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Target those who employ child labour

EVERY TIME I order groceries home, I open my apartment door feeling rather uncomfortable. The 11-year-old delivery boy is barely visible behind the big grocery bag he carries. Often I hand him a good tip.

I don't know if it is the same discomfort or guilt that drives bureaucrats and ministers to order raids to rescue children working in most inhuman conditions in city sweatshops. But do they feel their social responsibility is over once they have "liberated" these kids from the drudgery of zari-units and dhabas?

Child labour is banned in India. So the government is bound by law to show some action. Prodded by voluntary groups, raids are conducted. Media is called in for coverage. Rescued kids are put in temporary shelter homes and after age verification — the process may take anything between a few days to months - they are sent back

home, with a note for the district magistrate concerned.

Then, the "rescued" kids are promptly forgotten and nobody bothers to find out if they are back in sweatshops or dhabas in another city or if they have starved to death.

But there are legal provisions for rehabilitation: After rescue, these kids have to be sent to schools, their families have to be provided with earning assets. The administration has little time for all these and rehab funds often go unspent. But even if the administration followed the law to the letters, the efforts would have little effect on this social evil.

Let me discuss why.

Child labourers come from very poor families who have far too many kids for their

means. But it is not really a problem of family planning. Unfortunately, even after six decades of independence and one-and-half decade of economic liberalisation, the concept of human resource is understood by a vast majority of Indians in simple arithmetic.

With proper education and subsequent career opportunities still a distant dream, a poor couple opts for as many kids possible to maximise the family's earning hands.

But I doubt if laws or enforcement can have any effect on such desperation that forces these poor people to try

and compensate for quality with quantity. Clearly, the administration cannot fine these impoverished parents. If they are put behind bars, their kids will anyway starve. At the same time, the government can keep rescuing kids and spend for their rehab but so long there are employers, the poorest of parents will continue to have kids and have them supplied to the market.

Only if we can stop such job opportunities, it will slowly dry up the supply. The poorest of us will not go on having kids and feed them with their meager resources if there is no one to employ those little ones. As a welcome spin-off, such a situation will also help meet our family planning targets.

How to do it? Maybe rewrite the law with very heavy penalties with intimidating jail terms (not just the existing provision of one-year term) for those who employ child labour. But that is perhaps asking for too much from our governments that allow employers go scot-free by identifying child labourers as neglected children. For now, the administration can concentrate on enforcement and rehab.

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