

# Origin and Work Status of Child Labourers: A Case Study of Howrah Slum in West Bengal, India

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## ABSTRACT

*The Census of India 2001 defines child labour as participation physically and/or mentally of a child below 17 years of age in any economically productive activity with or without compensation, wages or profit. Child labour is an instance of violations of a range of rights of children and is identified as a serious and enormously complex social dilemma in India. The core areas of the origin of the child labourers are urban slums. Undoubtedly the most powerful force, driving children into labour is poverty, coupled with rapidly growing population, ignorance and increasing dependency load. The situation finally leads to school drop-outs, lack of moral status as well as social security in a large scale.*

*The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the socio economic background, which leads the slum children to enter into the growing labour market and the hazardous conditions of work place, which does not care for their tender age. In the study area, three slum wards of Howrah Municipal Corporation are selected. Child labourers are interviewed at their household or work places who mainly work as garage worker, domestic helper, rag-pickker, hotel boys, shop helpers, factory labourer, construction labourer etc. It is clear from the analysis of this study that the children are bound to be involved in various economic activities due to their poor socio-economic background, which is nothing but the exploitation child labourer.*

**Key Words:** *child labourer, urban slum, job hazard, exploitation.*

## Introduction

International Labour Organization (ILO) defined the term *child labour* as the work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development. According to UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund), child labour represents that situation where a child between 5 to 11 years of age did at least one hour of economic activity

or at least 28 hours of domestic work in a week, and in case of children between 12 to 14 years of age, he or she did at least 14 hours of economic activity or at least 42 hours of economic activity and domestic work per week. The Census of India 2001 defines child labour as participation of a child less than 17 years of age in any economically productive activity with or without compensation, wages or profit. Such

participation could be physical or mental or both. This work includes part-time help or unpaid work on the farm, family enterprise or in any other economic activity such as cultivation and milk production for sale or domestic consumption. The Government of India classifies child labourers into two groups: Main workers are those who work 6 months or more per year. And marginal child workers are those who work at any time during the year but less than 6 months in a year.

Child labour is an integral part of labour force, especially in urban slums of third world countries. These children are the most deprived section of population forced to enter labour market at tender age to earn a meager amount or to contribute to family work, sacrificing personal development. Poverty coupled with rapidly growing population, ignorance and increasing dependency load are responsible for the brutal incidence of children employment mainly in the slum areas of developing countries. In India, child labour is not a new phenomenon. India is sadly the home for the largest number of child labourers in the world (Molankal, 2008). The Census found an increase in the number of child labourers from 11.28 million in 1991 to 12.59 million in 2001.

Children are employed generally in factories because they provided a cheap and uncomplaining labour force as against adults who could be more demanding and hence more difficult to handle (Basu, 1998). Children are chosen because they are not unionized, can be easily controlled, tortured, and exploited without any fear of repercussion. Besides, children are suitable to jobs like brick making, carpet weaving, and silk spinning etc. Their cheapness and

remote possibility of collective bargaining on their part makes them vulnerable and persuade producers to employ and exploit the child labour.

The necessity of education is ignored for the child and replaced with need for providing food and shelter i.e. childrens' work to add meager amount to the family income or otherwise to help the family business. In doing so, they are being deprived of basic rights such as the right to education, to freedom from abuse, and to proper health. Child labour hampers the normal physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development of a child. Children who are in the growing process can permanently distort or disable their bodies when they carry heavy loads or are forced to adopt unnatural positions at work for long hours. Children are more vulnerable because they are less resistant to diseases and suffer more readily from chemical hazards and radiation than adults (Molankal, 2008).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the present study are to:

1. Analyze the socio economic background, which leads the slum children to enter into the growing labour market.
2. Investigate and assess the hazardous conditions of work place, which does not care for their tender age.

