

***OUR STORY OUR DREAMS
MICRO AND MACRO INFLUENCES ON
CHILD LABOUR***

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I thank you for giving me this opportunity to participate in hundredth anniversary celebrations of the city of Trondheim. I am very happy to be a part of this conference. I believe that Norway is a country that has a deep concern for children. It is because of this they have recognised Movements of Working Children from three regions of the world and invited us to participate here as resource persons. For this I would like to extend my gratitude to the people of Norway on behalf of Bhima Sangha, Namma Sabha and the working children of Asia.

Today I am taking you all on a journey. This is my journey. This is a journey traversed by millions of children like me, children who are old, young, boys and girls. I am inviting you all on this journey with the fervent hope that you will all participate in this journey and empathize with it.

I am now starting this from a tiny village on the west coastal district of India. This is my grandfather's era. I am not yet born. This village is called Nagaramata. Naagaramata is on the banks of Mabukala Hole (river). My grandfather's house was in a corner on this bank. It was surrounded by thick forest, green grasslands, paddy fields, coconut and fruit bearing trees. Ours was a family of weavers. We had a total of five looms at home. The clattering noise of the looms could be heard throughout the day. Likewise there were basket makers, mat weavers, carpenters, jaggery makers, oil merchants, boatmen, toddy makers and farmers. So many occupations. And all this was located within a radius of 1-2 kms. They used to obtain the raw materials for all these from the forest or from the farms. They all belonged to different castes. There were 15 members in my grandfather's family. Compared to other families in the village, ours was small. In some families there were 50-100 members.

In our house, besides the looms, we had cattle. We also had some land. So, everybody had work. We had the forest for fodder, grazing land for the cattle, an unpolluted river as a water source, occupations right at home, farms for growing grains and vegetables, house full of people and lots of work for everybody. Everybody at home used to be engaged in reeling, weaving, dyeing and agricultural work. The children in the family used to work according to their capacity. This also enabled them to learn a skill.

This was the scene in most families in the village. The raw materials needed for pottery, cane work, mat making, oil extraction, carpentry and construction was available in the vicinity. My father who was then a young boy used to bring fruits, honey, greens and herbs from the forest. My grandmother used to fetch the fuel and fodder. My grandfather and uncle used to get greens and vegetables. It was easy to get utensils, baskets, ropes, mats, oil and other household essentials from the same village or nearby village. Therefore the villages were self-sufficient or there was mutual dependence. During festivals, at the beginning of the year and village fairs, we had weave new clothes for everybody in the village. Every household had its own occupation. The eldest man in the family was the head of the family. Regardless of

who earned how much in the family, everyone had food and clothes. The head of the family was responsible for all kinds of transactions. The womenfolk spent most of their time cooking, cleaning, weaving and helping in agriculture work. Boy children and men were given more prominence. Everybody identified us as the weaver community.

The caste system was clearly visible. Everybody had to take up his or her family occupations. The village craftsmen were not given much prominence. This was being decided on the basis of caste and class. Even though a family learnt an occupation other than its own, it could not take it up as a family occupation. There was a fear of social restrictions. The agricultural land was hired on lease from the landlords. Apart from giving an annual share of the produce, it was necessary for us to work without wages for the landlord during festivals, weddings and such other family functions and give contributions. The employer was the head of the Panchayat (local government). This was a family legacy. Employer, other landlords and priests were members of the Panchayat. All decisions were theirs. Nobody could question them on that count. For whatever we produced, they fixed the prices. The social and economic inequality and the discrimination between boys and girls were clearly visible. A few had an access to education and information. They were the decision makers. But most of these decisions were made at the village level. This situation was common to thousands of villages like Nagaramatha during that time. At times, these social stratifications can become extreme. This can be seen in some parts even to day.

But the villages had agriculture, and allied occupations and cottage industries as their main occupations. The children generally worked under the protection and close scrutiny of the family. There was no exploitation and abuse. There was a hope of learning a life skill. Their help as well as benefits was directly to their families.

But this did not last for long. Once upon a time, from Barkoor, which was near Naagamata, spices, rice, clothes, jaggery and areca nuts were exported to various places. After the Second World War, these exports were banned. Instead wood and tiles were exported and food grains, cutlery items and clothes were imported from Mumbai.

Urban products from far off cities slowly made an entry into the villages. Mill clothes, metal utensils and cutlery items came. This posed a serious challenge to the native products. Our handloom clothes could not compete against their allure and prices. Nobody questioned the reason for this. Grandfather said, "time has come for the deterioration of the village". The looms at home were relegated to the attic. The foot roads and cart roads disappeared and roads were constructed for vehicles. New things came in. The local goods lost their price and market. The mill cotton was replaced by nylon. Aluminum and plastic made an entry.

