

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

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Volume 3 | Issue 3

2020

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# Labour Law- Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986

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## ABSTRACT

*Throughout history, across cultures, children have always worked in a family structure. It is through this work that children are introduced to the society and largely acquire the social and practical skills required through life. However, there is a very thin line where the promotive aspect of working children translates into a detrimental effect on their health and development. This is where the term 'child labour' comes into existence. The exploitation of children for commercial and financial benefit has plagued today's society. This has warranted the need for various labour law legislations which deal with child welfare and abolition of child labour. This research article is aimed at one of those provisions called the Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. The article aims to give a comprehensive analysis of this statute by analysing various provisions and putting them in consonance with the international perspective. The article starts off by giving a brief overview of this legislation and a historical narrative to trace the origins of the legislation. Further, the article also deals with the scope and need of the legislation and the intent of the legislature while enacting it. Then the key provisions of the Act are analysed and a constitutional perspective is provided. The judicial interpretation of this child labour law is also narrated through various phases throughout history. The article concludes by providing suggestions for improving the current situation of law. The objective of this article is to sensitize the reader about the Child Labour Act and to help them form an informed opinion regarding the same.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of any country is dependent upon the skill and diligence of its future work force. This workforce consists of children who are biologically weak and vulnerable due to their tender age who need to be moulded unto capable adults. The idea of employing children can be traced back to the times of slavery when they were treated as an expendable commodity. With the passing years world witnessed industrialization which meant that more hands were needed onboard to aid increased production and earn profits. When these conditions were

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combined with weak laws it gave rise to the biggest humanitarian issue of child labour. These children were forced to work due to abject poverty, their socio-economic conditions and lack of social security schemes.

The employers employ these children as they can be forced to work on long shifts with less wages. Also, some industries require small and soft hands to produce goods which also contributes to child labour. As a state which believes in the welfare of its citizens, India hasn't been able to perform well due to poor implementation of laws. The state is responsible for providing these children with basic necessities including education, health and housing but has miserably failed to efficiently implement or in some cases legislate policies. Some laws have become so redundant that they lack the capacity to have the required deterrent effect. Further, the definitions of international agencies definitions vastly differ with the interpretation in the Indian Statute. This difference creates a huge gap and leads to poorly legislated laws.

To analyse the concept of Child Labour we need to understand the age limit given by law for children. According to the Indian Majority Act, 1875, '*Every person domiciled in India shall attain the age of majority on his completing the age of eighteen years and not before*'.<sup>3</sup> The definition which is provided above is different from the definition in Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 which states that, '*a person who has not completed his fourteenth year of age or such age as may be specified in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, whichever is more*'.<sup>4</sup> When we analyse the definitions which are given under various Indian legislations we can observe that legislature wants to interpret the term 'child' in the widest sense. This entails that government wants to exclude children aged between 14- 18 years from purview of child labour due to existing structure of the Indian Society. The Indian society over the years has recognised children as helpers in various family and commercial businesses which translates to '*more hands more earnings in the family*'. The second term in the word 'child labour' is labour which in the crudest sense refers to any type of work in exchange for consideration mostly in terms of wages.

The International Labour Organisation defines Child Labour as '*work that deprives children (any person under 18) of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and/or mental development*'.<sup>5</sup> The definition provided by this organisation

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<sup>3</sup>The Indian Majority Act, 1875, Section 3.

<sup>4</sup>Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, Section 2(ii).

<sup>5</sup>International Labour Organisation, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999, Article 3.

has included all the aspects dealing with development of the child while on the other hand the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 defines it under Section 3as '*No child shall be employed or permitted to work in any occupation or process*'.<sup>6</sup>This section also has certain exception like family business etc. On comparison we see huge difference between the intent of the legislators and their interpretation of child welfare.

## II. HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The roots of this evil practice of child labour have been embedded in the ancient times. During the times of the kings and monarchs, the term child slavery was used or popularly known as '*Dasya*'. The philosophers were not keen in writing or even discussing the subject of child slavery due to wide acceptance and popularity of this practice. Chanakya was the only one who criticised child slavery and wrote about the dehumanising aspect of the same.