### **Study Area**

The Howrah Municipal Town is situated on the west bank of the River Hooghly opposite to Kolkata. It is a part of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area and cosmopolitan in nature. For its location adjacent to Kolkata

Metropolitan City as well as the advantage of Howrah Railway station and rapid establishment of small industries, large scale migration from different parts of India and West Bengal significantly contributes to high growth of slum population with heterogeneous character. Howrah town has 441 slum pockets scattered over the 27 wards out of 50 wards of Howrah Municipal Corporation. About 9% of total population of the study area lives in these slums (HMC records). It is assumed that the child labourers mainly reside in the slums of the town. Hence, this study was designed with the focus on the origin and work status of child labourers residing in the slums falling under the jurisdiction of Howrah Municipal Corporation (HMC). Three slum wards (ward no. 19, 20, 22) of HMC have been taken as the case study in the present context for in-depth analysis of the issue.

### **Database**

Various information like addresses of slum pockets and different development plans regarding slum are collected from the office of Howrah Municipal Corporation. Available literatures regarding the present issue have been consulted from National library, E-books and E-journals of university websites and other authentic open access journals. Primary survey has been conducted on 123 child labourers of selected slum wards of Howrah Municipal Corporation Area at their households and nearby factories.

### **Methodology**

1. **Tools used** – interview schedule, diagrams, tables etc.
2. **Parameters used** – To analyze the socio-economic background, the main

criteria considered are - profile of labourer and family background. The parameters used to determine profile of labourer are age, sex, religion, educational status, age at starting work and birth order. Whereas, to study family background, the parameters like parent's abandonment, parents' literacy, family type, migration history, are used. To investigate the situation of work place, different criteria like type of work, remuneration, working hours, recess time, holiday, financial support, drinking water and latrine facility, environmental quality are examined. A perception study is conducted on different criteria like job satisfaction, employers' ill treatment, hazardous work situation, low remuneration, shame-feeling etc.

3. **Analysis procedure** – statistical techniques and cartographic representations are made with the help of MS-excel and Map-info software.

### **Result and Discussion**

Almost 23.96% of the total slum population of Howrah District lives in the study area. The slum pockets, surveyed, are addressed as are M.C. Ghosh Lane, Panchanantala Lane, Nilmoni Mallik Lane, Bassiruddin Munshi Lane, Noor Md. Munshi Lane at Ward No. 19, Belilious Road, Jolapara Masjid Lane at Ward No. 20, Dakshin Shanpur Ramkrishna Colony, Purba para, Musalman Para at Ward No. 22. Children of the age group 5-14 are interviewed at their household and nearby small industries i.e. the work place to assess their socio-economic background and work conditions.

## 1. Socio-Economic Background

Socio-economic background of a child labourer is very crucial part of this study to detect the causal factors behind their engagement in different kinds of occupations at early age. To evaluate the origin of child labourers, the detailed study of their personal profile as well as family background is essential.

### 1.1. Profile of Child Labourer

Child labourers' personal profile is considered to be the most important parameter to assess the trend and present situation. Different demographic factors, educational status and some special criteria like birth order and age at starting work have also been taken as the important parameters.

#### 1.1.1. Demographic Factors

1.1.1.1. Age- In the present study, it is

found that out of 123, a huge number i.e. 84 child labourers are at the age group of 10-15 (Fig. 2), whereas only 39% belongs to 5-10 age group. It can be assumed that the trend of their age starting work is increasing day by day.

1.1.1.2. Sex- The study reveals that 99 out of 123 child labourers are male (Fig. 3) whereas only 19.21% is female. The female workers are worked as domestic help with their mother. A few of them also work at small industries. There is no female child labourer in Muslim Community.

1.1.1.3. Religion- Child labourers mainly belong to Hindu families (Fig. 4). Almost 88.62% of the child labourers are Hindu. On the other hand 11.38% are Muslim and they generally work as shop helpers and construction labourers.

