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MUMBAI'S MAP OF LOST CHILDHOOD

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From Upscale Colaba To Dharavi's Slums, Govt Tracks Child Labour For Court

Mumbai: Children are employed as domestic workers in upscale Colaba and Lokhandwala, while in Bhuleshwar they are more likely to be toiling in gold jewellery units. In Dharavi they can be found straining their eyes over intricate hand embroidery in jari factories.

New data submitted by the Maharashtra government to the Bombay High Court allows one to map the chronic child labour spots across the city and the kind of work done there.

The information was submitted earlier this week to a division bench of Justice Bilal Nazki and Justice Ashok Bhangale during the hearing of a suo motu Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on the menace of child labour in the state. The PIL was based on a letter written by former high court judge G S Patankar.

"Particular areas are known for specific industries that employ children as labourers," said Vikas Sawant, national coordinator of Pratham, an NGO that works with the government to conduct raids and rescue children.

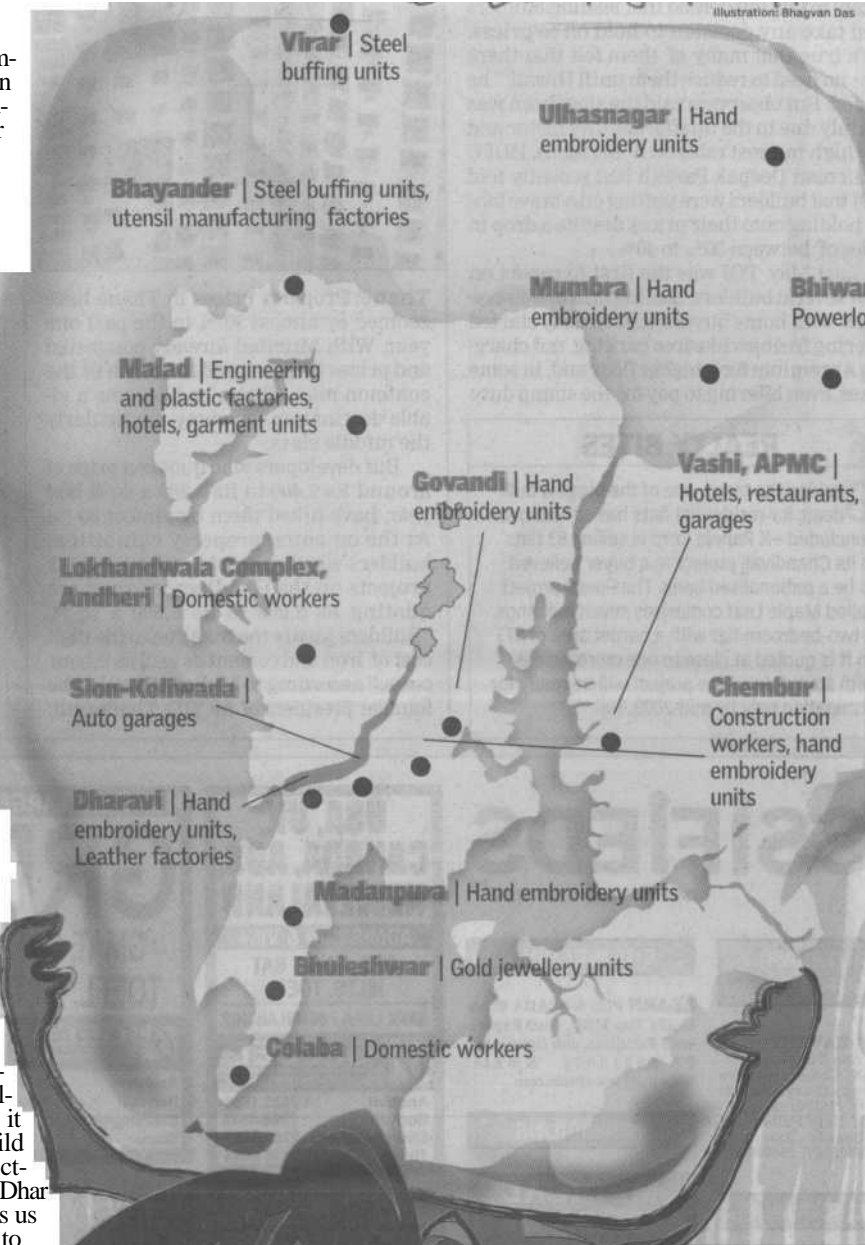
Recently, when a raid on a housing society in Cuffe Parade led to the rescue of children employed as domestics, it dispelled the myth that child labour was a problem restricted to the slums of Govandi or Dharavi. "Such information helps us come up with a mechanism to identify places, target establishments and rescue children," said Sawant.

In its affidavit, submitted by additional public prosecutor Poornima Kantharia earlier this week, the state told the court that it had drawn up an action plan to deal with the menace. "The main vision of the action plan is to eliminate child labour in hazardous industries by 2008 and completely eliminate the practice of child labour by 2010," said Vishwas Jadhav, state labour officer.

Jadhav said that a task force headed by the labour commissioner and comprising police officers, BMC shop inspectors and women and child welfare officers had been conducting raids in slums with the help of NGOs.

In the past two years, 735 raids were conducted all over the state, with 3,089 child labourers rescued and 827 employers arrested.

Not surprisingly, Mumbai and



and restaurants. (See map)

More alarming according to civic activists, is that over 2,260 of the rescued children were from outside the state, which implies that a cartel could be involved in trafficking children. The government claimed that the raids had resulted in employers voluntarily sending back an estimated 23,483 children back to their native places.

Activists said the problem cannot be wished away despite the state government setting a deadline to make Maharashtra a child labour-free state.

"Many a times, residents of areas that house the factories employing child labourers obstruct the raids," said Sawant, pointing to a need for creating public awareness. For instance, the landlord of premises leased to a factory may not want his own income hurt. Another area of concern is the lack of proper institutional care for the rescued children, who are usually placed in observation homes for juvenile delinquents. Reuniting the children with their families is not without its share of problems too. "The children come from poor families and unless the government intervenes to economically assist them there is no guarantee that the children won't find their way back to these factories," said Sawant.

The government on its part has indicated that it is serious about tackling the problem. "The state's action plan proposes conducting periodic surveys, creating public awareness, undertaking educational rehabilitation and generating special funds for children with special needs, such as domestic child labourers, street children

FREED THE CHILDREN

(Rescue statistics for 2006-07)

| | Rescued | kids from Maharashtra | From other states | Employers held | |
|---------------|------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| Mumbai | 55 | 1,712 | 96 | 1,616 | 357 |
| Thane | 32 | 575 | 103 | 472 | 159 |
| Rest of state | 648 | 802 | 630 | 172 | 311 |
| TOTAL | 735 | 3,089 | 829 | 2,260 | 827 |

Note: The state estimates that another 23,483 children were sent back home by employers to avoid arrests during the raids

and migrant labourers," Jadhav said in the affidavit.

But activists maintained that much more needs to be done, including framing a policy for rehabilitating child labourers and the speedy prosecution of employers.

The PIL is scheduled for further hearing when the high court reopens after the vacation in June 2008.

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