The domestic economy and the exploitation of children’s work: The case of Kerala

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1. Introduction

For some years now Indian newspapers have regularly exposed the sorrowful stories of crude profiteering to which the migrant girls from the Southern state of Kerala who work thousands of kilometres away from home in the prawn curing factories of Gujarat and Maharashtra are exposed. Their cruel fate has caught the imagination of well-intentioned social scientists and social workers, and they have published a number of reports about these girls’ working and living conditions (see Anonymous 1984; Saradamoni 1989). Having read that many girls hailed from fishing villages adjoining the one where I have been doing fieldwork for some time now, I was naturally curious to know more about them. I was particularly struck by the fact that a rural society that I had known to be extremely disinclined to send girls to work for wages beyond the immediate vicinity of the home, would so suddenly turn out to be willing to release them to such distant and unknown employers.

This was indeed not so, as a few of the girls to whom I spoke in their homes during a study trip in July–August 1992, assured. The girls, many of whom had started work in the curing factories by the age of twelve, explained that they had had to take quite some pain to convince their fathers to let them go with neighbouring girls and women on their trip to North India. Most of the fathers had but reluctantly agreed to what they felt as a loss of status and did so only because they were too old or ill to work and had no grown-up sons who could help maintain the family.

The girls had been attracted by the stories of neighbours and friends whose work in the curing factories had procured them the means to help their families and earn their own dowries. The girls’ stories contrasted sharply with the image conveyed by newspapers and reports. Rather than of squalor and exploitation, they spoke of their enjoying working in the company of other


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girls, of the exciting bus journey across India, of the video show on Sunday, and above all of the respectability their income had gained them in their own homes.

When, somewhat taken aback, I enquired about the long nightly working hours mentioned by the reports, the girls explained that they undertook the trip to make as much money as possible and, being paid a piece rate, did therefore not object to long working hours. Even the dormitory – described by the reports as a single hall without beds in which the girls were locked up at night – they felt to be a nice and safe place to sleep in.

Sitting with them in their father’s house I indeed wondered if the journalists and social scientists who wrote so emphatically about their plight had ever seriously considered whether village life offered the girls a life more suitable for their harmonious growth. Or, for that matter, whether the living and working conditions of the girls who stayed at home to work by the side of their mothers in making coir yarn or drying fish, and had hardly any possibility at all to obtain nutritious food or earn their own dowries, were any better than those of the migrant girls.

Why did public opinion not feel outraged about the lives of the girls in the villages, and why was there such an outcry about the enterprising ones who sought to escape from poverty by securing their own earnings and seemed quite happy with this possibility? As I will discuss in this paper, work is only perceived to be exploitative when, regardless of the consequences for the individual child, it is considered a threat to what society views as normal socialisation. The underlying assumption of this belief is that, even under conditions of extreme indigence, the family would still be able to protect its children from excessive drudgery and provide them with a space for healthy development. It is my contention that this belief is simply false.

In the study of children’s work it is common usage to make a distinction between work performed in the context of the family and work performed in the labour market. This distinction, however obvious it may appear, has far-reaching consequences, for it is critically connected to the notion of the exploitation of children’s work. It is only when a child is directly engaged as cheap labour by the market and is paid a wage, however nominal, that both labour experts and the lay public agree to feel that s/he is exploited. The child that works by the side of his/her parents is unlikely to be considered to be exploited, for the reason that the main preoccupation of parents would be their children’s training and socialization. Parents are believed to naturally protect the children who work by their side from excessive drudgery and to allow them sufficient scope for education and leisure. The daily tasks performed by children to help their parents, as long as they remain unremunerated, are perceived as the expression of an essential obligation that ensures their normal socialisation.

To acknowledge this distinction between non-exploitative and exploitative work, it has become common practice to use two notions: that of children’s work and that of child labour, with the understanding that only the latter is