The forest produce, paddy and other raw food grains started going out on these very roads. Tile factories came up. Their sales began. Entire forests were brought down to fire these tiles.

Trees were uprooted and sent to paper factories in lorries. The availability of leaves and wastes for agricultural manure became scarce. Chemical manures came from cities. Agriculture became costly. Oil containers came from city mills. The oil refineries in villages closed down. Paddy, copra and sugarcane from villages went to the city mills and in return, polished rice, sugar, polyester sarees and plastic products attacked the village market. As the looms were relegated to the attic, the men folk migrated to far off cities. In our house, my father and his brothers left for Hubli and Hyderabad. The womenfolk started working in the landlord's family. This story is not restricted to just my family, but this was true for almost all families in the village.

From the data collection we have done we know that there were 100 jaggery refineries in existence 15 years ago in Hattikudru, an island has come down to a mere 20 now. Out of the 125 handlooms at Basrur, only 10 remain today. At Shiriyara, out of 20 families engaged in leatherwork, 55 years old Sanjeevanna is the lone person who knows this trade today.

As migration started, joint families became nuclear. The small agricultural landholding disintegrated and had to be sold for low prices as they became useless. Or they were adjusted towards loans taken. It was inevitable for my mother to work as a labourer to run the family. There was no hope about men who went to the cities. There were too many mouths to be fed at home. Too many problems. My mother left the house with me, my elder brother and younger sister. We built a hut on the five cents land given to us by the government and started living there. We had moved away from the place where we were born, and brought up, the familiar river, forests and story telling grandmother. Kolkere was dry, no water, and no shade. My life began amidst people who had left their houses like us, far from the village, in the huts of the Janata Colony. The nearby town Basrur looked down on the residents of the Janata colony as untouchables and inferiors. From here, we had to walk 2 kms to fetch water, ration, fuel and to go to school. For work one had to go even far. Once upon a time, these people were all from the craftsmen's families. But now, they were working as labourers.

In the beginning, I was admitted to a school. Every morning, as soon as I got up, I had to run to fetch water. In the evening, I had to walk all the way to Basrur to collect fuel and ration. In the midst of all these, I did not have time for studies. I could not follow what was being taught at the school. I was scared to question the teacher. Beating was the only answer for all of us. Even though we were in the classroom, all our attention would be on the vehicles and the people on the road. The teacher always used to tell me, 'It would be better if you go to graze the cattle'. To me and my classmate Gangadhara, school meant boredom and fear.

By then my younger brother was two years old. He was not able to walk. It was inevitable for my mother to work. So, they took me out of school. In a way it was a relief for me. I did not feel that school and education was in any way useful to me. I felt that I had got rid of trouble from my teacher. Now I had to work at home. Looking after my younger brother, cooking, fetching water and fuel, washing clothes and dishes, cleaning the house, buying provision from the market... This spelt my everyday routine.

In Kolkere, like me Raju, Rajiva, Ananda and Lakshmi had also left school by then. While problems at home were one reason, the other reason was the feeling of unhappiness about the school. I had leisure for a while only when my mother came back from work in the evening. At that time, close to my house, Gramshrama activists were running a centre. I was attending it. A lot of working children used to come to the centre.

By the next two years, my younger brother started walking. I had little free time now. I started going to work in a farm near my house in order to help the family. By then, my friends Rajiva and Ananda left for Hyderabad, 800 kms away, to work in a hotel through a middleman. Rajiva and Ananda were very enthusiastic about the fact that they were going to work in a hotel in a big city. I was scared. They were 800 kms away with different language and different people. What will be their future, I used to wonder.

My father had come back home when he was 40 years old. When he came back, he did not bring anything. He was empty handed. He had not learnt any new skill, he had forgotten his old skill. He was not able to do agriculture anymore. His health had deteriorated due to hard work, pressures and abuse. He had to again join a near by hotel. The same labour, same income. The precious time when he could have gained a skill, earned money and grown as an individual was lost in washing plates and dishes in the hotel.

My fears proved to be true. Rajiva and Ananda who had gone to the city were angry that their fathers had driven them into such a situation.

My friend Lakshmi had by then started rolling beedis at home. If girl children are sent away from home, it is to work as domestic helps in others' homes. Hard work, sexual exploitation, physical abuse, harassment are common. Even if they are at home, they have to face other difficulties. If they are given education, it is difficult to get them married, more education means more dowry, she cannot work as a coolie. There is no opportunity to go to school. Even if she goes, she has to work at home as well.