In the medieval times during the Akbar's rule, the Decree of Akbar of 1594 A.D. ordains that, '*A father or a mother might, if, forced by hunger and extreme misery, sell their child and afterwards when they had the means to pay, might buy it backagain from servitude*'.<sup>7</sup>

During the colonial period due to rapid industrialisation many children were forced to work in factories. The working conditions were so bad that many children died at a very young age due to lack of proper nutrition which affected their physical and mental development. The first legislation regarding child labour was made under British rule called the Indian Factories Act in 1881 which prohibited the employers to employ any child below the age of 7. This Act also laid down provisions for working hours, holidays and need for safety equipment. Shortly after, the age in the Indian Factories Act, 1891 was increased to 12 and the working hours were reduced. This was followed by the Mines Act, 1901 which dealt with the prevention of child labour aged below 12 in the mining industry.

By this time the government had started to realise the importance of welfare of children due to ongoing criticisms relating to labour laws. Thus, finally in the year 1906, the WT Morrison Committee released a report which formed the basis of The Factory Act, 1911 and Factory Act, 1922.<sup>8</sup>The Act of 1911 mandated fitness tests and also imposed restrictions on children working at night. These Acts hold importance in the history because the latter act was enacted to include ideals of International Labour Organisation Convention in Indian Municipal Laws.

The conditions of child labour in India, however, did not improve and some of the accounts

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<sup>6</sup>Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, Section 3.

<sup>7</sup>Al-Badayuni, Murtakhabir-Tawarikh, 1594 A.D., Vol.II, p.404.

<sup>8</sup>W.T. Morrison, Indian Factory Labour Commission Report, 1906.

of workers state that children as young as even five years were employed in these factories. The British government appointed the Royal Commission during this time and their report was published in 1931. As a result, the Factories Act 1934 was enacted which pushed the lower age limit on employing children to 12 years, and further limited the working hours for children between the age 15-17 to 5 hours a day.

The Indian governments realised the need for making better laws after the independence due to which the Factories Act of 1948 came into picture. This Act mandated that children could only participate in work if they were above the age of 14. The framers of the constitution and Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru realised the need to allocate resources to child welfare. This was supported by the first five-year plan which also recommended education & health should be focused on while planning the budget.

In the year 1974, the Government of India introduced and adopted the National Policy of a Children in 1974. This policy's agenda was to make a framework which accommodated provisions relating to security of children. The following year in 1975 government ratified ILO's convention relating to the minimum prescribed age for working underground. The government also appointed a 16-member committee headed by M.P Gurpadaswamy in the year 1979. The recommendations of this committee were to effectively implement constitutional provisions embodied under Article 24, which relates to abolition of Child Labour and Article 39(e) & (f) which are DPSP'S which place responsibility on states to abolish child labour.

Finally, the Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act was enacted in the year 1986. This Act states that children below 14 years cannot be employed and the children aged between 15-18 cannot be employed in any hazardous industries. It also prescribes maximum working hours and minimum wages for children.

The Act was amended in the year 2016 but even the amendments did not satisfy the critiques due to lack of interest shown by legislators in making provisions more humanitarian and based on welfare principles. The Act is now named as Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. The government recently ratified the ILO's convention on Child Labour in 2018 due to which a bill was introduced to include provisions of this convention which is pending in the Lok Sabha.

### **III. SCOPE OF THE LEGISLATION**

Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 as amended in 2016 now includes Right to Education in the definition which denotes the government wants to

increase the ambit for penalizing people who force children to work instead of attending school. The scope of this ambit is very wide and has been strictly interpreted to eliminate any chance of ambiguity in process of implementation.

Under Section 3 of this Act, no child who is under the age of 14 years can be employed in occupation. The only exception to this is the family business, which a child can work only after school hours and during his/ her vacations. The second exception is audio- visual entertainment industry in which a child is allowed to work but certain restrictions have been imposed.

This Act has been divided into two categories. Firstly, as mentioned above and the second category which is adolescent. Under Section 2(i), '*adolescent means a person who has completed his fourteenth year of age but has not completed his eighteenth year*'.<sup>9</sup> The adolescents mentioned in the second category are not allowed to work in any hazardous industries like mining, explosives etc. but can work in non-hazardous industries. The other important amendment was that under the current Act child labour has been made cognizable offence. The scope of this Act includes all occupations and works and completely prohibits child labour except in certain situations.