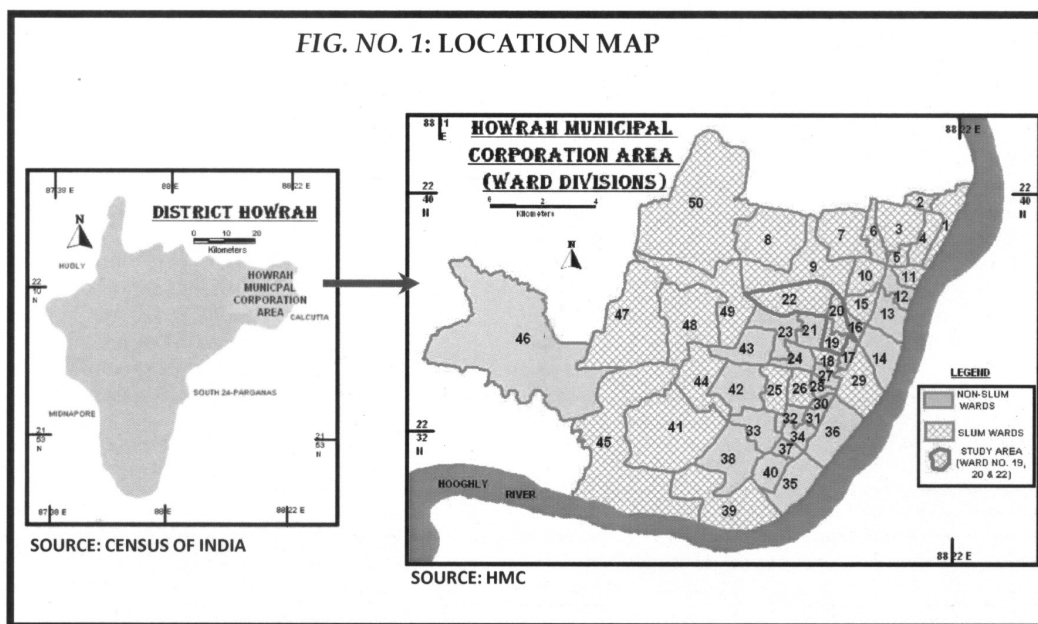
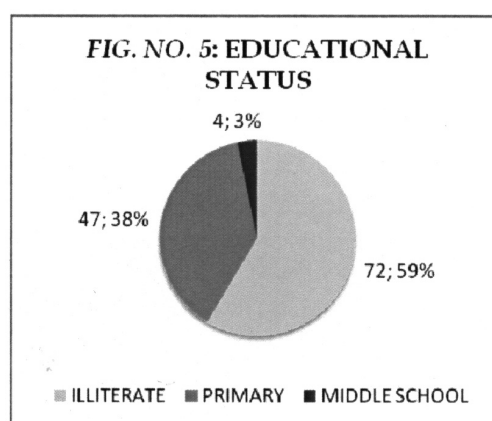
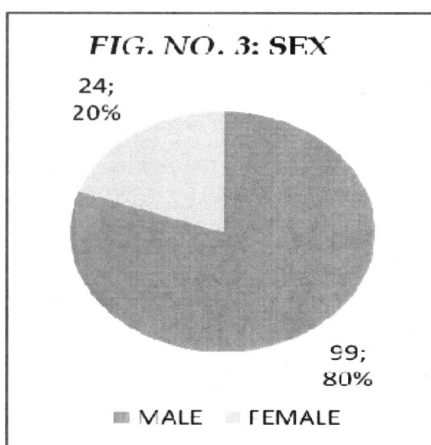
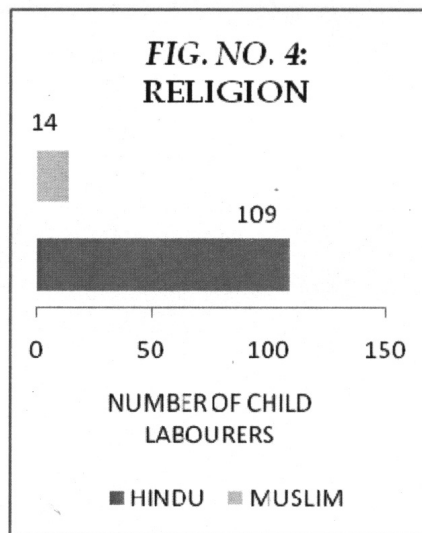
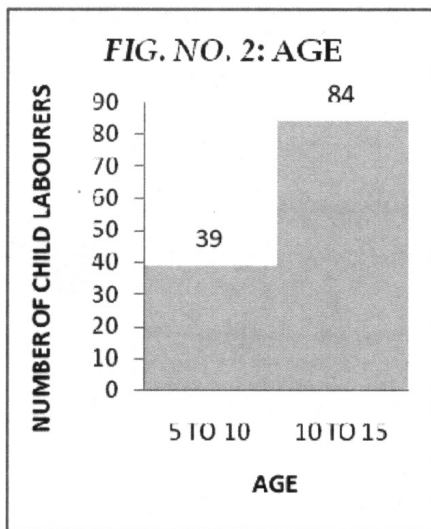