Vanaja, a girl in our group, had to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning. She had to sweep, fetch water, wash dishes, cook and run to the school. Everyday, she was late to school. Everyday she was beaten and scold at school for being late and not doing the homework. As she was not able to bear the harassment and shame, she dropped

out of school. At home also, the same pressure. A feeling that 'It is enough if a girl learns household and agricultural work. We will get rid of a load if we get this girl married off'. When she went work at others' homes, she was not let inside. As she belonged to lower caste, she had to purify the place where she sat with cow dung. She was not supposed to touch anybody. For this reason, she stopped working at others' homes.

The growth of cities, their allure and attraction, disintegration of villages has led to the large-scale rural-urban migration. Once upon a time it was the migration of elders like my father and uncle. But, today it is the migration of children like Rajiva, Ananda and Lakshmi. The disappearance of rural occupations, diminishing agriculture, fundamental problems and disintegration of joint families has resulted in migration. These children who are without any skill, experience and who are illiterates do not get any job with a future. For jobs with higher incomes, one needs skill. Therefore, these children end up doing small time jobs that are scorned by everybody. They do not offer any security. They do not offer any future.

These children who are uprooted from their native villages and caught in the web of cities are devoid of their culture, social and emotional relationships. They become orphans. The situation of Rajiva and Ananda were very similar. They had to work from four in the morning to ten in the night; work that was scorned and considered as inferior by elders. Cleaning glasses and plates and left over. Children have to work in such shameful and unhealthy conditions. If they lie down tired, they are beaten. Hot water is thrown on them. They do not have any contact with the outside world. If they get any letters from their houses, they do not get it. At night, they are exposed to torture from their older colleagues. It is a kind of bonded labour. Rajiva felt dejected. Even today, Rajiva is scared of cities, big vehicles and machines.

The situation of children who live on the streets and in slums is even more hopeless. They are looked at as criminals; they do not have any protection. They are scorned by everybody as a social affliction. They are harassed by the police and local rowdies every day.

The situation of girl street children is even worse. They do not have anywhere to go or any privacy to answer the nature's call and for bathing. They are constantly haunted by sexual abuse. They are forced to sell their bodies at a very tender age.

Health, nutritious food, shelter, protection, education and entertainment are all unheard things. But, there is a feeling that working children are a necessity in cities; that some work cannot be done by anybody other than children. In the city of Bangalore itself, number of working children exceeds 100 thousands. Ragpickers, children working in hotels, agarbathi, beedi, sex work, small industries, service sector, garages, construction work and those who work as hawkers - child work has become inevitable in cities. It was only recently that an effort was made to identify

our existence in cities. When these cities were being constructed nobody has thought about people who would come there to work, for essential services.

In our country, it is the cities, which have more slums than villages. To the children, the city devoid of its humane face has become a monster.

I do not understand the current paradigm of development or the policies. Balkur is a place near my village. Once upon a time, it was an inexhaustible source of food grains. It was famous for its variety of rice, vegetables and sweet potatoes. There were no roads, no pumpsets. Now, there is rush to grow sugarcane. Loans for cultivation, information on sowing the seeds, chemical manures at door steps, pumpsets for water source, roads for transportation, big lorries to transport sugarcane as soon as the harvest is done, a person from the factory to look after all these arrangements, a marketing system is all in place. There was no rush; there was no availability of all these facilities, and co-operation when the people were growing rice and vegetables.

I do not understand whether the production of rice and vegetables which is the basic need of a majority of people that needs more encouragement or the production of sugar. If I question this, they try to shut my mouth with the explanation, 'you do not understand all this. Sugarcane is a commercial crop. It is easier to make money'. I wonder what will happen if tomorrow we do not get any rice. Is it possible to eat only money and sugar?'

Ours is a country of villages. These villages once had occupations, which were environment-friendly and nature friendly.

In such places, the neglect of environment, opening up of big factories, exodus of entire villages, submergence of land and chemical wastes- all have dealt a heavy blow.

A few years ago when I heard that in cities people had to buy water, I thought it was funny. It was a time when there was an ever flowing, pure water stream by the side of the house. There is a well-known local proverb in usage 'does the river need the consent of the feudal lord to flow?'

But today, in the city of Bangalore, the open well water is not suitable for drinking. Near our CWC office, even if we dig five feet deep, we get water. But we cannot use it. When I was young, my grandmother used to say that anybody who poisons water is bound to end up in hell. I used to believe it then. But now, I pray to God let it not come true. If not, just imagine how many people can be accommodated in hell. What can one say about such a development?

