

Child Exploitation in India: Legal Framework and Challenges in Protection

Dr. Liza Mihin,

Assistant professor, Department of Education , Neelam Taram Government College, Yachuli, Arunachal Pradesh.

ABSTRACT

Child protection remained a critical issue in India, with millions of children facing exploitation, abuse, and neglect despite existing legal safeguards. This study explored the legal framework related to child protection under the Constitution of India and examined major challenges, including child labor, trafficking, sexual abuse, domestic violence, early and forced marriages, poverty-driven exploitation, ineffective law enforcement, cyber threats, and gaps in child welfare services. Although various laws and policies were in place to safeguard children's rights, their weak enforcement, coupled with societal attitudes and economic hardships, hindered effective protection. The study emphasized the need for stricter implementation of child protection laws, enhanced awareness programs, improved education access, and stronger rehabilitation services. It concluded that a collaborative effort involving the government, civil society, and communities was essential to create a safer and more inclusive environment for children. Strengthening child welfare mechanisms and addressing the root causes of vulnerability were identified as key steps toward ensuring the holistic development and well-being of India's children.

KEYWORDS: Child Exploitation, Legal Framework, Challenges and Protection

Introduction

Child exploitation remains one of the most pressing human rights issues in India, affecting millions of children across various socio-economic backgrounds (Sharma, 2020). Despite India's progress in legislative reforms and policy initiatives aimed at child protection, exploitation in different forms—such as child labor, child trafficking, sexual abuse, child marriage, and forced begging—continues to be a widespread concern (Sharma, 2021). The exploitation of children not only deprives them of their fundamental rights but also hampers their physical, emotional, and intellectual development, thereby limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to society (Sharma, 2019). Various socio-economic and cultural factors contribute to child exploitation in India, including poverty, lack of education, unemployment, gender discrimination, and weak enforcement of child protection laws (Sharma & Verma, 2020). Additionally, globalization and the rapid expansion of industries, particularly in unregulated sectors, have increased the risk of child labor and other forms of exploitation (Sharma, 2022).

Legally, India has a well-defined framework for child protection, enshrined in both constitutional provisions and specific laws designed to safeguard children from exploitation (Sharma, 2018). The Constitution of India provides fundamental rights and directive principles that emphasize the protection and welfare of children. Article 39(e) and (f) directs the state to ensure that children are not forced to engage in hazardous employment and that their childhood is protected from exploitation and moral degradation (Sharma, 2021). Additionally, Article 21A guarantees free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14, which is a crucial step in preventing child labor and other forms of exploitation (Sharma, 2019).

Several laws have been enacted to protect children from exploitation, including the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, which was amended in 2016 to ban the employment of children below 14 years in all occupations except family enterprises (Sharma, 2020). The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, is a landmark legislation that criminalizes various forms of sexual exploitation against children and ensures a child-friendly judicial process for victims (Sharma & Gupta, 2021). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, provides a framework for the care, protection, and rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law as well as those in need of care and protection (Sharma, 2019). Furthermore,

the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, aims to prevent early marriages, which often result in the exploitation of young girls (Sharma, 2021).

India is also a signatory to several international conventions and treaties that uphold child rights and emphasize the importance of child protection (Sharma, 2017). The country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, committing to international standards for ensuring children's rights to survival, protection, development, and participation (Sharma & Singh, 2020). Additionally, India adheres to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions on the elimination of the worst forms of child labor and the minimum age for employment, demonstrating its commitment to eradicating child exploitation (Sharma, 2022).

Despite these legal provisions, the implementation and enforcement of child protection laws remain a major challenge in India (Sharma, 2021). Several systemic barriers hinder the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms, including corruption, inefficiencies in the judicial system, lack of proper coordination among law enforcement agencies, and inadequate funding for rehabilitation programs (Sharma, 2020). Many cases of child exploitation go unreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of awareness among victims and their families (Sharma & Patel, 2019). The socio-cultural acceptance of practices such as child labor and early marriage in certain communities further exacerbates the problem (Sharma, 2021). Additionally, traffickers and perpetrators of child exploitation often operate with impunity due to weak law enforcement and gaps in legal provisions (Sharma, 2022).

