

Original article

UNDERSTANDING HEALTH AND ILLNESS AMONG CHILD WORKERS IN STONE CRUSHING SECTOR OF BALASAN RIVER BASIN, DARJEELING DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

‘Health is wealth’ so runs the proverb. Every member of a society has right to get proper health care facilities as well as healthy environment and in this context as a human being children have right to enjoy the same. It is said that the future of a society depends upon the children; hence it is very much necessary to provide better health care facilities to them. But today, the violation of child right to health is widely rampant in our society and in this context child work is a burning example which leads to their physical as well as psychological deformities. Early onset of working activity has a negative impact on their health. Working involvement of children in hazardous sectors is liable to ill-health and may also have effects on their development. So in this perspective, the influence of work on health of working children is a matter of grave concern. The present study mainly highlights the health status of working children in the stone crushing sector of Balasan River basin, Darjeeling district, West Bengal.

Key words: Health, Illness, Workers, Child, Stone crushing, Darjeeling

INTRODUCTION

‘Health is wealth’ so runs the proverb. As said by WHO health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. According to Article 12, everyone has right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Saksena, 1999: 250). The health of man or of a nation is a concept which requires recognition that well-being depends upon attention to all the key social, political and economic variables that affect the life of man (Howard, 1972: 75).

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The health of the community is based upon the ideas, attitudes and behaviour patterns of the individual and his family, for these determines what he will or will not, or cannot, except or accept from those who make his health their professional concern. The health attitudes and behaviour of a family are related to its position in the social class hierarchy of the community, and are significantly affected by the prescriptions and proscriptions regarding health shared by those who are members of the same class (Koos, 1954: 156-160). Every member of a society has right to get proper health care facilities as well as healthy environment and in this context as a human being children have right to enjoy the same. Children represent the future, and ensuring their healthy growth and development ought to be a prime concern of all societies. Health is an important indicator to realize the socio-economic condition of a society or community. It is said that the future of a society depends upon the children; hence it is very much necessary to provide better health care facilities to them. Thus, the children must be provided healthy and hazardous free life for the well-being of a society, as we all know an unhealthy child will grow up into an unhealthy adult. So, the right to survival for every child is important to us. But today, the violation of child right to health is widely rampant in our society and in this context child work is a burning example of violation of child rights which leads to their physical as well as psychological deformities. Early onset of working activity has a negative impact on their health. Working involvement of children in hazardous sectors is liable to ill-health and may also have effects on their development. So in this perspective, the influence of work on health of working children is a matter of grave concern in the present day. However, the present study mainly highlights the health status of working children in the stone crushing sector of Balasan River basin, Darjeeling district, West Bengal.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the health condition and health care practices of child workers.
2. To understand the working condition and environment.

METHODOLOGY:

The area was selected on the basis of pilot survey and observation. The village namely Purba Rangia was selected which was located on Balasan River basin adjacent to

Siliguri town under Matigara block, Darjeeling district, West Bengal. The findings are based on primary as well as secondary data. Primary data were collected through several methods and techniques like interview, case study, observation, group discussion and preliminary census schedule.

AREA AND PEOPLE:

The area under study namely Purba Rangia village located at Balasan River basin adjacent to Siliguri town and lies at the foothill region of the Himalayas. The River Balasan downwards from Himalayas with natural resources to a great extent like sands, stones, boulders etc. which are used as the raw materials for urban constructions and it emerged out as a prime earning source for the people working in the stone field. Primarily the stone based occupation was the backbone of economy of the studied people. It was such type of economic sector where there was no need of monetary investment to do it. The stone based work was of various types such as stone collection, sand gathering, stone crushing, truck loading and so on. The Balasan River bed provided them the land to establish a new residence. All the studied families in the village were migrants who came from the adjoining districts, states and country also. It is surprising that a large number of studied families migrated from Bangladesh. Several castes, communities and ethnic groups lived in the studied village but most of them belonged to Rajbanshi community, a chief scheduled caste of North Bengal. According to Census, 2011 total number of working children in West Bengal is 234275 (Census, 2011). In the studied area total 377 child workers were found from 250 families of which the males were 186 (49.43%) and females were 191(50.66%).