Fig. 1: Location Map

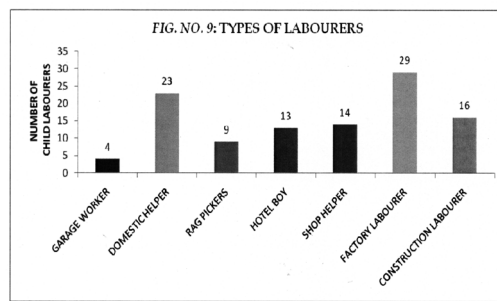
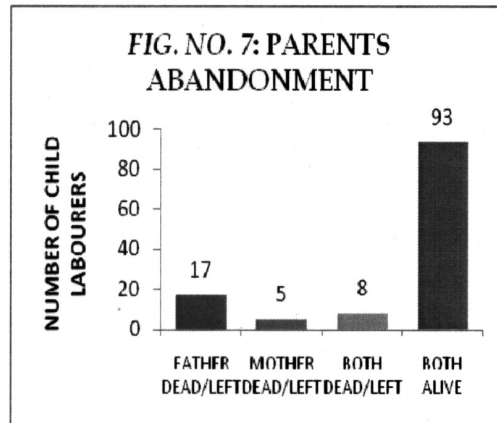
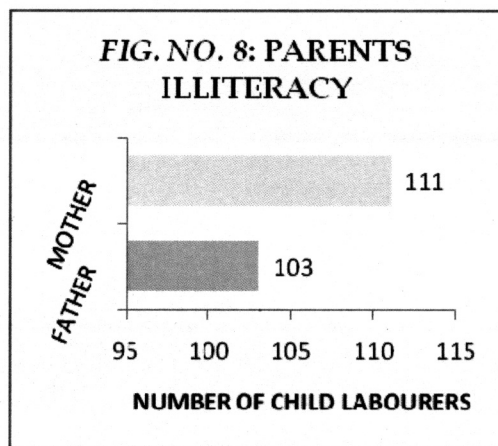
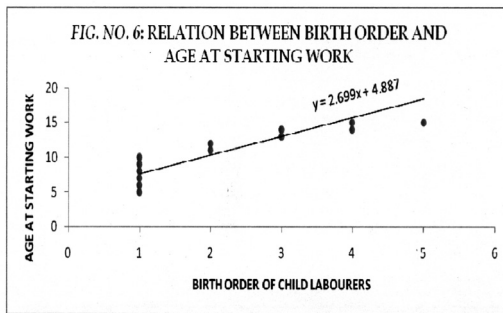


#### 1.1.1.4. Educational Status

As per the sample survey 58.54% of the child labourers are found illiterate and never attended school (Fig. 5). There is no literate girl child labourer in the study area. All the rag pickers in the sample are found illiterate. Regarding the literates, 38.21% of the total sample has just primary education and remaining 3.25% has the rare experience of going secondary schools. A major part

of primary school goers and all the secondary school goers of the studied population are out of school (OOS) at present. It is clear from the questionnaire survey that poverty is the main reason for the school drop-out. Education is luxury to them. It is more important to them and also their guardians to earn for the family, whatever the amount it is, than to spend time, labour and money for education.