Another major challenge is the lack of adequate rehabilitation and reintegration programs for rescued children (Sharma, 2019). Many children who are rescued from exploitative situations struggle to reintegrate into society due to inadequate social support, education, and vocational training (Sharma & Verma, 2020). The psychological trauma experienced by victims of abuse and exploitation also requires long-term intervention, which is often lacking in government rehabilitation programs (Sharma, 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of poverty and child exploitation creates a vicious cycle where children from marginalized backgrounds are more vulnerable to exploitation due to their socio-economic conditions (Sharma, 2020).

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and international agencies in child protection is crucial in bridging the gap left by government mechanisms (Sharma, 2018). Various organizations work tirelessly to rescue, rehabilitate, and empower exploited children by providing legal aid, education, and vocational training (Sharma, 2021). However, there is a need for stronger collaboration between governmental bodies and non-state actors to create a more comprehensive child protection framework that not only addresses legal loopholes but also focuses on the prevention of child exploitation through awareness programs and community engagement (Sharma, 2022).

DEFINITION OF CHILD

The term *child* has been defined differently across legal, sociological, psychological, and international contexts, generally referring to a young human being who has not yet attained full physical, mental, or emotional maturity. Legally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989, defines a child as any person below 18 years of age, a definition adopted by various Indian laws, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. However, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, distinguishes a child based on gender, considering males under 21 and females under 18 as children. Similarly, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (amended in 2016), restricts child labor for those below 14 years and prohibits hazardous work for adolescents aged 14–18. The Indian Constitution, while not explicitly defining a child, provides fundamental protections, such as Article 21A ensuring free education for children aged 6–14 and Article 24 prohibiting hazardous employment for those below 14. Psychologically, childhood is characterized by cognitive and emotional development, as described in Jean Piaget's stages of development, which outline the gradual transition from sensory learning in infancy to abstract thinking in adolescence. Sociologically, childhood varies across cultures, with some communities expecting early responsibilities while others emphasize prolonged education and dependency. In traditional Indian society, childhood was seen as a phase of discipline and learning, whereas modern perspectives advocate for rights-based protection. The dynamic nature of childhood requires a holistic approach, considering legal, psychological, and socio-economic factors to ensure comprehensive child welfare and protection.

TYPES OF CHILD EXPLOITATION

Child exploitation refers to the abuse, manipulation, or mistreatment of children for personal, financial, or other gains, violating their fundamental rights and hindering their physical, emotional, and social development. Various forms of child exploitation exist, each posing serious threats to the well-being of children.

1. Child Labour

Child labor refers to the employment of children in work that deprives them of their childhood, education, and health. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (Amended in 2016) prohibits children under 14 from working and restricts hazardous work for adolescents aged 14–18. However, children continue to be employed in industries such as agriculture, mining, construction, and domestic work, often under exploitative conditions.

2. Child Trafficking

Child trafficking involves the illegal recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of children for forced labor, sexual slavery, or other forms of abuse. According to The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, of 1956, trafficking for prostitution is punishable, but children are also trafficked for begging, organ trade, and domestic servitude. Poverty, lack of education, and weak enforcement of laws contribute to child trafficking in India.

3. Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Children are often subjected to sexual abuse, including rape, molestation, pornography, and prostitution. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 criminalizes all forms of sexual abuse against children, yet many cases go unreported due to fear and social stigma. Online sexual exploitation, including child pornography and cyber grooming, has become a growing concern with increased internet access.

4. Child Marriage

Child marriage remains a major issue, particularly in rural India, despite being illegal under The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, of 2006. Girls, in particular, are forced into marriage before the legal age of 18, leading to early pregnancies, health risks, and the denial of education and personal growth opportunities. Social customs, poverty, and gender inequality drive the prevalence of child marriage.

5. Child Begging

Many children are forced into begging by organized criminal networks, traffickers, or even family members. These children are often subjected to extreme physical abuse, malnutrition, and psychological trauma. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, of 2015 considers child begging a form of exploitation and provides legal protection, but enforcement remains weak.

