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CHILD LABOUR

Blood on silk

A large number of children work in appalling conditions in Karnataka's silk industry, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of the country's production of mulberry silk.

VINITA

THE beautiful silk sarees you buy often have on them the sweat and blood of children like Naushad.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



The body of Naushad at the Government Victoria Hospital in Bangalore.

Naushad, 12, died on November 14 (Children's Day), 2000, of 79 per cent burns sustained while working in a silk reeling unit in Ramanagaram, 48 km from Bangalore. His employers say he committed suicide, but several residents of the town allege that he was burnt to death.

The eldest child of Shafiullah and Kamarunissa, Naushad lived with his parents and six siblings in Yarab Nagar in the town. When he was nine he joined Dadu Fayaz's silk reeling unit as a "cocoon cook" for Rs.15 a day - for 11-hour's work that steamed his hands into a pulpy mass. Most children in the silk industry start working at the age of eight. "Children do all the dirty jobs, like killing and extracting the worms and cleaning up the waste. We adults would never do such things," says a worker in a silk factory. Most of the children are bonded to their employers, who would be recovering loans of around Rs.5,000 taken by their parents. Such repayments often mark an endless process.

According to Naushad's relatives and neighbours, some of whom went into hiding in the wake of the death in fear of Fayaz's men, the boy was locked up in a dingy room adjoining the factory shed for a fortnight. At work, he was allegedly tortured physically and emotionally for not reporting regularly. When Naushad cried to go home for Id-ul-Fitr on November 12, his employer was stated to have thrashed him. Naushad's ensuing sullenness apparently enraged his employer. Akbar, Naushad's co-worker, who was stealthily carrying *salna* (a soggy mixture of rice and dal) for Naushad for about four days before he died that Sunday, said that he used to see Naushad being beaten.

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A child worker loosens silk thread from boiling cocoons at a reeling unit in Ramanagaram. The process causes burns and blisters in the white of the hand.

Naushad was admitted to the Government Victoria Hospital, Bangalore, at 9:45 a.m. on November 13. He died that night at 1 a.m. The employer's men claim that the child

committed suicide by setting himself on fire after dousing himself with kerosene. Nanju nda Char, Assistant Sub-Inspector at the hospital police station, said: "It is an open and shut case, with no complications." The hospital's records state that Naushad was 12 years old, but Char refutes this, saying it was a mistake made by his family in the rush to admit the child. According to Char, Naushad was 17 years old.



Activists of the Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness (MAYA), a non-governmental organisation working in the area of child rights, allege that the employer's representatives are trying to hush up the case by promising money and at the same time extending threats to the bereaved parents. Naushad's mother admitted to MAYA activists that she was paid Rs.15,000 to tell the police and the hospital authorities that the 'accident' did not take place at the work place but at their home. She is under pressure from various quarters to stick to this version.

Children at work in the reeling sector. They are often made to work for more than 10 hours daily, with no rest days.

The situation in the area where Naushad's workplace is situated is tense. On Monday, November 20, 2000, representatives of MAYA met the Superintendent of Police and the Collector, Bangalore Rural district, to discuss the action taken in Naushad's case. Following the meeting the SP, S. Ramakrishna, visited Ramanagaram town. However, the employer is absconding since then.



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On November 25, after a public meeting at the taluk level, representatives of the Child Labour Eradication Committee (comprising individuals from organisations/groups of Channapatna and Ramanagaram taluks) submitted a memorandum to District Collector, G .S. Narayanswamy demanding the removal of child workers from the silk filature units and the prevention of children working in the industry.

WHAT circumstances would drive a 12 year-old to suicide? The working conditions in a reeling unit are appalling. According to the Government of Karnataka's *Human Development Report, 1999*, approximately 400,000 people make a living from the sericulture industry. Of these, an estimated 100,000 are children. The figures for the reeling segment, in which Naushad worked, are shocking. More than 80 per cent of silk reelers are under the age of 20, most of them between the age of 10 and 15.



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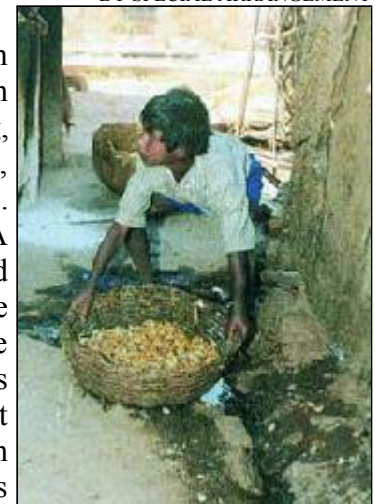
India, the world's second largest silk producer after China, accounts for just 5 per cent of the global silk market since the bulk of Indian silk thread and cloth are used domestically. Today Karnataka produces 9,000 tonnes out of the country's total production of 14,000 tonnes of mulberry silk. Sericulture is the source of livelihood for over 51,700 families in Channapatna, Ramanagaram, Magadi, and Kanakapura taluks of Bangalore Rural district, the major silk production centres of the State.

The majority of the working population in Ramanagaram taluk is employed in one or the other segment of the sericulture industry. Ramanagaram is the largest market for cocoons in Asia; 15 to 50 tonnes arrive at the Ramanagaram cocoon market daily. The Muslim community has traditionally accounted for 90 per cent of the reelers and reeling entrepreneurs, although non-Muslims have also entered the field in the last 20 years. More than 50 per cent of Ramanagaram's silk reelers are migrants from Kollegal, Yel andur and Chamrajnagar who came to the town in search of work in the last two decades.



The State government has promoted sericulture as a high employment, agro-based, income-generating industry. The industry comprises many processes - growing mulberry plants, rearing silkworms, producing cocoons, and reeling silk yarn. While the cultivation of mulberry and the rearing of silk worms are agricultural in character, the reeling, twisting and weaving of silk are distinctly industrial in nature. The reeling of cocoons is done in cottage establishments or in larger factories called filatures.