People who depended on the forest produce and cottage industries for their livelihood and who never exploited the nature are either ruined or they are counting their days.

I had a belief. According to me 'development' meant more people reaping the benefits of increased facilities, food, clothes, shelter, health and a congenial environment for living. But in reality, development has led to more hungry, more deficiency, costly living and ill health. We have to call all these as results of development. The current paradigm of development has not only proved to be dangerous and harmful to a lot of people, but it has plundered the nature's wealth, our rich culture, art and heritage.

As Science progressed and with the onset of development, more and more problems have cropped up. For instance, earlier, agricultural work was very safe and healthy. Today, with the advent of machines, chemical manure and insecticides it has become one of the dangerous occupations. The children are working in this sector as well. This model of development converts all kinds of works to dangerous works.

Today, development is characterized by war, oppression, exploitation of the eaker sections, raising number of working children, more diseases, and more hungry people. These are the peaks of development. This very development has strengthened the practice of child labour.

This model of development, which focuses only on urban development, does not talk about rural development, which comprises of 70% of the total population. The rural areas get very little share in our development polices. This one sided development has led to a rise in agricultural expenditure and a fall in production. This has dealt a severe blow not only to the rural occupations but also on the marketing of rural produce. Lack of raw materials, deforestation, soil erosion and other nature related problems have cropped up. Water sources dried up. Because of all these factors, rural artisans and tribal were pushed into a corner. Their children were forced to work in villages and cities as child labourers. The women and children are forced to face the brunt of all these. This nature of development is faulty. The relationship between man and nature is deteriorating day by day. We do not have an opportunity to become partners in development.

Rajiva and Ananda were brought back by their father. Though they had worked for years, they did not have any money. All their wages were cut towards glasses and plates were broken, their food medicines and loans. They had very little money left with them. They could not even buy a set of a clothes or a pair of slippers. Because they were afraid that whatever money they had would not be sufficient for their return journey.

By next year I, had migrated to a near by town. It all ready had residential areas, commercial establishments, and hotels. Even in our town, we had to pay money to get water. Water bottles were being sold in shops.

We all again met in Kolkere. The Gramashrama activists were running a centre for children. When we met again, the thought of building a collective spread its wings. We formed the Bhima Sangha in Basrur and Bangalore.

Why is our situation like this? What happened to the forest, the ever-flowing river, raw materials and rural occupations? How and When did this happen? From whom do we get an answer for all these? This is not a story that dates back to 30-40 years. It goes beyond that. We put forth all these questions to the quietly flowing Varahi, the river that was our life line once, but is now filled with silt and being sapped in the name of so called 'development'.

'Mother Varahi, before you join the ocean's womb, please tell us what happened to your children today?' This was the question we children put forth and the experiences that we had with our river Varahi led us to new avenues. We traveled with her from her origin to the point where she met the ocean. It was a journey of mother and children. The one sided system of development so far has been so deformed that there is a rift in the relationship between man and nature. The relationship is on the verge of destruction. The power to take decisions lies with people who do not have an ounce of affection towards environment, water, and natural resources.

In our society that businessmen are always viewed with suspicion. There is a feeling that their every move is profit oriented and that therefore, they always exhibit excessive religious and social concern and capitalise on this for their business.

Today, Capitalistic countries like America exhibit excessive social and environment concern. The way they make use of natural resources is enough to scare us. Their Inventions, their consumption and consumerism are responsible for all our problems. While experiencing this problem on one side, we face the threat of boycott of products made by children. I wonder whether we are untouchables and criminals.

These are the people who sell arms and at the same time propagate peace. Today in our country, the cottage industries, self-sufficiency, decentralisation and protection of weaker sections is being lost in the name structural adjustment. Social concern is exhibited in the name of boycotts and trade sanctions.

Our elders have lost their occupations and their future and have become beggars in cities. Where was this social concern when the Government and international powers forced big technology and machinery on us? They did not ask us then and they will not ask us now. Who are you leaving this world for? What have you done to our mother earth?

Boycotts, trade sanctions and compulsions do more harm than good. There are live examples for this in countries like Bangladesh and Morocco.

You have two approaches towards working children. One approach looks at us with pity and compassion; that children are in a very difficult situation. The parents are illiterates; the family does not have any responsibility towards children. These children should be in school not work. The child should have love affection, play, education, and entertainment. They forget the reality and want to give a dream childhood.

The second approach looks at working children as dirty, uncivilized, a curse to the civilization, that when they grow up, they become thieves. They should not be there, they are a disgrace if seen on the street by foreigners, they should be banned from working, and they should be swept aside like dirt. They do not identify the responsibilities of a working child.