The scope of the ILO's definition as discussed above includes all the provisions for child's overall development. The only activities which are permitted by this organisation are the ones which lead to child development; thus, it also covers the large loophole left by Indian government in terms of employment in family business. Under Indian laws the employers can guise under cover of family business and force children to work which is not the case with ILO's provisions.

#### IV. EXIGENCY OF THE LEGISLATION

➤ **Economic Factors** -All the issues relating to globalization, rapid industrialization, unstable economies, increasing population and the inflation fall on shoulders of the downtrodden. This happens due to the tidal effect where lack of job opportunities continuously forces poor people to employ their kids at work instead of sending them to school.<sup>10</sup> This also means that these children face the brunt of cost cutting techniques employed by owners due to lack of understanding and their tender age. Thus, there arises need for government intervention to regulate all these processes and protect children from exploitation.

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<sup>9</sup>Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, Section 2(i).

<sup>10</sup>Oxford University Press for UNICEF, The State of the Worlds Children, United Nations Children's Fund, 1997.

- **Social Factors** - The unscrupulous employers take benefit of social structure of Indian society, wherein in most of the poor families the children are a source of earning livelihood. They are treated like property to generate profits for the family. The children from these families are trapped in the quagmire of poverty which pulls them inside and the lack of education and skill set ensure that they are unable to find better jobs for themselves.

The society still hasn't been able to free itself from the clutches of gender disparity wherein girls are married at a very young age and boys are given the reins to control the family coupled with responsibility to earn livelihood. These people who have limited resources due to their illiteracy and unawareness and end up having a lot of kids which leads to beginning of other cycle. Thus, there arises need for government intervention to provide social security and give free education to these children.

## **V. INTENT OF LEGISLATURE**

The objective of this particular legislation was to stop the employment of these children and also give certain other regulations to control the working conditions and impose minimum wages. The other factor contributing to rise in child labour was lack of any specific legislation and proper implementation of those by prosecutors.

The Indian government is still struggling with eradicating poverty which is the reason why children are still allowed to work in their family business. The logic behind these specific sections is that firstly government realises the need of these families to employ their children, if they completely abolish it people will die because of poverty. Secondly the issue of eradication of poverty is not a short-term goal, the government needs time until then they cannot completely abolish child labour following the guidelines of ILO.

## **VI. ANALYSIS OF KEY PROVISIONS AND PREVAILING ISSUES**

- Under Section 3 of the Child & Adolescent Labour Act, 1986 the definition of the child has been aligned with the definition given in the Right to Education Act, 2009. Thus, any child below the age of 14 years cannot engage in any occupation and as discussed above there are certain exceptions:
  - While making the exception of family business the government ignored the fact that many employers will guise under the name of family and will run their business. The parents will be equal parties to the same and hence intent of legislation will completely fall flat. There is no mechanism to ensure that business belongs to family they can simply be employed to manage the activities.

- The second part of the definition talks about need for education, it states that these activities should not harm education of child but has not put any committee to supervise the same. The implementation of this clause cannot become reality as the children whose rights are being infringed are dependent on the people exploiting them.
- The number of working hours hasn't been prescribed which means the term '*should not harm education*' can be interpreted according to whims and fancies.
- The age which is prescribed in all the act may it be CL Act, Factories Act, 1948 or the Mines Act, 1952 it does not follow the mandate of ILO even when India has ratified the same. This act even brought down the age in Plantation Labour Act, 1951 from 15 years to 14 years again which reflects badly upon the legislators.
- Under Section 2, the new clause has been added relating to age of adolescence, which is between 15-18. On one hand this provision states that these children can engage in non-hazardous industries but cannot undertake hazardous activities. In the same amendment government brought the number of hazardous industries from 83 to 3 which shows lack of intention of child welfare. This has increased the chances of children's safety being comprised due to lack of clearly structured laws.
- Section 14(IA) provides for punishment for anyone who forces the child to work or employs a child which is prohibited in the preceding section. This Section after the amendment states that parents and guardians who are a party to this offence will be exempted completely if it is their first offence.<sup>11</sup> Section 14(2A) further provides that, if the parents are held for the same offence for the second time, only fine will be imposed up to Rs 10,000.<sup>12</sup> This Section, before amendment, had same punishment for parents, guardians and employers but now different liabilities have been placed. This completely removes the deterrent effect of the provision and parents who are equally at fault in this offence allowed to walk away without consequences.
- The name of the Act contains the word 'regulation' of Child Labour which completely opposes the intent. The word regulation clearly denotes something which negotiable in nature thus this completely makes implementation ineffective.