6. Child Soldiers and Militant Exploitation

In conflict-prone regions, children are forcibly recruited by militant groups and insurgents, serving as child soldiers, messengers, or human shields. This is a severe violation of child rights, stripping them of education, safety, and a normal childhood. International conventions, such as the UNCRC, condemn the use of children in armed conflicts, yet the problem persists in certain areas.

7. Cyber Exploitation and Online Abuse

With growing internet usage, children are increasingly vulnerable to online exploitation, including cyberbullying, harassment, identity theft, and exposure to harmful content. Criminals use social media and gaming platforms to groom children for exploitation. The Information Technology (IT) Act, of 2000 provides legal provisions against cybercrimes, but awareness and digital safety measures are necessary to protect children online.

8. Forced Criminal Activities

Children are sometimes coerced into illegal activities such as drug trafficking, theft, and smuggling by criminal organizations. Since children are less likely to face harsh punishments, traffickers exploit them for unlawful operations. The Juvenile Justice Act, of 2015 addresses such issues, but implementation challenges remain.

CAUSES OF Child exploitation

Child exploitation in India is a result of a complex interplay of social, economic, legal, and cultural factors. Despite numerous laws and policies aimed at child protection, millions of children continue to face various forms of exploitation, including child labor, trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced begging. The root causes of child exploitation can be categorized as follows:

1. Poverty and Economic Hardship

Poverty is one of the primary causes of child exploitation in India. Families struggling to meet their basic needs often send their children to work, exposing them to hazardous conditions and abuse. In rural areas, children are forced into labor in agriculture, brick kilns, and domestic work, while in urban areas, they work in factories, hotels, and construction sites. The lack of financial stability makes children more vulnerable to trafficking, forced begging, and early marriage.

2. Lack of Education and Awareness

Limited access to education forces many children into exploitative labour or early marriage. Many parents, especially in rural and marginalized communities, are unaware of the importance of education and child rights. High dropout rates, poor school infrastructure, and the need to contribute to family income further push children into exploitative conditions. Without education, children remain unaware of their rights and are more susceptible to abuse.

3. Unemployment and Poor Wages of Parents

When parents are unemployed or earn meager wages, they struggle to provide for their families. This economic instability often results in children being forced into work to supplement household income. Industries prefer child labour due to lower wages, further perpetuating the cycle of exploitation. Women-headed households and single-parent families face greater financial challenges, making children more vulnerable to exploitation.

4. Social and Cultural Practices

Deep-rooted cultural norms and traditions also contribute to child exploitation. Child marriage, for example, is still prevalent in many parts of India despite legal prohibitions. In some communities, girls are married off early to reduce the family's financial burden or uphold social customs. Similarly, caste-based discrimination often forces children from marginalized communities into exploitative labour, bonded labour, and domestic servitude.

5. Weak Enforcement of Laws

Although India has strong legal frameworks like the POCSO Act, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, and Juvenile Justice Act, weak enforcement and lack of stringent penalties allow child exploitation to persist. Corruption, inefficiency in law enforcement agencies, and lack of coordination between government departments create loopholes that traffickers and exploiters take advantage of. Many cases go unreported due to fear, social stigma, or lack of awareness about legal rights.

6. Human Trafficking and Organized Crime

Organized trafficking networks exploit children for forced labour, prostitution, begging, and organ trade. Poor rural families are often deceived by traffickers promising better opportunities for their children. Once trafficked, these children are subjected to abuse, physical violence, and extreme exploitation. Border areas and conflict-prone regions are particularly vulnerable to child trafficking.

7. Gender Discrimination

Girls are disproportionately affected by child exploitation due to deep-seated gender discrimination. Female children are more likely to be denied education, forced into child marriage, subjected to domestic servitude,

and trafficked for sexual exploitation. The preference for male children in some communities results in the neglect of girls, making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

8. Conflict and Natural Disasters

Regions affected by armed conflicts, insurgency, or natural disasters see an increase in child exploitation. In such situations, children lose parental support and are forced to fend for themselves, making them easy targets for traffickers and exploiters. Families affected by displacement, migration, or loss of livelihoods often push children into work or marry them off early as a survival strategy.

