



MARGINS AND POLITICS: EXPLORING INDIA'S NORTHEAST

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CHILD LABOUR AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA'S PROGRESS TOWARD THE SDGS: A CASE OF NAGALAND

Daniel Michal Khan

If a child is working, the country is ignorant. How a country handles its youngest citizens and their potential is a true indicator of its growth and enlightenment. One deeply ingrained social problem is child labour. In our society, it is repulsive to use children as labourers. It is abhorrent, unreasonable, inhumane, and immoral. Child labour puts children's potential in danger by depriving them of their future opportunities, health, and education. Underdeveloped and developing countries are places where child labour is both very widespread and common. In India, the problem of child labour has become very common.

India accounts for a disproportionately large portion of child labour worldwide, particularly in South Asia. An ILO report titled "Child Labour in South Asia" states that the country with the highest rate of child labour between the ages of 5 and 17 is India (5.8 million). The Census of 2011 revealed that there were 259.6 million children in India between the ages of 5 and 14. Of these, 10.1 million (3.9% of the total child population) are employed, either as "main workers" or

as "marginal workers." Furthermore, over 42.7 million children in India do not attend school.

It is concerning how child labour is currently occurring in India. The rate of decline is far too slow to meet UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, which calls for the abolition of all forms of child labour by 2030, even though the percentage of working children decreased from 5% in 2001 to 3.9% in 2011. Child labour needs to be considered from the perspective of international human rights to supplement the SDG framework. Every child's right to free, high-quality education (Article 28) and protection from economic exploitation (Article 32) is expressly guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Similarly, International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Employment and ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour obligate state parties, including India, to adopt effective measures for prevention, monitoring, and rehabilitation. However, the number of child workers increased in urban areas, suggesting a growing demand for child labour in low-wage jobs, while this decline was more pronounced in rural areas.

For the first time in 20 years, efforts to end child labour have stalled globally, which shocked us lately. The fact that child labour is rising for the first time in twenty years must be acknowledged. 160 million children are employed as minors. Eighty million of them are employed in the riskiest and poorest jobs. Some are left alone on the streets of large cities, frequently at a very early age, or they are sexually exploited, enslaved, removed from their relatives, or exposed to hazardous situations. Their physical and emotional health is seriously jeopardised by these jobs.

These statistics indicate that, despite global development, one in ten children are victim of child labour, and the number is rising at the moment. The ILO urges the global community to strengthen the battle against child labour and promote more social fairness. To create an atmosphere where children are shielded from this reality, social protection is essential, and the European Union (EU) is still collaborating with its international partners in this regard. Thus, the European Commission and the High Representative emphasised that until children worldwide are not exploited, have their rights violated, and are prevented from attaining their full potential, no sustainable and equitable future can be achieved.

Child labour is a result of poverty in any civilisation. Poverty must be eliminated in all of its forms in order to achieve sustainable development. To do this, it is essential to support equitable, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. Increasing opportunities for everyone, reducing inequality, raising the basic standard of living, promoting fair social development, etc., are some strategies to achieve this. Each of these interconnected elements is critical to both individual and societal health.

The SDGs call on all countries, rich, poor, and middle-income, to promote prosperity while conserving the earth. They also emphasise that eradicating poverty must be combined with initiatives that promote economic growth and address a wide variety of social needs, such as education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, as well as addressing climate change and environmental protection. According to the report of the 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI), India ranked 111th out of 125 countries in the GHI, 2023. In contrast, in October 2014, India ranked 55th out of 120 countries. This indicates that, despite years of progress up until 2015, the global fight against hunger remains largely at a standstill.

The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated the current state of child labour, making it more challenging to accomplish the international goal of putting a stop to child labour. The pandemic poses a threat to undo the gains made in the fight against child labour around the world. For the first time in the past 20 years, there will be an increase in child labour as a result of the epidemic, forcing millions of kids into the workforce.