## VII. CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The makers of the Constitution anticipated the issues lying ahead of the government in the years which would follow the independence. These lessons were a product of experience

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<sup>11</sup>Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986, Section 14(IA).

<sup>12</sup>Child & Adolescent Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986, Section 14(2A)

shared by developed countries and international organisations like ILO. Article 24 of the Constitution lay down that no child should be employed in any hazardous industry, factory or mines.<sup>13</sup> This is a fundamental right which creates a right of a child vis a vis duty of the state. The 86<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Indian Constitution in the year 2002 inserted Article 21A which provides for right to education till the age of 14 years, this was earlier a DPSP under Article 45. Also, the Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 39(e) and (f) cast a duty upon the state to provide children with healthcare and educational facilities for the welfare. Under Article 51A(k) this responsibility has also been placed on the parents and guardians.

## VIII. INTERPRETATION THROUGH JUDICIAL LENS

### Phase I

The Indian Judiciary has played a very important role in bringing about required changes in labour laws. Judicial activism has led to appointment of special committees to look into possible lacunae in law. The most landmark case which directly connected child rights to the Indian Constitution was **People's Union for Democratic Rights v Union of India**, 1982 or as popularly known as the Asiad case in which the court had observed that the child labour laws should be amended to give effect to the fundamental rights.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of **Bandhua Mukti Morcha v Union of India**, the court observed that child labour is an issue due to lack of resources and strict penalties.<sup>15</sup> Even after years of declaring bonded labour illegal still these practices go on. Thus, the legislature was directed to work towards making more effective amendments to the current laws to fix the issues and free the bonded labourers. All these mentioned cases which was prime example of judicial activism led to legislature passing the Act of 1986.

### Phase II

In this phase of judicial reforms, the judiciary focused more on individual states and not just the legislature. In *Sheela Barse v Unions of India*, the court reminded the state of its duties and said that, it should play an active role in development of a child.<sup>16</sup> They also placed duty on state's shoulder to enforce the directive principles of state policy.

The court in the case of *M.C. Mehta v State of Tamil Nadu* had observed the deplorable working conditions of children who were working in the match sticks and fire work industry

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<sup>13</sup>INDIA CONST. art 24.

<sup>14</sup>People's Union for Democratic Rights v Union of India, 1982 AIR 1473.

<sup>15</sup>Bandhua Mukti Morcha v Union of India, 1984 AIR 802.

<sup>16</sup>Sheela Barse v Union of India, JT 1986 136.

and had strictly instructed the State of Tamil Nadu to enquire into this and rescue children forcefully employed in these factories.<sup>17</sup> After this decision the government of Tamil Nadu had launched the compulsory insurance scheme and also various raids were conducted to free the kids who were forced to work.

### **Phase III**

The case to headline this phase was the TMA Pai Foundation v Union of India. This case has been a landmark case in recognising right to education as the fundamental right. The court observed that children up to the age of 14 years should have RTE which casts corresponding duty on state.<sup>18</sup> Even in the recent amendment of 2016 legislature took this decision as foundation to change the definition of child labour, to not let these exploitative activities harm child's education.

One of the more recent judgements relating to child labour is Jayakumar Nat v State of NCT of Delhi.<sup>19</sup> The Supreme Court in this case has observed the different aspects of rehabilitation of child labourers, they asked states to provide these poor people economic help so that they are not forced to send their children at work.