HEALTH STATUS OF WORKING CHILDREN:

Case Study 1:Tulsi Roy was a 14 years aged Rajbanshi boy. In his family he had his father, mother and a younger brother and sister. All the family members were involved in stone based work. Tulsi did both stone collection and stone crushing activities. He was busy with work in the stone field for all the year round ignoring the fact of scorching heat of summer and biting cold of winter. Due to daylong hard manual labour he often felt severe physical pain in his whole body. During winter he got weaker by acute physical pain and during summer the scorching heat of summer with extreme hunger made him weak very much. His

left eye got injured badly with stone chips due to lack of concentration to work and for treatment he went to untrained local quack. But due to wrong treatment his injurious eye became swelled up with burning sensation and he was referred to North Bengal Medical College. But they had not the capacity to spend money for necessary diagnostic tests and also for purchasing doctors' prescribed medicines. As a result to purchase the same they had to take loan from the local *samiti* (co-operative society). He had to collect stones and sands from the river and therefore, his clothes got drenched but he had to work in wet clothes throughout the day and as a consequence, he was suffering from fever, cough and cold and headache almost throughout the year. Even, owing to long touch with water he had an uncomfortable feeling on his skin that made him want to scratch. But he could not see the doctor due to unaffordable expense. He had to wake up very early in the morning with the ray of sunup and after having little breakfast with tea and pup rice he went to the stone field. He had to do a continuous hard work until lunch break. Though, Tulsi could eat meal twice in a day but it was insufficient and poor nutritious as he could eat rice with pulses and little amount of vegetable curry. Due to hard manual labour with insufficient and less nutritious food he became very weak. Besides these, due to busy working schedule he became irregular in bathing and hardly used shampoo or any other cleaning agents during bathing. His unclean bathing might have caused skin problem as he had an uncomfortable feeling on his skin. In fact, lack of sanitation, lack of proper care, inattention of parents, and due to day long hard manual work it was impossible for him to maintain a good standard of personal hygiene. The unhygienic food habit and also for drinking polluted water without filtering or boiling might have resulted in dysentery and diarrhoea. Apart from these, he was suffering from breathing problem. In the stone field the dust emitted out from the broken up stones which was being inhaled through respiration that might have resulted in breathing problem. Ultimately the working involvement and improper caring affected his health badly.

Case Study 2: Champalata Barman was a 13 years old girl belonged to Rajbanshi community. In her family she had her father, mother, two younger sisters and an elder brother. She had been working since she was eight years old. Champalata had to do work in the stone field throughout the day without any adequate rest. The untiring labour made her body painful. Moreover, often she made herself injured with stone chips and iron implements. The parents could not give her a full feed and she felt uneasiness due to extreme hunger. She could hardly

eat meal twice in a day but it was insufficient and less nutritious. She became very weak and she was suffering from malnutrition. She used to wake up very early in the morning and went to the stone field after morning fresh and necessary domestic chores. She usually returned home with her parents in the evening when the work was over for the day. They mainly took rice with pulses and little amount of vegetable curry. They could not afford to accumulate the least expensive animal proteins. She took her lunch directly in unhygienic stone field and used the river water for drinking. There was no water source in their house and due to this fact Champalata and her family had to depend upon both neighbour's uncovered well and river water for drinking, bathing and other domestic purposes. But they did not take any precautionary measures such as boiling and filtering which might have resulted in diarrhoea and dysentery. She had to do work for long in touch of river water for the collection of stones and boulders from the river. She was weak by fever, cough and cold, and headache. However, their dwelling house was broken and *kachha* type which was composed of the single little room. During rainy season the rain falling on leaky roof that made their house damp and the floor became muddy. Apart from these, due to busy working schedule Champalata could not maintain her personal hygiene as she was very much irregular in bathing, brushing up teeth, washing clothes etc. She became habituated with taking bath in the polluted river which might have resulted in a serious skin problem found to her.

