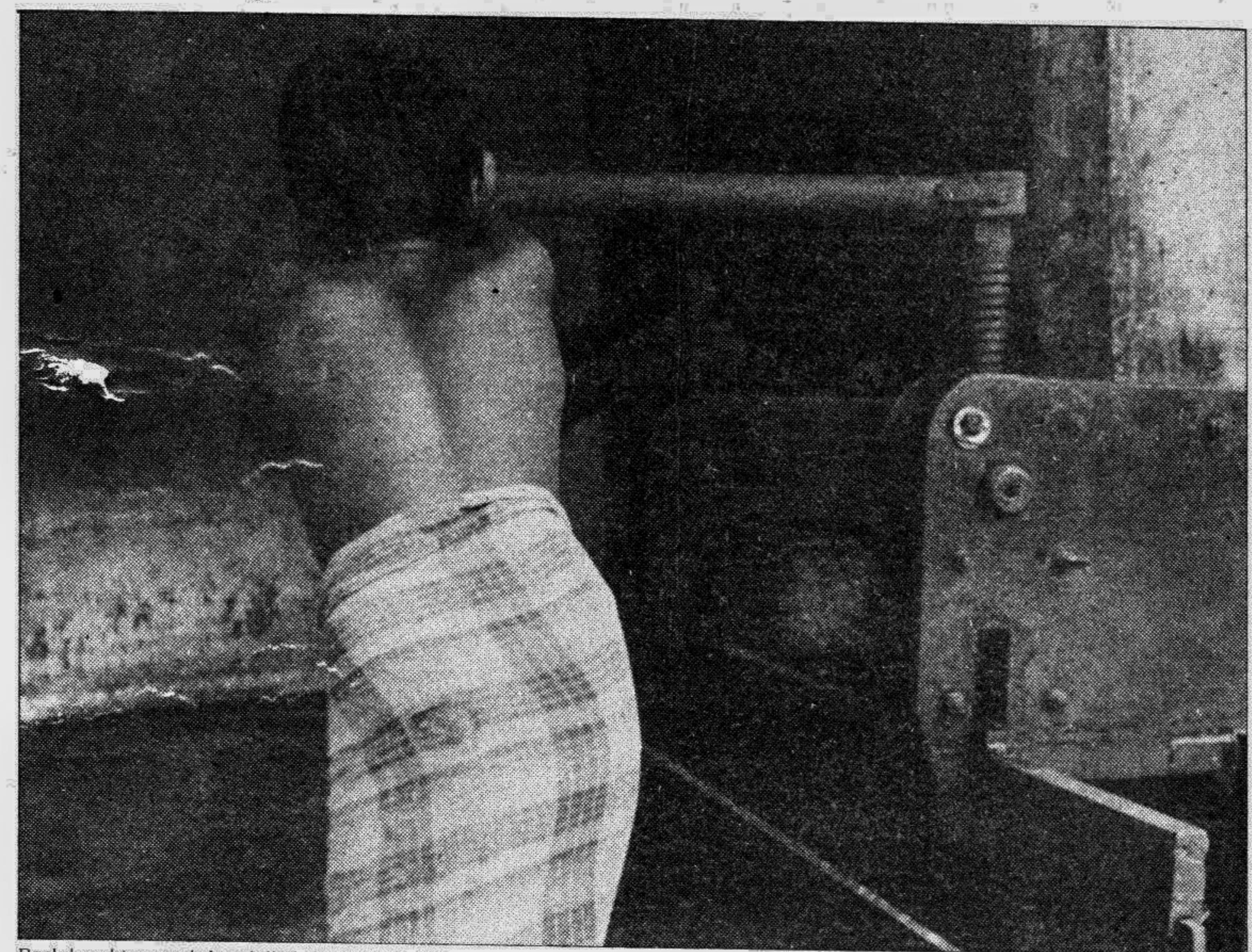
In rural areas children working at farms, assisting their fathers is a common phenomenon and is hardly constituted as work, and therefore they receive no wages. However, these children, whose mainstay is agriculture, are not going to school either. Those who do not attend school or do not have the means to do the same -- or drop out of school are naturally sucked into the burgeoning informal sector.

Their involvement in the informal sector activities bears testimony to child labour in the country. Mobilised for their own survival -- or quite often for that of their family -- as street hawkers, garbage collectors, most of the time children in Bangladesh are not considered by the society as "children in danger", or even "children at work" in the true sense of the terms.

Children serving as domestics have to perform a host of responsibilities. Those working in this category begin their working day, on average, over 24 hours, and no opportunity for rest.

The major cause of child labour is parental poverty. Economic considerations are strong determinants of child labour. These are forces which push and pull children to work. Statistics, if correctly computed, would concur that the greater majority of child domestic workers come from low socio-economic status households, characterised by parental illiteracy, and in disadvantaged rural areas. Rural parents seeking a better future for their children are indirectly encouraged by the urban middle class to place their children in urban households, with the understanding that the children will provide domestic labour in return. The parents are willing to accept the risks that accompany this type of arrangement since it offers a possibility -- no matter how small -- of getting the children out of their present poor condition.

Domestic helps, however, in some cases are better off in



Back breaking work has killed the child in him...

needs and stimulating employment at the local level.