## **IX. NATIONAL COMMISSION REPORT**

The First National Commission on Labour, 1969 was appointed under the Chairmanship of P.B. Gajendragadkar, to review the conditions of labour since 1947.<sup>20</sup> The main observations of this commission regarding child labour centred around children working in the unorganised sectors. Following this commission's report, legislature passed Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970 but did not include any provisions relating to child labour. Thus, many of the children were still exploited in various sectors.

In order to fulfil the mandate of the Indian constitution provided under article 39 (e) and (f), Government of India introduced and adopted the National Policy of a Children in 1974. The legislature laid down policy regarding child nutrition and health and furthered a policy suggesting a National Children's Board which was given the responsibility to monitor and enforce legislations dealing with compulsory education up to the age of 14 years. Also, the children till 14 years should not be employed in hazardous industries or any occupations that requires lifting heavy weights.

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<sup>17</sup>MC Mehta v State of Tamil Nadu, AIR 1997 SC 699.

<sup>18</sup>TMA Pai Foundation v Union of India, AIR 2003 SC 355.

<sup>19</sup>Jayakumar Nat v State of NCT of Delhi, W.P.(CrI.) 1548/2015 and W.P (CrI.) 1805/2015.

<sup>20</sup>Report of the National Commission on Labour, Ministry of Labour and & Employment & Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1969.

The Second Labour Law Commission was setup in the year 2002 under the chairmanship of Ravindra Verma.<sup>21</sup> The commission recommended that the act of 1986 should completely be scrapped due to so many issues relating to implementation and lack of effectiveness.

- The report of this commission was succeeded by legislature passing National Charter for Children in 2003 and National Common Minimum Programme 2004. Together these programmes laid down a road map for development of various aspects in a child's life like his food, education and rehabilitation if he was involved in labour activities.
- The recommendations of this commission led to legislature recognising the right to education as a fundamental right with Right to Education Act, 2009

## X. STATISTICS

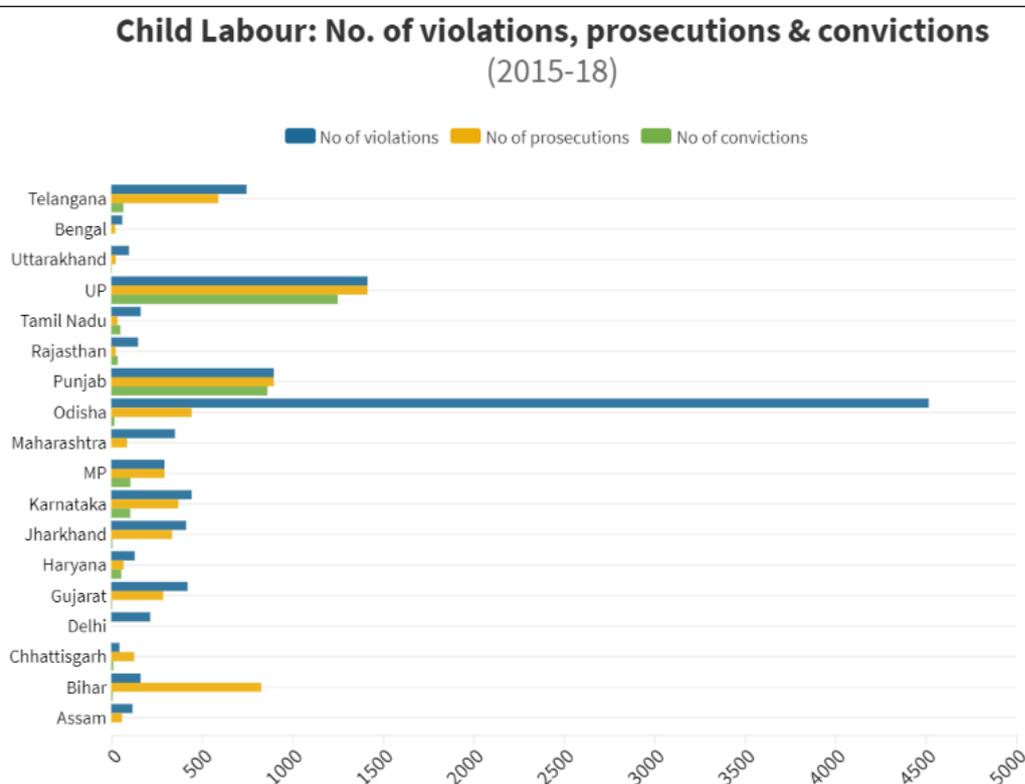


Exhibit:1, Source: Lok Sabha

The effectiveness of any law is portrayed from the statistics obtained through surveys and census. Despite a global effort to eradicate child labour, India has struggled to properly implement legislations and further enforce them. Between 2018 & 2019, authorities were able to obtain only 25% convictions in cases related to violation of various Labour Laws. A