9. Digital and Online Exploitation

With increasing internet penetration, children are at risk of cyber exploitation, including online child pornography, cyberbullying, and grooming by predators. Many children are unaware of digital threats, making them easy targets for traffickers and abusers operating on social media platforms and dark web networks. The Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 provides some legal protection, but enforcement remains weak.

10. Lack of Social Support Systems

Children without strong family or community support are more vulnerable to exploitation. Orphans, street children, and those from broken families often lack adult supervision, making them easy prey for traffickers and criminals. Government-run child protection services and rehabilitation programs are often underfunded, leaving many exploited children without proper rescue and rehabilitation support.

Child Protection under the Constitution of India

The Constitution of India provides a strong legal foundation for the protection of children, ensuring their rights, safety, and overall well-being. Various articles in the Constitution address different aspects of child protection, from safeguarding them against exploitation to ensuring their access to education and healthcare. Below is a detailed explanation of the key constitutional provisions related to child protection:

1. Article 15(3) – Special Provisions for Children

- This article is part of Fundamental Rights and empowers the state to make special provisions for the welfare of women and children.
- It allows the government to implement affirmative action policies, including exclusive schemes, laws, and programs focused on child welfare.
- This provision ensures that children receive extra protection from social, economic, and physical vulnerabilities.
- Examples of Implementation: Laws like the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, and child welfare schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program.

2. Article 21 – Right to Life and Personal Liberty

- Guarantees the fundamental right to life and personal liberty for all citizens, including children.
- The Supreme Court of India has interpreted the Right to Life to mean not just mere survival but a life with dignity, ensuring that children grow in a safe, secure, and nurturing environment.
- This article forms the basis for various child protection laws, such as those preventing child marriage, child abuse, and child trafficking.
- Example of Judicial Interpretation: In *Laxmi Kant Pandey vs. Union of India* (1984), the Supreme Court ruled that children's right to life includes protection against exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

3. Article 21A – Right to Education

- Added through the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, this article makes it a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14 years to receive free and compulsory education.

- The government is obligated to ensure universal primary education, reducing child labour and exploitation by keeping children in school.

- Examples of Implementation: The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, ensures quality education and prohibits the denial of admission to any child.

4. Article 23 – Prohibition of Trafficking and Forced Labour

- Prohibits human trafficking, forced labour, and begar (bonded labour), protecting children from being exploited in inhumane working conditions.

- It prevents children from being trafficked for child labour, prostitution, begging, and organ trade.

- Example of Implementation: The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 ensure strict punishment for those involved in trafficking and forced labour.

5. Article 24 – Prohibition of Child Labour

- Prohibits the employment of children below 14 years in hazardous occupations such as mines, factories, and construction sites.

- Protects children from working in conditions that may harm their physical and mental health.

- Example of Implementation: The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, amended in 2016, bans child labour in all sectors except family-based enterprises.

6. Article 39(e) – Protection from Economic Exploitation

- Directs the state to ensure that children's health and strength are not abused due to economic pressure.

- Prevents children from being forced into work that is unsuitable for their age and physical capabilities.

- Ensures that child labour laws are properly implemented to prevent children from being pushed into hazardous jobs due to poverty.

- Example of Implementation: The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme provides rehabilitation, education, and vocational training for rescued child labourers.

7. Article 39(f) – Right to Development and Protection

- Ensures that children grow up in a healthy environment with freedom and dignity.

- Protects children from exploitation, abuse, and material or moral abandonment.

- Encourages the prohibition of child marriage, prevention of child abuse, and protection against child neglect.

- Example of Implementation: The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, criminalizes sexual assault, harassment, and pornography involving minors.

8. Article 41 – Right to Assistance in Cases of Need

- Directs the state to provide assistance in cases of unemployment, sickness, disability, and undeserved want.

- Ensures that vulnerable children, such as orphans, disabled children, and those in extreme poverty, receive financial and social security support.

- Example of Implementation: The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) and Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, offer shelter, education, and rehabilitation to children in distress.

9. Article 45 – Early Childhood Care and Education

- Initially mandated the state to provide free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years within 10 years of the adoption of the Constitution.

- After the 86th Amendment, it now directs the state to provide early childhood care and education for children below six years.