### 1.1.2. Birth Order and Age at Starting work

The age at the time of starting work to financially help the family is ranging from 5 to 15. Although at slum areas poverty insists all wards of any parents to earn money, a trend (Fig. 6) is found for the first order child to start work at earlier age than younger ones. Being the eldest child of the family, the burden of responsibility becomes higher than the younger brothers and sisters. So a positive relationship is established between these criteria of the child labourers, i.e. the lower is the birth order the lower is the age at starting work. In this present study almost 47.15% of the total child labourers, being the first order child, have started work below ten years old.

### 1.2. Family Background

Parent's illiteracy, sudden death, indifference bound the children to work for earning money and to meet his/her own and family members' basic needs. The family type and migration history are also considered as secondary causal factors for the origin of child labourers.

#### 1.2.1. Parental Factors

**1.2.1.1. Parental Abandonment-** Although this criterion seems to be a vital one, but according to the study, parent's abandonment is established as a less important factor behind the origin of child labourers. Among 123 samples, only 13.82% and 4.07% child labourers have joined work after the death or indifferent/unusual behaviour of father

and mother respectively and 6.50% after losing both of the parents (Fig. 7). The major portion i.e. 75.61% of the child labourers has joined work with their parent's consent.

- 1.2.1.2. Parental Illiteracy- Almost 83.74% of fathers and 90.24% of the mothers of the child labourers are found illiterate (Fig. 8). They are not aware about the need of the basic education for their children. Moreover, the poverty and huge dependency ratio lead them to include their wards as earning members.

1.2.2. *Family Type*

Most of the child labourers (80.49%) belong to nuclear families whereas only 19.51% to the joint families. As more adult earning members are found at joint families the dependency ratio becomes low and the cases of child labourers is less.

1.2.3. *Migration History*

People are migrated from different states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa; from Bangladesh and from the interior villages of Howrah District in search of job opportunities at small industries of Howrah town and prefer to settle at the proximity of their workplace and thus gradually establish slums surrounding the industries. So it can be concluded that the child labourers are the immigrants. As per the sample survey, 52.05% are migrated from interior villages of Howrah, 36.99% from different states and 26.03% from Bangladesh.

## 2. **Situation of Workplace**

It is very much essential to analyze the employment situation of the child labourers to estimate the exploitation of physical and mental health at their tender age. Various issues related to their works and work places are assessed on the basis of the interview with child labourers and direct observation.

### 2.1. *Work Status*

To get a view of the miserable and hazardous working conditions of the child labourers at different work places, some factors like work type, payment, financial compensation are discussed.

#### 2.1.1. *Types of work*

A major portion (24.4%) of the child labourers are appointed at different small industries making machinery parts, plastic goods, aluminum goods, fertilizer etc (Fig. 9). 19.2% of the child labourers, mainly the girls, are engaged as the domestic helpers. A few of them are not paid individually as they share their mother's work. 19 out of 123 child labourers work at garages. They mainly wash cars and some of them are worked as mechanics. 12.3% of the child labourers are working as the helpers at different stationery shops, building materials' shops, grocery shops etc. Among the remaining, 13 child labourers are hotel boys engaged in washing plates or serving food. The rest 7.3% of the child labourers are rag pickers.

#### 2.1.2. *Remuneration*

Remuneration paid on a monthly basis ranges from 0 to Rs. 500/-. The child labourers are categorized into four groups

(table no. 1). Most of the child labourers (46.34%) belong to the remuneration group of Rs. 101-300. A few children (6.50%) have no remuneration, they just work as their parent's helping hand at their workplaces or get meager amount of food for labour.

### 2.1.3. Working Hours

The child labourers are classified into three classes according to their working hours per day (table no. 2). Most of the frequencies (63, 51.22%) are found in the second group i.e. 6-10 hours of work per day. The lowest frequency is identified in the last group of labourers who work for more than 10 hours per day.

### 2.2. Leave Facility

The study reveals that 14.63% of the child labourers work without any recess; whereas 49.59% and 35.77% of them get half an hour and one hour Tiffin break respectively. They cannot enjoy the general holidays. Hotel boys and shop helpers get one holiday in a week, which is the closing day for the hotels and shops. Others get few holidays only at the time of Durga Puja.