In the studied area the scenario of health profile of working children revealed an unpleasant condition. The stone based work was the only way of making their living but their payment was not enough for living. Due to this fact the parents and their children had to do the work hard altogether throughout the day in the stone field. Most of the children had to work on an average 6 to 7 hours in a day and sometimes even more than that, which might have resulted in their inability to get adequate rest and sleep. The working atmosphere of Balasan River bed was very much polluted and unhygienic. They had to do the work all the year round paying no attention to biting cold of winter and scorching heat of summer. The hard manual work along with hazardous working condition might have resulted in various ill-healths such as skin disease, cold and cough, fever, physical injuries, body pain, giddiness, headache etc. were common to notice among them throughout the year. Thus, in the studied area all the working children were subjected to several health hazards. Their parents could

not provide better health and treatment to them on their little earnings. For the treatment of diseases and ailments they had to depend upon the local untrained quacks and traditional medicine men but they could not always get a proper treatment from them. They worked hard without any adequate rest for all the day in the stone field. This untiring hard labour in the stone field made their body painful and often they made themselves injured with blood secretion and mostly their eyes were used to be injured with stone chips and iron implements. But often the injured place became swelled up with burning sensation due to lack of proper treatment and care. They were referred to Matigara Primary Health Centre and North Bengal Medical College only when the condition became complex. But it was out of their capacity to pay for treatment for long days with necessary diagnostic tests. Due to unaffordable expense sometimes they could not complete the full course of doctors prescribed medicine and as a result, they had to stop treatment in the middle. Besides these, during crushing stones the dust emitted out from broken up stones which was repeatedly being inhaled through respiration that might have resulted in breathing problem found among them. Often they worked hungry in the stone field and due to this fact they became ailing more. They had a burning sensation in their stomach due to hunger. Their parents could not feed them to the fill. Though, they could eat meal twice a day but it was insufficient and less nutritious. They took meal with rice, pulses and little amount of vegetable curry. Due to financial constraint they could not afford to maintain a nutritious food diet as taking fish, meat, egg, milk and fruits was rarely possible factor which might have caused weakness found among them. They had to do the work for prolong hours in touch of river water for the collection of stones from the river. As a result, their dress got drenched but they did work in wet clothes throughout the day that made them very sick with fever, cold and cough, headache etc. Besides these, for drinking, bathing and other domestic purposes they had to use uncovered well and river water. But owing to lack of health consciousness and awareness they could not take any precautionary measures such as boiling and filtering which might have resulted in diarrhoea and dysentery found among them. Moreover, their living environment was very much poor and unhygienic with waste disposals and human excreta due to lack of sanitation and drainage system. Their dwelling houses were mostly *kachha* type and broken too. The houses were mostly composed of the single little room with muddy floor, made of wattle walls, corrugated tin roofs and devoid of proper ventilation. During rainy season the rain entered into the room through

leaky roof and cracked walls that made their houses damp and muddy which might have caused several ill health. Due to lack room they were found to cook inside the room that made their rooms smoky resulted in their eyes went to red and started watering. Apart from these, due to busy working schedule throughout the day they could not maintain their good standard of personal hygiene as they were very much irregular in bathing, brushing up teeth, washing clothes, frequency of changing clothes etc. that might have a serious impact on their health. Many children with ill health had to do the continuous hard work in the stone field throughout the day and due to this fact they became ailing more. However, due to aforesaid factors the health of the studied children got affected badly.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The working children in the studied area were weakened by various ill healths throughout the year. The working environment was very much poor and unhygienic. The hard work throughout the year in hazardous working condition made them very sick. Moreover, due to busy working they could not maintain their good standard of personal hygiene. Apart from these, they had to depend upon uncovered wells for drinking and other necessary household works and they also used the river water while in the stone field. Due to lack of health consciousness and awareness they did not take any precautionary measures like filtering, boiling etc. before using this water which might have caused several ill health like stomach problem, dysentery etc. In their daily diet they could manage rice, pulses and little amount of vegetable curry for twice a day. The parents could not give them a full feed. The insufficient food with hard manual labour might have resulted in malnutrition. The mentionable matter is that during work, often they made themselves injured with stone chips and iron implements. Moreover, their living environment was very much poor and unhygienic. The working children in the studied area had to suffer from various ill healths such as dysentery, diarrhoea, skin disease, fever, cold and cough, physical injuries, body pain, headache, weakness, breathing problem, and so on. For the treatment they had to depend upon both the untrained quacks of local medicinal shops and traditional medicine men because there was no health centre in their village. Due to poverty they could not meet the expense of proper medical checkup for long time and also could not purchase all the doctors prescribed medicines and therefore often they had to stop treatment in the middle. However,

it was the fact that the studied people and particularly the working children had to face a lot of problems in respect to health and treatment.

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