

Child Labour in History: A Study of Cotton Textile Industry of Bombay

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Child labour has been employed in India since time immemorial. But this subject came up for discussion after the beginning of modern industry, particularly the cotton textile industry in Bombay. The British industrialists spread exaggerated stories regarding the working conditions of child labourers. The government appointed commissions to make enquiries. It took action on their recommendations. It tried to ensure that very young children were not employed. Certifying doctors were to give certificates regarding their age. This stopped the employment of young children but up to a limit. Some millowners opened schools for the education of child labourers. But their efforts were not much of a success. The number of child labourers declined in 1920s.

I Introduction

Child labour has been employed in India since time immemorial. But this subject came up for discussion after the beginning of modern industry, particularly the cotton textile industry in Bombay. Children were employed in it from early years. One reason for this was the poverty of the people. K.A. Keluskar, Secretary of the Maratha Aikyeekhoo Sabha, Bombay wrote to the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908, "Parents and other relatives of children are anxious to see their children begin to support themselves, as they are too poor to feed them. So it is but natural that they do not look to the health or age of the child whom they put to work."¹ Another reason for the employment of child labour was that for many years after the establishment of the industry, there was no institution imparting technical education so that adults were as much ignorant of spinning and weaving as children. As W.H. Sharp, Director of Public Instruction, Bombay, wrote, "Up to 1888 there was no school in the Bombay Presidency where technical education was given on a scientific basis, and the only places where the art of spinning and weaving could be learnt were the mills and handloom factories." At first only elementary knowledge of spinning and

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¹ *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908, Vol. 2, Evidence* (Simla: Government Central Branch Press, 1908), p. 88 (Henceforth referred to as *Morison Commission Report*).