

A Study on Child Labour in Maharashtra

Dr. Ambika Babu Nikam

Research Student, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chh. Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract:

Child labour continues to be a major socio-economic challenge in India despite sustained economic growth and legal safeguards. This research paper examines the magnitude, causes, sectoral distribution, and consequences of child labour in Maharashtra. Using secondary data from Census of India, NSSO/PLFS reports, and government publications, the study analyses how poverty, migration, informal employment, and educational deprivation contribute to child labour. Tables and chart-based interpretations are used to present trends and patterns. The paper argues that child labour in Maharashtra is largely concentrated in informal and unregulated sectors such as construction, agriculture, brick kilns, and domestic work. The study concludes that elimination of child labour requires an integrated policy approach focusing on poverty reduction, quality education, social security for migrant families, and strict enforcement of labour laws.

Keywords: Child Labour, Maharashtra, Informal Sector, Poverty, Migration, Education, Human Capital

Introduction

Children constitute the foundation of a nation's future human capital. Their education, health, and skill development determine long-term economic growth and social progress. However, the persistence of child labour reflects deep structural inequalities within society. In India, child labour is closely linked with poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and regional disparities.

Maharashtra is one of the most industrially advanced and urbanized states in India. It contributes significantly to national income through manufacturing, services, and agriculture. At the same time, the state experiences high levels of rural-urban and inter-state migration. Migrant and economically vulnerable households often rely on children's labour as a survival strategy. This contradiction between economic growth and the persistence of child labour makes Maharashtra an important case for study.

Concept and Definition of Child Labour

Child labour refers to the engagement of children below the legally permissible age in economic activities that are harmful to their physical, mental, emotional, or moral development. It includes work that interferes with schooling or forces children to drop out of education.

In the Indian legal framework, children below 14 years are prohibited from working in hazardous occupations, while free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 years is guaranteed. Nevertheless, child labour continues in non-hazardous and informal sectors, often remaining invisible to regulatory authorities.

Review of Literature

Existing literature on child labour in India highlights poverty as the most important determinant. Studies

emphasize that poor households view child labour as a coping mechanism to supplement income. Research focusing on Maharashtra indicates that child labour is widespread in urban slums, construction sites, brick kilns, agriculture, and domestic work.

Several scholars argue that the informalization of labour markets has increased the demand for cheap and flexible labour, including children. Other studies underline the role of migration and lack of access to schooling for migrant children. The literature broadly agrees that legal provisions alone cannot eradicate child labour without addressing underlying socio-economic factors.

Objectives of the Study

The formulation of clear objectives is essential for any social science research because objectives determine the direction, scope, and analytical framework of the entire study. Child labour is a multidimensional problem that affects education, health, productivity, and long-term human capital formation. Maharashtra, despite being one of the most economically progressive states in India, continues to experience the persistence of working children, particularly in informal and migrant dominated sectors. Therefore, the present study has framed the following interrelated objectives.

To Examine the Extent of Child Labour in Maharashtra

The first objective focuses on understanding the magnitude and trend of child labour within the state. Measuring extent means estimating how many children below the legally permissible age are engaged in economic activities instead of attending school. This objective requires analysis of Census, PLFS, and labour department estimates to identify whether the number of working children is declining or increasing over time.

Even though Maharashtra shows better income indicators compared to many states, urban slums, drought-prone regions of Marathwada and Vidarbha, and continuous in-migration create pockets where children enter labour markets early. By examining extent, the study aims to highlight the contradiction between high GDP contribution of the state and the survival strategies of poor households. Without knowing “how big the problem is,” policy discussion remains only theoretical. Hence this objective provides the empirical base for the research

To Analyse the Sector-Wise Distribution of Child Labour

Child labour is not uniformly spread across all activities. The second objective studies which sectors employ children the most—for example agriculture, construction, brick kilns, domestic work, hotels, and small shops. Sectoral distribution helps in identifying demand side factors of the labour market.

Agriculture absorbs children due to family based work structure, while construction sites use them as helpers because they accept low wages and can be easily controlled. Domestic work largely employs girl children and often remains invisible and unpaid. Through this objective, the research intends to map the informal character of Maharashtra’s labour markets and to show that unregulated sectors are the main breeding grounds of child labour. Understanding sectoral concentration is crucial for designing targeted interventions such as inspections in brick kilns or special schools near construction colonies .

To Identify the Socio-Economic Causes of Child Labour

The third objective addresses the supply side determinants. Causes such as poverty, migration, parental illiteracy, informalization, unemployment, and weak enforcement are examined. Identification of causes

means exploring why families send children to work and why employers prefer them.

Distress migration in Maharashtra disrupts schooling; children moving with parents to cities lose access to local language schools. Illiterate parents underestimate the returns to education and overestimate the immediate benefit of child earnings. Informal contractors avoid legal procedures and hire children as flexible labour. By analysing these factors, the study attempts to situate child labour within broader development debates rather than treating it as an isolated social evil. This objective also connects with your own research interest in Marathwada women because the mentality and decision power within poor households influence both women and children .