Economic growth must also be sustainable. It will be short-lived if it does not conserve the natural environment and resources. Moreover, the nexus between the environment and poverty is all too readily observed in much of the region. The rural poor are often forced to live on fragile lands and waters that require sensitive resource management in the face of increasing degradation. Although much of the environmental damage has been caused by the rich and powerful, the pressures of poverty and population compound the threat through deforestation, over-grazing and over-fishing.

The urban poor are exposed to disease and illness resulting from over-crowding and highly polluted living conditions. Measures to protect the environment must therefore be integral to the fight against poverty.

Economic growth alone cannot be relied on to eliminate poverty. It has to be complemented by well-articulated national strategies for poverty reduction and social development. Just as some targeting of economic development is necessary to reach by-passed areas, so also social development must be targeted to ensure individuals or communities are not excluded. An effective national strategy must therefore provide for adequate budgetary allocations for human capital formation, targeting of basic social services to the poor, removal of gender discrimination, population policy and social protection. Beyond developing human capital, the national strategy must also help strengthen social capital, especially for those subjected to some form of exclusion.

To respond to these multiple considerations, targeted programmes may be required in the following areas of human capital development, social capital development, gender and development, social protection and population policy. Accelerating poverty reduction in Bangladesh represents one of that nation's greatest challenges. For the government and its development partners, a critical task is to identify strategies that have greatest potential for reducing poverty. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies reviewed the outcome of past efforts and evaluated the potential impact of various anti-poverty strategies.

The findings: development of human capital has the largest impact on poverty, followed by investments in physical infrastructure such as roads and electricity, and then expansion of high yielding agro-technology. The study highlighted the valuable synergies that could be gained from human capital formation and infrastructure and from infrastructure and micro-finance. Area development programmes based around agriculture, infrastructure and micro-finance likewise demonstrated high potential.

While the study identified high potential areas for poverty reduction, it nevertheless cautioned against involvement in sectors that lacked strong internal leadership, whether from government or civil society. The study suggested that greater focus be given to gender concerns and that many traditional projects offered considerable scope for increased involvement of women.

Linked to this, and to the vulnerability caused by health problems, the study also suggested greater attention be paid to basic health and nutrition.

Therefore, unless poverty alleviation strategies are undertaken in a coherent and sustainable manner, no policies to eradicate child labour will be successful. The root cause of child labour is poverty. However, solving the 'poverty problem' will not be enough. The nature of poverty has to be assessed and then alleviated. Many nations today appear to be rich although it is there where exists unthinkable inequality of income and living standards. This is because the rich with their high levels of income make the total national income and the GDP a huge figure. Such figures do not indicate the inequalities that may exist.

To help eradicate poverty, inequalities have to be identified. It is the children of those deprived who are prone to get involved in child labour. This is because most of the national income is enjoyed by the rich few, while only a small percentage of income is shared by the rest of the population most of which are in absolute poverty. Hence, poverty eradication strategies must include steps to diminish inequalities between the rich and the poor.

The gap between rich and poor countries should also be considered -- in a bid to resolve the problem of child labour. This is factor is like to play the most important role, if the world has turned into a "global village", then the rich neighbours must shoulder the responsibility to help the poorer ones. Unless the gap is reduced, if not at par, no plan or theory seems to be feasible.

To prevent child labour, protection of women and children have to be ensured. The smuggling of children to middle east countries is not a new phenomenon. Children are often lured out along with women for a better future. Instead they are faced with intolerable hardship as they are either sold off or made to work under undignified circumstances. Bangladeshi children are often taken away to become camel jockeys, an exploitation that often leads to death. Therefore, in order to prevent child labour, child smuggling has to be checked. For this is required increased security and protection, which is too linked with poverty and the economic status of the children who are being smuggled away.

The government has decided to launch a Special Education Programme from January 2000 to educate the urban working children through the Primary and Mass Education Division of Education. Arrangements have been made to organise a two-year basic literacy course. At a time when child labour problems are taking a precarious toll, this initiative should be welcomed. This may prove to be yet another success story where the fruits of success will reach the poorest of the poor. The timings will be flexible and will supplement not the existing jobs they hold. Thus, while a steady income will be ensured, these children can get a good education which would ultimately raise the quality of labour and enable them to get higher wages. A 'phasing out' system would also be applicable here. In addition to the basic literacy course, if functional literacy and vocational training is included, then this would have a positive long term effect. The children will grow up to create a skilled, efficient labour force enjoying a higher standard of living.

Child labour can be do without. But child labour exists because of the children, because of the families to which the children belong. All arguments to do with child labour existing e.g., cutting costs of manufacturing can be overruled on the ground that there are plenty of workers, between the working age-group. Therefore, labour, child or not, will remain cheap. No, children do not have the most powerful legal instrument today, at least not in the Bangladeshi context. Child labour is a necessary evil in poor countries; in Bangladesh.

However, if Bangladesh can come out of the poverty trap, it will soon find children going to schools rather than seeking jobs to earn for a family that only expands. Sustainable development should therefore be the key word of the day, because it is here where lies the solutions to many an evil that afflict society today.



Making the best of a little break before they work again...

— Star Photo