The frequency of child labour is influenced by a number of interrelated factors, including poverty, unemployment, underemployment, illiteracy, etc. While many others are in it for survival, household poverty pushes children into the labour market to earn money to supplement family income. Child labour prevents children from learning and developing their abilities, which prolongs household poverty across generations and slows down social or sustainable development as well as economic growth.

It's terrible to work with children. Since children are not prepared to work like adults, this wicked practice ought to be outlawed, and the government needs to ensure that no youngster is denied an education due to poverty. Even educated and knowledgeable people flagrantly disregard the regulations that forbid child labour. The government and the populace of the nation must work extremely hard to put an end to this behaviour. The nation's future lies in its children. Therefore, the country's progress stops if its youth are destroyed. Eradicating child labour will require a globally integrated approach, coordinated measures, effective policy-making and efficient use of resources in order to meet SDG Target 8.7. Thus, this paper investigates the magnitude of child labour and its impact on the global sustainable development goals with reference to the Dimapur district of Nagaland.

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the child labourers' socio-demographic background.
2. To investigate the causes and consequences of child labourers.
3. To comprehend how child labour impedes the achievement of the SDGs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the major economic, social, and cultural factors contributing to child labour?
2. What are the real causes of child labour in this region?
3. How does child labour hinder progress toward achieving SDGs?

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out over a duration of eight months, spanning from July 2023 to February 2024, in the Dimapur district of Nagaland. The study aimed to explore the realities faced by child labourers and to investigate the key factors that drive or force children into such exploitative labour practices. Fieldwork formed the basis of the study, and a random sampling technique was employed to select the participants. The sample consisted of 100 children, aged between 5 and 17 years, who were engaged in various forms of child labour for their survival. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative data were collected using a semi-structured and open-ended questionnaire after obtaining the assent of the child participants. For the qualitative aspect, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and brief

periods of participant observation to gain contextual insights into their daily lives and working conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic profile of the child labourers was assessed using primary data collected directly from the study participants. Given the absence of official statistical records on child labour in the Dimapur district, this study serves as an important source of insight into the issue. In addition to capturing demographic details, the research also explored the underlying reasons that compel children to engage in various forms of labour. These factors were examined through both quantitative responses and qualitative accounts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the children's socio-economic backgrounds and the circumstances that drive them into the workforce at such a young age.

Table no. 1: Socio-demographic data of the child labourers

Sl. No.	Socio-demographic information of the child labourers (N=100)		
1	Gender	Frequency	Percent
	Male	72	72%
	Female	28	28%
2	Age group		
	7-10 years	34	34%
	11-14 years	51	51%

3	15-17 years	15	15%
	Native place		
	Assam	65	65%
	Manipur	4	4%
4	Nagaland	31	31%
	Religion of the Respondents		
	Muslim	55	55%
	Hindu	12	12%
5	Christian	33	33%
	Family Size		
	3 - 5 members (small family)	7	7%
	6 - 8 members (medium family)	24	24%
6	8- 10 members (large family)	69	69%
	Living Status of Parents		
	Father (alive)	78	78%
	Mother (alive)	92	92%

The data presented in the table indicates that, out of the 100 child labourers surveyed in the Dimapur district, a majority—72 (72%)—were male, while 28 (28%) were female. The largest age group among the respondents was 11–14 years, accounting for 51 individuals (51%). This was followed by 34 respondents (34%) aged 7–10 years, and 15 respondents (15%) in the 15–17 age group. In terms of place of origin, the majority of the children, 65 (65%), were

from Assam, followed by 31(31%) from Nagaland, and a small number, 4 (4%), from Manipur.

Religious affiliation among the participants showed that Islam was the predominant religion, with 55 respondents (55%) identifying as Muslim. Christians made up 33 (33%) of the sample while 12 (12%) identified as Hindu. The majority of children—69 (69%)—belong to large families with eight to ten individuals, while a lower percentage—24% (middle) and just 7%—come from tiny families, according to family size data. The study also examined the living status of the respondents' parents. It was found that the majority of fathers (78%) and mothers (92%) were alive. However, 21 children (22%) reported having been abandoned by their fathers, and 8 (8%) had been abandoned by their mothers.