A study conducted by MAYA in 1999 showed that children work in all segments of the sericulture industry - in mulberry cultivation, cocoon rearing, winding, doubling, twisting, and re-reeling. Before the reeling process begins, the cocoons are boiled in hot water to kill the worms. Children do this work in damp and unhealthy conditions. A 1997 report on child labourers in World Bank-aided programmes described the process thus: "As reelers, the children dip their hands into scalding water and palpate the silk cocoons, sensing by touch whether the fine silk threads have loosened enough to be unwound. They are not permitted to use spoons instead of their hands when checking the boiling cocoons, on the theory that their hands can more easily discern when the threads are ready to reel.



At age 10, their palms and fingers are white with the thick tracks of fissures, burns and blisters."

The raw silk is processed in winding units by children between the ages of six and nine. They wind the silk into strands, a process which can cut their wet, sore hands. Injuries do not heal in these conditions. In the process of doubling the strands of silk, children in the age group six to 14 are employed. As in the case of winding, children must stand continuously and closely observe the yarn to ensure that it does not break or knot. The strain of this work often leads to backache and eye problems. Children in the age group of six to 10 years work in re-reeling units. Reeling units and machines are in fact designed in such a manner that only children can work on them.

Children work in the units for 10 to 12 hours and are paid daily wages fixed at the employer's discretion. Usually they are not paid even Rs. 10 a day. There are no weekly rest days or holidays. When there is no power supply, the children are made to work in the employer's homes.

The units are cramped, dark, wet and poorly ventilated, and often have small generators running inside, which release carbon monoxide and other noxious fumes. Complaining is taboo. "They beat us very hard with belts if we make a small mistake or if we come late to work. Often if we have a cut or bruise on our hands, we just have to daub some cream and get back to work. Otherwise they hit us on the head and sometimes even lock us up in the unit premises," a child worker told this writer.

Bronchial ailments, coughs, colds, persistent back pain, leg pain, asthma, lung infection and tuberculosis are endemic among child reelerers. Constant exposure to the dead worms and the stench causes dizziness and fever. The children are made to listen to loud music, ostensibly to mask the deafening noise of the machines. This often leads to deafness. "I have a constant problem of heavy breathing, cough, stomach ache, fever, headache, pus in my ears and dizziness," says a child. His eight-year-old sister complains of persistent leg pain, back pain and dizziness. Throughout the long working day, both drink up to eight cups of tea in order to ease the pangs of hunger.

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A cocoon cook. Most children in this sector work under conditions of bondage.

Some children also suffer from silk-related allergies. Having to stand throughout the day could lead to menstrual disorders in girl children.

Employers would argue that poverty forces the children to work in the silk industry. But Venkataraju, a silk unit owner in Sidlaghatta, admits that if he does not employ children, he would be running the unit at a loss. He says that children do not argue if they are paid between Rs.10 to Rs. 20. An adult would have to be paid Rs.60 to Rs.70 to do the same job.

MOST children in this sector work under conditions of bondage. Parents take an advance from their employers and give their children in bondage to their employers for several years until the loans are repaid. "When my children ask me now why I did not send them to school, I feel guilty. But then I was helpless. My elder daughter had to get married and we needed money. The schools in our areas were not teaching the children anything useful and I felt it was better that they start working and earning. Now I seem to have wasted their lives," says Akhila, a mother of three children.

Daulat, a child worker, feels his debt will never be repaid and he will have to toil for the rest of his life. He said that when cocoon supplies fell, his parents took petty loans again and thereby increased the principal debt amount. Meanwhile, they also send him to work at mango orchards until the silk units reopen.

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At a reeling unit in Ramanagaram.

Children in these areas spend their entire childhood in silk factories and find themselves uneducated, unskilled and unemployed as they enter adulthood. "I want to go to school... what is the use of this work? At least if I go to school, I can do something on my own instead of having to struggle like this," said Noor, a child worker. His friends Amjad, Rafiq and Zabi also said that they wished they could go to school one day.



According to the 1991 Census, there are 9.76 lakh working children in the State of which 49 per cent are girls. The participation rate of children in the age group of five to 14 years as full-time workers is 8.2 for boys and 6.5 for girls. For reeling and twisting, the ratio of child workers to adult workers in the industry is 2:1. In weaving, the employment of children is limited. The State's Human Development Report, 1999, argues that if every child who is not going to school is counted as a potential working child, then there are over three million working children in Karnataka.

The Department of Sericulture and other associated government bodies view their role as being limited to the technical aspects of the industry and research on the silk variety. When MAYA representatives met the technical service wing officer at Ramanagar am, he denied the existence of the child labour in the sericulture industry. He said that his office did not account for children in their lists.

The World Bank has actively promoted the silk industry over the last decade and a half, although in doing so it has largely ignored the firm foundation that child labour provides to the industry. From 1980 to 1989, the Bank loaned \$54 million to support the sericulture industry in Karnataka. In 1989, the Bank gave two more loans totalling \$177 million for the National Sericulture Project in Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. In 1994 and 1995, the World Bank loaned another \$3 million to modernise the silk industry and helped back a \$157 million project to upgrade the production facilities and quality of silk. Prior to the intervention of the World Bank, a study conducted by the Institute for Socio-Economic Change, Bangalore, a premier social science research institute, alarmed by the incidence of child labour in the sericulture industry, recommended that this aspect be included in the National Sericulture Project. However, subsequent intervention by the World Bank, the Swiss Development Corporation and others has been restricted to conducting studies, analyses and reports on the issue. In reality, little has been done by them to improve the conditions of the children and the families toiling in the industry.

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