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Children don't Deiong in sweatshops

It is irksome that matters are allowed to escalate a great deal in India before the authorities consider setting their house in order. GAP, the international garment brand, has withdrawn outfits from its 3,000 stores following allegations of use of child labour by its contractors. Commerce minister Kama! Nath has a case when he says that allegations of child labour are often used by developed countries as a way of imposing non-tariff barriers on Indian goods.

If investigations reveal that the Indian suppliers of GAP did not actually use child labour, then the chain needs to be taken to task. But the existence of child labour in India must be acknowledged. There is enough proof to demonstrate that scores of children work under hazardous conditions in manufacturing units, agriculture, weaving, fireworks, fishing and most commonly as domestic helps. This is in violation of India's own laws. Not to mention that at a time when the country is trying hard to increase its share of global trade,

sweatshops using child labour would only lend Indian exports a bad reputation.

All sorts of companies obtain goods from Indian vendors and authorities must try hard to monitor the supply chain. This must go with all-out efforts to put all Indian children in schools, which would unleash growth and opportunity on a huge scale.

However, banning all employment for

move. In many poor families it is imperative for children to work. A distinction must be made between forced child labour and employment in a family-based cottage industry like pottery or knitting, wherein the children work in their spare time after school hours.

Child labour means that children are deprived of the opportunity to play and grow intellectually. They are deprived of education. Child labour in that sense, in which the child's physical, mental and emotional well-being is compromised,

Child labour is only a lesser evil

The "Oh! It's atrocious" reaction by most to any talk of child labour has become a cliché. Be it about the young carpet-makers of Mirzapur, or the recent case of international apparel brand GAP withdrawing all 'Made in India' clothes because a sting operation showed one of the company's suppliers to be using child labour, the reaction of the so-called educated elite is always immediate and fierce.

Without supporting child labour, it's possible to say that such an exaggerated reaction is nothing but an attempt at being politically correct. Just look at the background of these so-called child labourers. They come from strata where their families couldn't afford even the basics in life. These are the same kids you see moving around our overcrowded towns and cities begging, indulging in petty crime, and at times even doing drugs. Now imagine yourself as a parent, or even a child in that situation when one can afford nothing. What does one do? Allow the child to earn something for the

family, with a semblance of dignity, or starve and fall prey to nefarious activities?

Child labour is bad, period. But can our system ensure that every child rendered jobless due to a blanket ban gets education and other basic necessities? In the system we live in, that thought is Utopian. The system therefore has no right to deny the child even the little chance he has of giving a modicum of dignity to his life. Summarily banning child labour is as silly as the courts mandating that a child must study within five km of his home without first ensuring that there is a decent school within that radius. The solution is not a ban, but to ensure that wherever these kids work, the employers don't exploit them.

If child labour is evil, then allowing the child to get into undesirable activities is an even bigger evil. It is time the shouting brigade and the international community accept this ground reality. It may be less than ideal, but till we set right the situation it's better to live with a lesser evil.