Table no. 2: Distribution of Child Labourers Based on Work

Sl No	Distribution of Child Labourers Based on Work (N=100)		
1	Types of Work	Frequency	Percentage
	Domestic	20	20%
	Service sectors (shops, hotels, garages, restaurants, workshops, vendors, brick factories, construction works, etc.)	52	52%

	Rag picking	28	28%
2	No. of hours of work/day		
	5-7 hours	23	23%
	8-10 hours	59	59%
	More than 11 hours	18	18%
3	Monthly Income of the Respondent		
	₹1000-₹3000	32	32%
	₹3001-₹5000	56	56%
	₹5001 & above	12	12%
4	Work experience in years		
	≤1 year	15	15%
	1 - 3 years	19	19%
	>4 years (before pandemic)	66	66%
5	Mode of Employment		
	Through own effort	17	17%
	Through parents	52	52%
	Through relatives	31	31%

Table 2 presents the occupational distribution among the 100 surveyed child labourers. The majority, 52%, were involved in service-related occupations such as working in restaurants, hotels, garages, workshops, vending, brick kilns, and construction sites. Another 28%

of the children were engaged in rag picking, while 20% served as domestic helpers in private households. The findings also highlight the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour patterns—66% of the respondents began working during or after the pandemic, driven by heightened economic hardship and deepening poverty. When it comes to daily working hours, 59% of the children reported working between 8 to 10 hours, 18% worked for over 11 hours a day, and 23% worked between 5 to 7 hours daily. In terms of monthly earnings, 32% earned below Rs. 3000, while a larger share—56%—earned between Rs. 3001 and Rs. 5000. Only 12% of the children made over Rs. 5000 per month. Parental influence played a significant role in initiating child labour, as 52% of the children cited their parents as the reason for entering their current occupation. Additionally, 31% were introduced to work through relatives, and 17% found work on their own initiative.

Table No. 3: Causes of Child Labour

Sl No.	Causes of Child Labour (N=100)		
1	Literacy Level of the Respondents		
	Illiterate	20	20%
	1 st - 5 th standard	63	63%
	6 - 8 th standard	17	17%
2	Parent's occupation		
	Daily wager	73	73%
	Rag picker	17	17%
	Farming	4	4%
	Own business	6	6%

3	Are your parents migrated to Nagaland?		
	Yes	63	63%
	No	37	37%
4	Reasons for working		
	Family cannot afford schooling	40	40%
	Due to starvation	57	57%
	Other reasons	3	3%

The data presented in Table 3 indicates that out of 100 child labourers interviewed, 20% (20 children) had never enrolled in primary education. A significant portion, 63% (63 children), had studied up to Grades 1 to 5 before dropping out, while 17% (17 children) managed to reach Grades 6 to 8 but discontinued due to various personal and family-related challenges. In terms of their fathers' occupations, the majority—73% (73 respondents)—reported that their fathers were daily wage labourers. Additionally, 17% (17 fathers) worked as rag pickers, 4% (4) were engaged in farming, and 6% (6) owned small businesses. Furthermore, 63% of the respondents stated that their fathers had migrated from other states in search of better employment opportunities. When asked about the reasons for working at such a young age, 57% of the children cited the need to fulfill basic necessities, while 40% mentioned that their families could not afford the costs of education. A small fraction (3%) gave other miscellaneous reasons. These findings highlight the critical role that economic hardship and family circumstances play in pushing children into the workforce at an early age.