<sup>21</sup>Report of the National Commission on Labour, Ministry of Labour and & Employment & Rehabilitation, Government of India, 2002.

written reply of the Central Government revealed that between 2015-2019, 10,826 cases of violation of Child Labour Act were reported, out of which only 56% went to stage of prosecution and just 2701 cases resulted in a conviction.<sup>22</sup> According to some statistics, the majority of child labourers in India i.e. over 80 per cent of children who are below 14 years of age are employed in work in rural areas. According to the Census 2011, most child labours in India are employed for agriculture and allied activities. The Census 2011 data revealed that 53.69 lakh children aged 5-14 years were working as agricultural labourers and cultivators in India.<sup>23</sup> Further, the combined total of child labourers employed in various industries is around 1.3 crore.

The International Labour Organization had also expressed its concern on the ongoing status of child labour in India in their report on child labour where they claimed that nearly 4% of the child population in India is directly involved in occupations in factories and hazardous industries. Further, now the cases of child labour are increasing in urban areas as well due to the requirement of children for menial jobs. This increase in number of child labourers is particularly alarming when ILO estimated that nearly 22,000 children are killed at work every day.

## **XI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE**

The practise of child labour, particularly in the India context, has been in existence since time immemorial. The fabric of society had been weaved in such a way that employing children for commercial activities was considered to be normal and not detrimental to their health. However, in the present age and culture, child labour is an abomination which is to be eradicated for the better preservation of future generations. The Indian government has time and again made efforts to eradicate this evil practise and has had hits and misses. However, approaching the future the legislature of our country is looking forward to bringing Indian laws relating to child labour in consonance with international standards.

In 2018, a bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on amendments to the Child Labour Act. This bill has not been passed but is a victory in itself because it completely prohibits child labour till the age of 18 years without creating separate categories. This move came after the Indian Government ratified the two ILO conventions dealing with child labour in 2017. In the same year government also passed some rules relating to Child Labour Abolition which deal with setting up of various committees and giving the district magistrates powers to take

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<sup>22</sup>Starred Question No. 116, Lok Sabha 2019. <http://loksabhadocs.nic.in/loksabhaquestions/annex/17/AS116.pdf>

<sup>23</sup>2011 Census Data, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, India.

action in case the law is violated.

We as a nation have come a long way from having no measure to deal with situations of child labour to have specific provisions penalising individuals but there still a long way to go and certain suggestion for improvement of law are as follows:

- The name of the act of 2016 which contains the word regulation it should be amended to rehabilitation as the that reflects the legislative intent.
- Under Section 3 (CL Act), the family business should not be an exception and absolute restriction should be placed on employment of children.
- The term ‘working hours of school’ under Section 3 should lay down number of prescribed hours as 4 as more than that child will not be able to cope with the studies.
- The punishment prescribed under Section 14 (IA) (CL Act) should be enhanced for parents and guardians in order to equalize it to that of the employer.
- As the recommendation of 2018 (CL Bill) the age for child labour should be increased to 18 years to truly give effect to ILO’s convention. This age bar should also be amended in other statues like Factories Act 1948, Mines Act, 1952 etc.
- The meaning of hazardous activity should again be increased and should cover any activity which even hampers smallest developmental activities of the child and agricultural activities should be brought under this activity. This word hazardous should be replaced with ‘intensive activity’.
- Rehabilitation programmes should be made more effective by releasing funds and setting up proper rehabilitation centres. These centres should remove the child from the custody of parents who are forcing the child to work.
- Also, an important step towards ensuring such poverty eradication programmes should be taken where the poor people are provided with minimum support income to ensure their livelihood is not affected by these amendments.

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