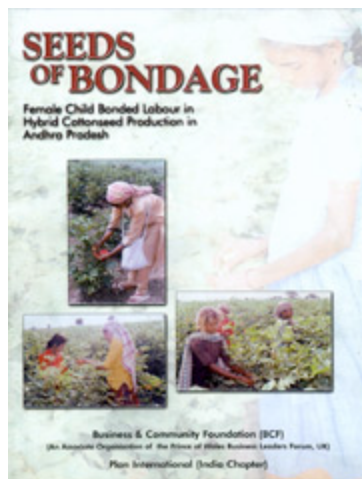


Seeds of Bondage



The present report is based on the detailed study carried out by the author on the working conditions of children in seven mandals of Telangana and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, which was supported by Business and Community Foundation as part of its fellowship programme for Corporate Partnerships.

The study estimated that in India nearly 4 lakh female children, in the age group of 7-14 years, are employed in cottonseed fields, in which AP alone accounted for nearly 2.5 lakhs. This number is far greater than the total number of children employed in carpet, glass bangles, gem polishing and limestone industries put together in India. Child labour in these industries does not exceed 25%, with a majority of them being boys; whereas in cottonseed female child labour constitutes about 90% of the labour force.

The study also showed that the children work on long-term contract basis, with low wages and long working hours because their parents had either taken loans or advances from the seed producers (more often it is thrust upon them) and thus are forced to live in a debt trap for years. About 95% of the children employed in the study area come under this category of debt bondage.

On average children are paid about 70% of the adult female and 45% of the adult male wage rates. When it is realized that the local child labour is insufficient, the seed producers bring children from neighbouring areas. These children are put in camps and given food.

In order to extract more work from children, the employers are resorting to new methods of exploitation by offering several incentives such as chocolates, biscuits, Tiffin-boxes, bangles, ribbons, and occasional film shows. There are certain wrong notions being intentionally spread by the employers to avoid adult labour, like citing the age-old superstition that it is inauspicious for women to work during menstruation. The female children are pliable and also endure long working hours.

Study found that the work in cottonseed fields seem to pose long-term health problems for girls because of their constant exposure to poisonous pesticides used to control pests. Another dimension, which affects the female children, is literacy. About 60% of the children working in cottonseed fields in the study area are school dropouts.

Contrary to popular belief, the study showed that poverty is not the reason for child labour, but the absence of a strong social norm against employing children and governmental response in providing facilities.