

Labour Without Love

:: Shuchi Kapoor

The recent amendment to the Child Labour Law may be pegging at the socio-economic fabric of our times, but what it actually camouflages is a well-known reality – that a third-world nation with 179.6 million under the poverty line must make its poor children work if it needs to sustain itself. A law that forbade children to be employed in any industry under 14 years of age has now bent itself a little and allows them to work in family-run enterprises and in the audio-visual industry. Except the circus, of course. Which means that after-school hours and vacations will no longer be meant for fun and frolic, but for shouldering the responsibility of helping the fastest growing economy maintain its pace. If it doesn't already cut a sorry figure that there is a need to have a Right to Education Act in this country, this amendment further ensures that poor children continue to work. Because many situations like scavenging or salt farming wouldn't fall under the premise of being hazardous (the amendment ensures that children below 14 can work in family enterprises that do not involve a hazardous occupation). In ways more than one it keeps the caste system intact as accurately pointed out by Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, children's rights activist and co-founder of HAQ, which works for protection of child rights, as it ensures that a potter's son/daughter is destined to remain a potter, a weaver's child a weaver and so on.

The Rann of Kutch, a desert-marsh and the biggest salt producer of India, is one such stark example. While most families living and working out of the Rann send their children to live with the relatives in nearby villages, there are many who often keep a child or two back, in order to have an extra pair of hands to meet ends.

This series shot at the start of the peak season, when the heat is excruciating but perfect to produce more salt, reflects on the two-facedness of the law-makers in this country. There is nothing of a social life or even basic amenities for these families and children step into their parents' shoes so that we can have salt on our tables.

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1 Children exposed to the harshness of the sun and salt often have severe skin issues; 2 Most children working in the salt pans of Kutch have either dropped out of school or haven't been to one. They would rather follow their fathers' footsteps than get an education which is not valid for the kind of work they will continue to do; 3 Parvati, aged 12, making salt in the blinding heat as her parents take a break for tea. She doesn't want to get married as she worries as to who would take care of her parents if she is gone; 4 While most people have been given rubber boots by the government, many say it is a pair per family, when almost all members are contributing to making salt; 5 Most young girls are well trained to shoulder the responsibilities at home and at work; 6 Life in a desert marsh is devoid of a social life, friends or neighbours for miles. A young boy bicycles in a vast expanse of arid nothingness