They identify working children as a problem today. But this problem has been forced on us by the current system and the way of developmental. Seeking solution to the problem of child labour without identifying and rectifying the problem in the system is like disinfecting the plants. This is a very cruel approach. When the working child and his family look at work as an avenue, they would have examined different possibilities and arrived at this as a final decision.

I remember the discussion my mother had with me, when I had to leave school to look after the house. Whether an alternate arrangement can be made about my brother? Can the water be fetched in the night? Can mother take the child to her place of work? Can mother get work in a near by place? Can brother be sent to the Creche with other children? Can I take him to school with me?- all these discussions were held and mother asked for my opinion.

Inevitably, my mother was not in a position to take any decision. I took a decision to leave school because of the shame and cruelty I suffered at school. One has to work for basic facilities like water, fuel and fodder when the forest and the common land disappear in the name of 'development'. In a worse situation, one has to migrate to cities, start working in hotels, garages, small industries and on the street.

Today, we have become guinea pigs. For children working in hazardous sectors, new formulae like boycott, compulsory education and Prime Minister's programme are invented and experimented on us year after year. What is the impact and reaction of all these?

These experiments are our biggest problem today. There is no thought about the impact it has on us, our feelings and our needs like rats, monkeys and rabbits, we working children are falling victims to experiments being carried out in the social and economic laboratories. As a result of this experiment, girl children working in the garment sector in Bangladesh were driven to the streets. In Morocco, the lives of girl children have become miserable as a result of fraud and publicity. We have such examples in every country and continent.

It has become inevitable for us to work. This is a sin committed by the adult world. We are proud about our work. In our country, we contribute to 20% of the nation's economy. We want to stop exploitation at work. We do not want work that is exploitative. We want respect for our work. If every worker in the world is proud being an employee, a master craftsman and if you desire to respect him or her, we too want the same respect. We are proud about our work. We often hear about bringing working children to the mainstream. They talk about our social integration by putting us in school and by banning our work. Do we have an opportunity in the society, in this mainstream? Do we really want such a society? We are hesitant to join a stream where hatred over caste, creed and race prevail, disparity between rich and poor, between first world and third world, discrimination between men and women exist, and where the distorted human face plunders the nature. We dream of a main stream where all these are absent, building a new society. Can you join such a stream? Can you join hands with us in building such a society?

In the midst of all these struggles and pain, we have built a collective with all difficulties. Some adults are not able to recognise this. We have a tough path before us. It is not easy to convince adults. I would like to remind you of a historical event where the working children's collectives from all over the world met together, despite all these limitations and difficulties, to discuss about working children of the world. We have discussed and arrived at decisions in Kundapur in our country. These decisions have to be kept in mind in all instances where decisions regarding working children are made.

While deciding about any adult group, the decisions are taken with their participation. But when it comes to taking decisions about children's lives, it appears as if adults think of themselves as eligible for making such decisions. All these mistakes are because of adults' decisions. When adults hand over this world to children, I hope that they would show modesty to ask us about what kind of a world we would like to live in.

We have to create a social system based on partnership. It is possible to realise our dream only when children are partners in development.

We have to create an opportunity to make this participation happen. This has to happen from the grassroots to the global level. Only then will it be made easier. When we look at the problem of child labour in all its magnitude, it appears to be huge and as if we need a magic wand to seek solution to this problem. But, when we look at it at the local level (decentralised), it is easy for us to participate and seek clear solutions.

We have launched '**Makkala Panchayat**' (**Children's Panchayat**) in five Panchayats in Kundapur Taluk on the west coast of India. This is a Panchayat of, by and for working children. The aim of this is to make working children join hands with

adults' Panchayat to draw up rural development plans, keeping children as its main focus. The children have been participating with adults at every level - identifying working children's problems, seeking solutions and bringing them into effect. It is only when our participation happens equally from village to city to the global level, that we can build a new society. Today we are living under very bad conditions.

The discrepancy between children and adults, men and women, centralization, severing of relations between man and nature, big developmental projects and urban based development - all these have led to this problem.

I dream of building a society where children and adults can together participate, where there is a growing concern about environment, and which is based on decentralization, where there is no discrimination between men and women, creed, language and caste, where there is equal distribution of wealth, where everybody's basic facilities are met, a world full of peace and abundance.

We have gathered here today in Norway, a country that is one of the champions of children's rights and has the system of Ombudsmen to protect children's rights. It is therefore fitting environment to the nature of Urban Childhood. May this conference lead the way to children's participation and protagonism in addressing the problems of working children? I sincerely hope that the adults present here will be the first to light the way towards this.