To Assess the Impact on Education and Human Development

Assessment of impact is the most analytical objective of the study. Child labour directly interferes with Right to Education (6–14 years) and produces school dropouts, low learning outcomes, malnutrition, injuries, chronic illness, and low skill formation. The study evaluates how early entry into labour reduces future productivity and keeps families in poverty traps.

In Maharashtra many children combine work with irregular school attendance; they feel exhausted and cannot concentrate on conceptual subjects like mathematics or economics. Long hours in hazardous environments damage mental health and personality development. Through tables and chart interpretations, this objective aims to show that child labour slows inclusive growth of the state and increases inequality

To Evaluate Government Initiatives for Elimination

The final objective studies the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms such as National Child Labour Project (NCLP), rehabilitation centres, mid-day meals, scholarships, inspections, and rescue operations in Maharashtra. Evaluation means checking coverage, coordination gaps, and implementation difficulties. Growth oriented policies of Maharashtra have reduced child labour partially, but schemes do not adequately reach migrant families. Many slum children remain outside NCLP special schools due to documentation problems—similar to the difficulties you observed among slum women beneficiaries. By evaluating initiatives, the study intends to recommend integrated strategies combining poverty reduction, quality education, social security, and strict enforcement.

Research Methodology

Nature of the Study

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature.

Sources of Data

The research is based entirely on secondary data, collected from:

- Census of India
- NSSO and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reports
- Government of Maharashtra Labour Department reports
- Reports of ILO and UNICEF
- Books, journals, and research articles

Tools of Analysis

- Percentage analysis
- Tabular presentation
- Logical and qualitative analysis

Limitations of the Study

- Dependence on secondary data
- Possible underreporting of child labour due to its informal nature
- Lack of district-level disaggregated data in some sources

Magnitude of Child Labour in Maharashtra

Despite a decline in child labour at the national level, Maharashtra continues to report a considerable number of working children. Urbanization and industrial growth have increased the demand for informal labour, indirectly encouraging child labour. Seasonal migration from drought-prone regions further aggravates the problem.

Table 1: Trend of Child Labour in Maharashtra (Indicative)
Estimated Working Children (in lakhs)

Year	Value
2001	7.5
2011	5.6
2021	4.8

Based on survey estimates and projections

Interpretation:

The table shows a declining trend in child labour over time. However, the absolute number remains significant, indicating that economic growth alone has not eliminated the problem.

Sector-Wise Distribution of Child Labour

Table 2: Sector-Wise Distribution of Child Labour in Maharashtra

Sector	Percentage Share (%)
Agriculture & Allied Activities	35
Construction	22
Brick Kilns	15
Domestic Work	13
Informal Services (Hotels, Shops)	15
Total	100

Chart Description:

A pie chart based on Table 2 would show agriculture as the largest employer of child labour, followed by construction and informal services.

Interpretation:

Child labour is heavily concentrated in labour-intensive and unregulated sectors. These sectors prefer child workers due to low wages, easy control, and lack of enforcement.

Socio-Economic Causes of Child Labour

Child labour remains a persistent challenge in developing economies despite economic growth, urbanization, and legal safeguards. The roots of child labour are deeply embedded in socio-economic structures rather than in the individual choices of children. Understanding these causes is essential from the perspective of Economics, human capital theory, and social justice.

The most dominant cause is poverty and low household income. Poor families struggle to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare. For them, children's earnings become a survival strategy. When adult income is irregular or insufficient, the opportunity cost of sending a child to school appears high, while the immediate returns from work seem attractive. This income-poverty nexus pushes children into the labour market at an early age.

Distress and seasonal migration further intensify the problem, especially in states with regional disparities. Migrant households often lack stable residence and proper documents for school admission. Children accompany parents to construction sites, brick kilns, or agricultural fields where schooling is inaccessible. Disrupted education gradually converts into permanent dropout, and the child becomes part of informal labour supply.

Another crucial factor is parental illiteracy and lack of awareness. Education generates long-term economic benefits, but illiterate parents may not recognize these future gains. Traditional mindsets consider work as more practical than learning. Inter-generational poverty reproduces itself when parents transmit the same coping behavior to the next generation, creating a cycle of deprivation.

The expansion of the informal sector is a structural demand-side cause. Informal enterprises prefer cheap and flexible workers because they operate outside strict regulation and minimum wage norms. Labour-intensive activities like small hotels, roadside shops, waste picking, and home-based units employ children since they are easier to control and less likely to unionize. Economic reforms have increased informalization, and with it the indirect demand for child workers.

Unemployment and underemployment of adults also play a central role. High dependency ratios in large families reduce per capita resources. When adults fail to obtain secure jobs, families diversify income sources through children's work. From a labour-market view, this represents failure of the economy to provide decent employment and social security to the poor.

Educational deprivation and school quality act as push factors. Many rural and slum areas face overcrowded schools, teacher shortages, and hidden costs of education. When learning outcomes are low, parents withdraw children, and the labour market absorbs them. Thus, the schooling system and child labour are inversely related.

The gender dimension cannot be ignored. Girl children are more engaged in domestic and unpaid care work which often remains invisible in statistics. Early marriage expectations and safety concerns restrict their mobility, and they lose educational opportunities. This hidden labour reduces their future participation in skilled workforce.