### 2.3. Financial Support

Only 38.21% child labourers obtain some monetary help for medical treatment from the employers. In most of the cases the employers do not take any

Table-1: Child Labourers according to Remuneration per Month

| Remuneration/<br>month | Types of Child Labourers |                  |                |               |                 |                      |                        | Total          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------|
|                        | Garage<br>Workers        | Domestic<br>Help | Rag<br>Pickers | Hotel<br>Boys | Shop<br>Helpers | Factory<br>Labourers | Construction<br>labour |                |
| <b>NIL</b>             | 4<br>(21.05%)            | 2<br>(08.70%)    | -              | 4<br>(30.77%) | -               | -                    | -                      | 08<br>(6.50%)  |
| <b>≤100</b>            | 8<br>(42.11%)            | 6<br>(26.09%)    | 2<br>(22.22%)  | 7<br>(53.85%) | 9<br>(64.29%)   | 3<br>(15.79%)        | 2 (12.5%)              | 37<br>(30.08%) |
| <b>101-300</b>         | 7<br>(36.84%)            | 9<br>(39.13%)    | 5<br>(55.56%)  | 2<br>(15.38%) | 5<br>(35.71%)   | 18<br>(62.07%)       | 11 (68.75%)            | 57<br>(46.34%) |
| <b>301-500</b>         | -                        | 6<br>(26.09%)    | 2<br>(22.22%)  | -             | -               | 8<br>(27.59%)        | 3 (18.75%)             | 21<br>(17.07%) |
| <b>Total</b>           | 19<br>(100%)             | 23<br>(100%)     | 9<br>(100%)    | 13<br>(100%)  | 14<br>(100%)    | 29<br>(100%)         | 16<br>(100%)           | 123<br>(100%)  |



Table-2: Child Labourers according to Working Hours per Day

| Working Hours/ Day | Types of Child Labourers |                |               |               |               |                   |                     | Total          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|
|                    | Garage Workers           | Domestic Help  | Rag Pickers   | Hotel Boys    | Shop Helpers  | Factory Labourers | Construction labour |                |
| <6                 | 7<br>(36.84%)            | 14<br>(60.87%) | 7<br>(77.78%) | 5<br>(38.46%) | 6<br>(42.86%) | -                 | -                   | 39<br>(31.70%) |
| 6-10               | 8<br>(42.11%)            | 6<br>(26.09%)  | 2<br>(22.22%) | -             | 8<br>(57.14%) | 23<br>(79.31%)    | 16 (100%)           | 63<br>(51.22%) |
| >10                | 4<br>(21.05%)            | 3<br>(13.04%)  | -             | 8<br>(61.54%) | -             | 6<br>(20.69%)     | -                   | 21<br>(17.07%) |
| <b>Total</b>       | 19 (100%)                | 23<br>(100%)   | 9<br>(100%)   | 13<br>(100%)  | 14 (100%)     | 29<br>(100%)      | 16<br>(100%)        | 123<br>(100%)  |

responsibility for their child workers' immediate financial needs.

#### 1.4. *Basic Needs*

The facilities like drinking water and latrine are totally absent in 64.23% cases. At 31 workplaces only, the child labourers avail drinking water.

#### 1.5. *Working Environment*

The child labourers generally work in difficult and hazardous environment. As per the survey 46.34% of the child labourers work under open air and are exposed to sun and rain (fig. no. 10). 33.33% and 87.13% of the child labourers are bound to work at ill-ventilated places and with harmful chemicals respectively.