Table No. 4: Children's perspectives on entering child labour

Sl. No	Children's perspectives on entering child labour	No. of respondents (N=100)			
		Yes	%	No	%
1	Were you consulted by your parents before being engaged in work?	33	33%	67	67%
2	Are you satisfied with the work you are currently engaged in?	28	28%	72	72%
3	Have you ever expressed dissatisfaction to your parents regarding your work?	67	67%	33	33%
4	Are you willing to carry on with this work in the future?	38	38%	62	62%
5	Would you return to school if financial support were made available to you?	62	62%	38	38%

Table 4 reveals a significant dissatisfaction among children regarding their current employment for multiple reasons. The primary and most frequently cited cause, according to 67% (67 respondents) of the participants, was that their parents did not consult them before assigning them work. It is concerning to observe that a substantial portion of these child labourers—72% (72 children)—expressed unhappiness with their jobs. For example, when asked who introduced them to their work, many indicated it was their parents. A common refrain among them was, "I wanted to continue my studies, but my father insisted I work to earn money." This sentiment was widely echoed, underscoring the powerful influence of parental pressure in compelling children to enter the workforce at an early age.

Another troubling aspect is that 67% of respondents frequently voiced their grievances to their parents about the hardships they endure at work, yet their concerns largely went unacknowledged. Overall, the socio-demographic profile reveals that child labour in Dimapur is deeply rooted in poverty, migration, marginalisation, and family instability. These findings point to a multi-dimensional crisis—economic, educational, and social.

CHILD LABOUR IN NAGALAND: A BARRIER TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

Child labour in Dimapur, as revealed through this study, is not merely a localised social issue- it is a multidimensional development crisis that significantly obstructs India's path toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each child engaged in labour represents a failure to fulfil global commitments on poverty alleviation, education, and human

rights. The problem is deeply systemic, and its root causes – such as chronic poverty, hunger, educational exclusion, and social inequality – demonstrate that the persistence of child labour is both a symptom and a driver of underdevelopment.

SDG 1 – No Poverty

The most often mentioned root reason for child labour is poverty. According to the research, 57% of children began working because they were starving, and 73% of parents are daily wage workers with erratic incomes. These families live in a cycle of survival where daily subsistence depends on the children's little earnings. Child labour will continue if poverty is not addressed through adequate social protection. This emphasises how urgently poverty-reduction initiatives, such as cash transfers, job programs, and food security measures, must be expanded, particularly for migratory and informal sector workers.

SDG 2 – Zero Hunger

Food insecurity is closely related to poverty and was a significant factor in youngsters joining the workforce. Many respondents stated that they began working to prevent famine for their family rather than out of choice. Even with the Public Distribution System (PDS) initiatives and free midday meals, migrant families and unregistered residents are frequently left out. Hunger and malnutrition impede children's long-term potential and health by restricting their physical and cognitive development and forcing them into exploitative labour.

SDG 4 – Quality Education

Education is arguably the purpose that is most obviously affected. The study found that 20% of the child labourers had never attended school at all, and 63% had dropped out before finishing Class-V. The Right to Education Act, which requires free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14, is obviously not being enforced. In addition to denying children their right to an education, child labour guarantees that poverty will persist for future generations. The fact that 62% of kids would like to go back to school if offered financial assistance indicates that the true obstacles are affordability and access rather than willingness.

SDG 5 – Gender Equality

Despite the fact that boys make up 72% of the labour force, this may be due to the prevalence of male labour in public areas. Girls are probably underrepresented in the study since they are frequently involved in household chores. Their labour – cooking, cleaning, taking care of siblings, and occasionally even performing unpaid domestic work in other homes – tends to go unnoticed, unregulated, and unrecorded. In addition to limiting girls' educational options and exposing them to risks like abuse and early marriage, this hidden burden perpetuates gender norms.

SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

Target 8.7, which aims to eradicate child labour in all its manifestations by 2025, is most closely related to this problem. The results in December, however, indicate that this objective is still a long way off. Due to increased financial hardship, 66% of the study's child labourers started working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without

any legal rights or safeguards, many children labour in dangerous and informal industries like construction, rag picking, and lodging. In addition to violating their rights, this exploitation shows how labour market regulations have failed to guarantee respectable employment for adults, hence compelling children to enter the economy.

SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities

Significant socioeconomic and identity-based differences among child labourers are revealed by the study. Minority and immigrant groups make up a disproportionate share of child labourers, especially Muslims (55%) and migrants from Assam (65%). Due to a lack of paperwork, these groups frequently experience systemic marginalisation, restricted access to public services, and exclusion from government programs. Therefore, addressing child labour necessitates emphasising access, equity, and inclusion, particularly for historically marginalised populations.

SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Target 16.2 explicitly calls for ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against children. The study reveals that 67% of children were forced into work without being consulted, and many were abandoned by one or both parents. This lack of agency, combined with unsafe work environments, amounts to structural violence against children. The absence of functional child protection mechanisms, child helplines, or enforcement of child labour laws underscores the weakness of institutions meant to protect vulnerable children. Stronger governance, community-based reporting mechanisms, and child welfare services are essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study's findings highlight the need for a multifaceted, rights-based policy response that tackles the structural facilitators as well as the underlying causes of child labour in Dimapur. In order to assist India in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Target 8.7, a number of significant recommendations are put forth at the conceptual, institutional, and practical levels based on these findings.

Enhancing Policy Enforcement and Institutional Accountability: Although progressive legal frameworks like the National Policy on Child Labour (2006), the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, and the Right to Education Act, 2009 exist, their fragmented implementation and lax enforcement continue to impede real progress. Through improved labour inspection, community vigilance committees, and digital reporting platforms, the government should bolster local-level monitoring systems. Integrating child labour surveillance into district-level SDG monitoring frameworks is necessary to guarantee institutional accountability.

Addressing Poverty and Social Protection Deficits: Social protection needs to be given top priority because 57% of respondents entered the workforce as a result of hunger and poverty. Household vulnerability can be decreased by increasing access to parental employment programs like MGNREGA, conditional cash transfers, and food security programs. In order to guarantee inclusion in welfare programs, access to public distribution networks, and educational benefits, migrant and informal sector families need to be legally registered.

Providing Inclusive and Equitable Education: According to the data, 83% of child labourers had left school before finishing the eighth grade. Reintegrating out-of-school youth requires the establishment of targeted re-enrolment initiatives, bridge schooling programs, and flexible learning models. Incentive-based education programs, such as scholarships and midday meal extensions for migrant and marginalised children, should be implemented by the local government in partnership with civic society.

Encouraging Community Awareness and Behavioural Change: It was discovered that a significant percentage of child labourers were hired as a result of family or parental decisions. Therefore, awareness programs should emphasise the long-term social and financial repercussions of child labour to change community opinions of it. Youth organisations, local leaders, and faith-based organisations can be important allies in changing societal norms and raising awareness at the community level.

Integrating Gender and Migration Dimensions: Despite the study's numerical dominance of male child labourers, female domestic employment is still underreported due to its concealed nature. Therefore, gender-sensitive strategies that acknowledge and address the invisible nature of girls' labour must be incorporated into policy measures. In the same vein, state governments must set up interstate coordination mechanisms to guarantee migrant children's access to assistance and education, as 63% of respondents were the offspring of immigrant parents.

Enhancing Data, Research, and Monitoring Systems: There remains a paucity of disaggregated data on child labour at the district level in Nagaland. Making educated decisions requires regular surveys, community-based monitoring, and the incorporation of

child labour indicators into local development planning. Future studies should use comparative and longitudinal methods to assess how post-COVID recovery policies affect the decline in child labour.

In conclusion, ending child labour in Dimapur and, consequently, throughout India, demands a coordinated, inclusive, evidence-based strategy that incorporates institutional reform, gender equity, high-quality education, and poverty reduction. India can only make significant strides toward achieving its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN and ensuring a just, sustainable, and dignified future for every child by implementing such an integrated approach.

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