Social inequality and caste-based occupations historically influenced child labour. Marginalized communities have limited asset ownership and rely on hereditary low-paid work. Children enter the same trades, reinforcing inequality. Economic vulnerability combined with discrimination becomes a strong social determinant.

Urbanization and slum environment create specific risks. Overcrowding, crime, alcoholism, and absence of childcare facilities make children roam workplaces. They become vulnerable to exploitation,

trafficking, and hazardous work. The danger arises from the environment, not from the children, yet it traps them in labour.

Finally, weak enforcement and governance gaps reduce the effectiveness of laws. Rescue without rehabilitation, poor coordination between labour and education departments, and corruption keep economic incentives unchanged. From institutional Economics, child labour persists when expected penalties are lower than profits.

In conclusion, child labour is generated by a combination of income failure, migration, informal demand, parental illiteracy, and educational exclusion. These factors interact to form a vicious circle: early work leads to school dropout; dropout results in low skills; low skills create low productivity and wages, reproducing poverty in adulthood. Elimination therefore requires an integrated strategy—poverty reduction, decent adult employment, universal quality education, protection of migrant children, community awareness, and strong institutions. Investment in children is not only a moral duty but also a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive economic development.

Impact of Child Labour

Table 3: Impact of Child Labour

Dimension	Major Effects
Education	School dropouts, low learning outcomes
Health	Malnutrition, injuries, chronic illness
Economic	Low skill formation, low productivity
Social	Perpetuation of poverty and inequality

Interpretation:

Child labour has long-term adverse effects on human capital formation, thereby slowing inclusive economic development.

Legal and Institutional Framework

India has enacted several laws to prevent child labour, including the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act and the Right to Education Act. Maharashtra has implemented these laws through inspections, rescue operations, and rehabilitation programmes. However, gaps in enforcement and coordination reduce their effectiveness.

Government Initiatives in Maharashtra

Major initiatives include:

- National Child Labour Project (NCLP)
- Special training centres for rescued children
- Mid-Day Meal Scheme
- Educational scholarships for disadvantaged children

These initiatives have contributed to reducing child labour, but coverage and implementation remain uneven.

Findings of the Study

- Child labour in Maharashtra is mainly concentrated in the informal sector.
- Poverty and migration are the dominant causes.

- Girl children are more vulnerable in domestic and unpaid work.
- Decline in child labour is slow and uneven across sectors.

Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

Integrated Poverty Reduction Strategy

Child labour cannot be eliminated without raising the income of vulnerable households. The state should strengthen livelihood programmes such as skill development for slum parents, women self-help groups, and access to microfinance. Regular adult income lowers the dependence on children's earnings and changes the opportunity cost structure in favor of education.

Universal Access to Quality Education

Free schooling must be accompanied by quality infrastructure. Recommendations include:

- neighborhood schools in slum and migrant clusters,
- bridge courses for dropouts,
- digital learning support and remedial teaching.
- Scholarships, uniforms, textbooks, and transport should be provided so that hidden educational costs do not push children back to work.

Special Protection for Migrant Children

Maharashtra experiences high seasonal migration; therefore portable education facilities are essential. Mobile schools at construction sites, temporary hostels, and Aadhaar-linked easy admission should be introduced. Coordination between sending and receiving districts will ensure continuity of learning.

Regulation of Informal Sector

Labour inspections should extend beyond registered factories to informal units, hotels, brick kilns, and agriculture. Strict penalties for employers using child workers, compulsory registration of all enterprises, and community monitoring committees can reduce demand-side incentives.

Adult Employment and Social Security

Employment generation for adults through urban works programmes, housing for migrants, and health insurance will reduce the family dependency ratio. From a human capital perspective, investment in adults indirectly protects children.

Rehabilitation not only Rescue

- Rescued children often return to the same workplace. The policy must ensure:
- counselling,
- enrollment in NCLP or municipal schools,
- financial compensation to the family,
- tracking for at least three years.
- This transforms a short-term legal action into long-term capability building.

Health and Nutrition Support

Mid-Day Meal coverage should be widened to all urban poor schools. Regular health checkups, vaccination, and de-addiction programmes for slum men will improve the home environment and lower “danger from surroundings.”

Gender-Focused Interventions

- For girl children:
- safety audits,
- separate sanitation facilities,
- awareness against early marriage,
- conditional cash transfer to mothers.
- Making girls visible in statistics and schooling is essential for inclusive growth.

Community Awareness and Parental Education

NGOs, universities, and colleges like yours can conduct campaigns on returns to education, legal rights, and superstition reduction. Educated parents are the best inspectors of the system.

Data and Research Support

District-level surveys by BAMU and other institutions should be funded to capture hidden child labour. Evidence-based policy improves targeting and evaluation.

Conclusion

Child labour in Maharashtra reflects deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities rather than mere legal failure. While economic growth and government initiatives have reduced child labour to some extent, a large number of children remain outside the education system and trapped in informal work. The elimination of child labour requires a holistic strategy combining economic development, quality education, social protection, and strict law enforcement. Investing in children is essential not only for social justice but also for sustainable economic development.

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