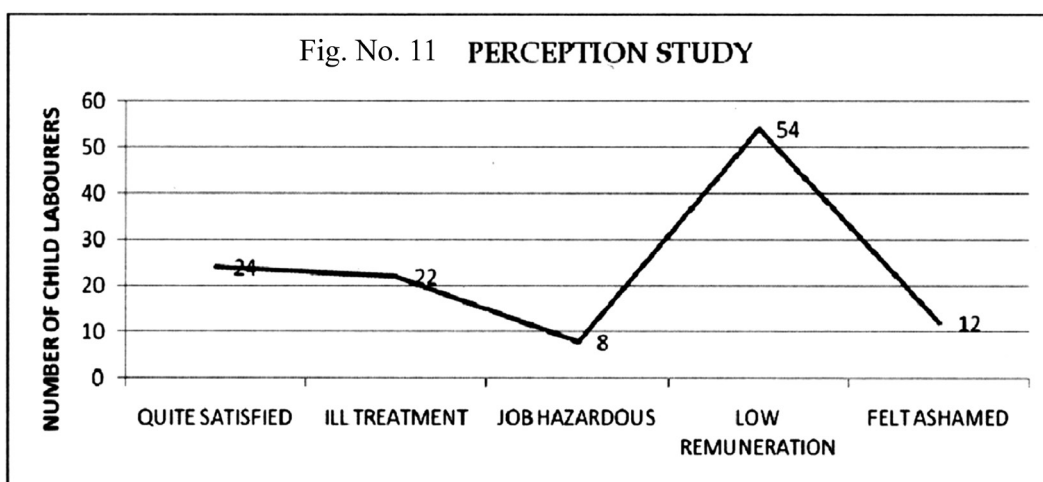
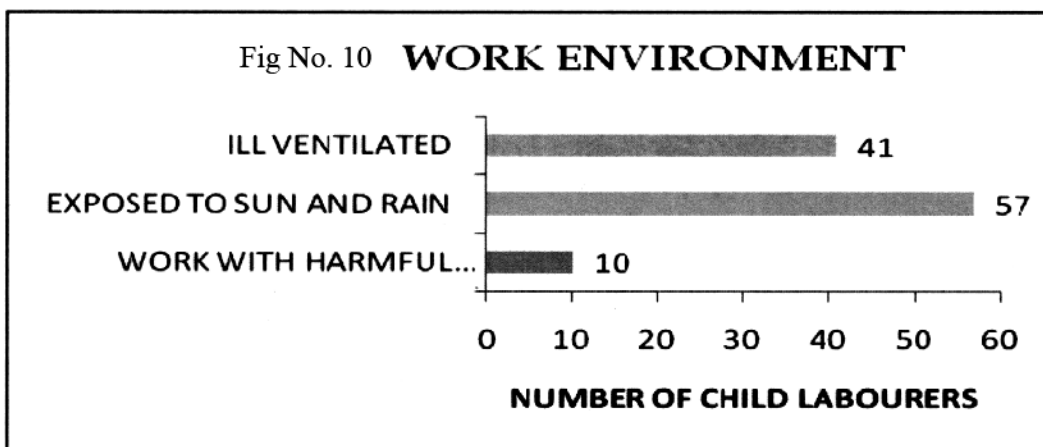
## 2. **Perception Study of Job Satisfaction**

According to the interview 19.51% of the child labourers are quite satisfied with their job (fig. no. 11). For the rest of the cases 17.89% complain for their employers'

ill-treatment, 6.5% and 9.76 feel the job hazardous and shameful (mainly rag pickers) respectively. Almost 44.07% of the child labourers are not satisfied with their remuneration.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the vital cause behind the origin of child labourers is nothing but the poverty, which compels the parents to engage their smallest family member in work to enhance the income. So, as long as the poverty will remain, slum children will be converted to child labourers. It is a continuous process. To abolish the system of child labour the administration should take appropriate measures for the rehabilitation of the child labourers, assuming the urban slums as the 'child labourers' hot spot'. Some legal steps may be adopted such as:



1. Preventing employment of child labourers at different harmful chemical industry.
  2. Providing well ventilated working environment for child labourers.
  3. Strict maintenance of the working hours for the child labourers.
  4. Providing minimum wage for the child labourers at work.
  5. Ensuring medical check-up for the working child labourers
  6. Providing elementary education to the child labourers by their employers and local administration
- Thus it is an urgent need of the hour to secure the child labourers from the rigorous social exploitation and ensure their physical and mental health.

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