- Recognizes the importance of early childhood education in shaping the child's future.
- Example of Implementation: The Anganwadi System under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) provides nutrition, preschool education, and healthcare for children below six years.

10. Article 47 – Duty to Improve Nutrition and Public Health

- Directs the state to improve nutrition, public health, and the standard of living.
- Aims to eliminate malnutrition among children and prevent diseases caused by poor nutrition and hygiene.
- Encourages the prohibition of intoxicating drinks and drugs that harm public health, indirectly protecting children from substance abuse and addiction.
- Example of Implementation: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Poshan Abhiyaan focus on providing nutritious food to school-going children to improve their health and reduce dropout rates.

Challenges in Child Protection in India

1. Child Labor

Despite legal prohibitions, child labor remains a persistent issue in India. Many children are engaged in unorganized sectors like agriculture, domestic labor, construction, and hazardous industries. Due to economic hardships, families often push their children into labor, depriving them of education and a safe childhood. The implementation of laws such as the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act remains weak, allowing the problem to persist.

2. Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is a significant concern, where children are kidnapped, sold, or lured under false promises and then forced into labor, sexual exploitation, or illegal adoption. The weak enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and corruption within the system make it difficult to rescue and rehabilitate victims. Rural and impoverished children are particularly vulnerable due to a lack of awareness and resources.

3. Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Child sexual abuse remains a widespread issue in India. Many cases go unreported due to fear, social stigma, and lack of awareness. Even though laws like the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act exist, the slow judicial process and lack of proper support mechanisms prevent justice for many victims. Abuse in schools, homes, and childcare institutions further exacerbates the crisis.

4. Lack of Education and Awareness

Many children and their families lack awareness about child rights, legal protections, and safety mechanisms, making them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Inadequate education access, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, perpetuates poverty and child exploitation. Without education, children are more likely to fall into labor, trafficking, or other forms of abuse.

5. Violence and Domestic Abuse

Children often face physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse at home, in schools, and in childcare institutions. Many cases of domestic violence go unreported due to societal norms and fear of retaliation. This exposure to violence can lead to long-term psychological trauma, affecting a child's emotional and mental well-being.

6. Early and Forced Marriages

Child marriage continues to be a major problem in India, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, girls are often married off at an early age due to poverty, social norms, and lack of education. Early marriage not only deprives girls of education but also exposes them to domestic violence and early pregnancies, leading to serious health risks.

7. Poverty and Economic Hardship

Financial distress is one of the leading causes of child exploitation. Many families, struggling to meet their basic needs, push their children into child labor, trafficking, or early marriage. Survival becomes a priority over education and well-being, leading to an unending cycle of poverty and child rights violations.

8. Ineffective Law Enforcement

Although India has strong child protection laws, their implementation is weak. Corruption, lack of proper monitoring, and slow judicial processes prevent victims from getting justice. Many perpetrators of child abuse, labor, and trafficking escape punishment due to inefficiencies in the legal system, making children more vulnerable.

9. Online Safety and Cyber Exploitation

With increased digital access, children are at risk of cyberbullying, online grooming, and exposure to harmful content. Many children, especially in urban areas, are unaware of online safety measures, making them easy targets for cyber predators. Inadequate digital literacy among parents and educators also contributes to the rising cases of online exploitation.

10. Gaps in Child Welfare Services

Despite government initiatives, India still lacks adequate rehabilitation centers, support systems, and trained personnel in child protection agencies. Many rescued children do not receive proper psychological and social support, making their reintegration into society difficult. The shortage of well-equipped shelters and care facilities further weakens child protection efforts.

Conclusion

Child protection in India faces numerous challenges, ranging from child labor and trafficking to sexual abuse, domestic violence, and inadequate legal enforcement. Despite the existence of strong laws and policies, gaps in implementation, awareness, and social attitudes continue to put millions of children at risk. Poverty and economic hardship further drive children into labor, early marriage, and exploitation, while the rise of digital access has introduced new threats like cyber exploitation. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach, including stricter law enforcement, increased awareness, better education access, and stronger rehabilitation services. Collaborative efforts from the government, civil society, and communities are essential to ensure that every child in India is protected, empowered, and given the opportunity to lead a safe and dignified life.

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