

Child Labour in Indian Cotton Supply Chain *(With Special Focus on Hybrid Cottonseed Production)*



Davuluri Venkateswarlu
(Glocal Research Foundation)

ABOUT GLOCAL RESEARCH

- Glocal Research Foundation is a Hyderabad based research and policy advocacy institution actively involved issues related to child rights and education.
- Since 2000 actively involved in conducting research and net working with local and international NGOs campaigning on child labour in cotton supply chain focusing on hybrid cottonseed production.
- Active member in a state level joint forum of NGOs and seed companies in AP started in 2003 to address the child labour problem in cottonseed production.
- The research studies conducted by Glocal have received wide attention from different stakeholders and formed a basis for policy initiatives by Govt, UN agencies and seed industry.

OVERVIEW OF COTTON PRODUCTION- INDIA

- India has the distinction of having largest area under cotton cultivation and largest number of cotton farmers in the world.
- With about 22 million acres of land under cotton crop, India accounts for 22 % of world's total cotton area and 13% of global cotton production.
- One third of world's cotton farmers live and work in India
- Cotton accounts for 5% of the total cropped area in India

Child labour in cottonseed production in India

- Use of hybrid varieties in cotton is a Asia specific phenomenon
- About 80% of total cotton area in India is currently covered with hybrid varieties.
- After the introduction of BT cotton all the major seed companies in India have converted their hybrids into BT cotton hybrids. Currently BT cotton hybrids account for 70-75% total cotton hybrids in India
- Children are used in both commercial cotton and hybrid cottonseed production.
- There is a very limited Information available on the magnitude of child labour in cotton production but extensive use of child labour is reported in hybrid cotton seed production activities



State wise total area under cottonseed production in India (2006-07)

Name of the state	Total Area (acres)	% of area
Gujarat	25000	41.6\7%
Andhra Pradesh	16000	26.7%
Tamilnadu	9000	15%
Karnataka	5000	8.3%
Other states (Maharashtra, MP, Punjab etc)	5000	8.3%
Total India	60000	100%

Cottonseed production- contract farming

- Currently private seed companies both MNCs and Indian companies account for nearly 90% of the total cottonseed produced and marketed in the country
- Cottonseed production is carried out through contract farming.
- Seeds companies depend upon local farmers for seed production. They arrange seed buy back arrangements with local farmers through middlemen called 'seed organizers'.
- Although seed companies are not directly involved in the production process, they exert substantial control over farmers by supplying foundation seed, advancing production capital, fixing the procurement prices and through stipulating quality controls



Nature of work- Gender Division of Labour

- Cottonseed production is a labour intensive activity.
- Labour costs account for 55% of total production costs
- Seeds are produced through hand emasculation and pollination (cross pollination).
- Cross pollination is a vital task which account for nearly 90% of total work. The duration of cross pollination work is 80 to 100 days. During this time 10-15 labourers are required per acre every day to carry out this work.
- Children particularly girls are employed for cross pollination work.



Emasculation



Pollination



- **Emasculation and pollination work is done manually which alone requires 90% of total labour days and 45% of capital investment**
- **Children, particularly girls, are mostly employed for this activity**

Magnitude of child labour problem

- **During 2006-07 an estimated total number of 4,14,390 children (2,23,940 below 14 years and 1,90,450 are 15-18 age group) mostly girls were employed in cottonseed farms in India.**
- **Children constitute about 77% in AP, 84.5% in Karnataka, 79% in Tamilnadu and 66% in Gujarat of the total workforce.**
- **Girls out number boys.**
- **No other industry in India has such a high proportion child labour in its workforce**



Proportion of children to total workforce in cottonseed farms in India during 2006-07

State	Total number of children (below 14 years)	Total number of children (15-18 years)	Total children (below 18 years)
Andhra Pradesh	42.7% (70,400)	34.8% (57,600)	77% (128000)
Gujarat	32.7% (85,340)	33.4% (87,850)	66% (173190)
Karnataka	55.6% (29,500)	33.9% (18,000)	84.5% (47500)
Tamilnadu	46.3% (38,700)	32.6% (27,000)	(79%) 65700
Total	54% (2,23,940)	46% (190450)	(73.5%) 414390

Note: figures in brackets indicates the actual numbers

Estimates are based on survey of 430 sample farms during 2006-07 in 78 villages in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat and Tamilnadu (Source: Davuluri Venkateswarlu `Child Bondage Continues in Indian Cotton Supply Chain (2007)

Workforce Composition – Female Migrant Labour

- In Gujarat and Tamilnadu most of the workforce in cottonseed farms are migrant labour.
- In Gujarat 75-80% of migrant labour in cottonseed farms are Adivasis (STs) from South Rajasthan.
- Women particularly girls account for more than 50% of migrant workers.



Terms & conditions of employment

- Children are employed on a seasonal contract basis through advances and loans extended to their parents by local seed producers, who have agreements with seed companies.
- Organised attempts are made by the employers to woo the children into this sector.
- The recruitment of migrant child and adult workers for work in cotton fields of North Gujarat and Tamilnadu and parts of AP is dependent upon an extensive network of agents, locally called '*mates*' `maistries` ,
- Children are made to work long hours (10 to 12 hours)
- The wage rates paid children are below than adult as well as local market wages.
- Migrant labourers live in makeshift shelters on the farms.



Reasons for preferring female child labour

- **Girls' wages are much lower than adult wages**
- **They work longer hours**
- **They are willing to work more intensively**
- **They are generally easier to control**



Impact on Education & Health

- **More than 85% children working in cottonseed fields are not attending school.**
- **Children are directly exposed to high quantities of pesticides used in cottonseed production.**
- **The general health problems reported by children include -severe headaches, weakness, convulsions and respiratory depression**
- **Few cases of deaths due to pesticide exposures are also reported**



Violation of child rights

- The existing employment practices in cottonseed farms results in denial of rights of children and violate many national laws and international conventions.
- Children's right to education, health and safe living are denied by employing them on the farms on long term contract basis, making them to work long hours and exposing them to poisonous pesticides that are applied in higher quantities on the plants
- Securing of children's labour through giving loans/advances to their parents and compelling them to work till loan is repaid, long hours of work and paying less than minimum wages violates many Indian laws including
 - The Children (Pledging of Labour) Act 1933
 - The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976,
 - The Child labour (prohibition and regulation) Act 1986
 - Article 21A of Indian constitution which guarantees every child a fundamental right to free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years.
 - ILO's Conventions No. 138 regarding minimum age for admission to employment
 - UN Convention on the rights of the child



Low procurement prices contributing for child labour

- The exploitation of child labour in cottonseed farms is linked to larger market forces. Several large-scale national and multinational seed companies, which produce and market the seeds, are involved in perpetuating the problem of child labour.
- Low procurement prices paid by the companies is one of the contributing factors to the extensive use of child labour in cottonseed production.
- Even though companies obtain a huge profit margin, they do not seem to be making a rational calculation of the cost of cultivation when fixing the procurement price to be paid to their seed farmers. With the current procurement prices of companies, seed farmers cannot afford to pay better wages to the labourers and still make reasonable profits. Unless better wages are paid, farmers would not be in a position to attract adult labourers to work in their fields in sufficient numbers
- This is not to suggest that once procurement price is increased the problem will be automatically resolved and farmers will shift to adult labour and pay better wages to the labourers. However, raising the price can at least address a part of the whole problem and other interventions will be more effective once it is resolved.

Response from Government and Seed Industry

- The response of state and central governments to address the problem of child labour in this sector has not been very encouraging. In the early 2000s the government of Andhra Pradesh made some serious efforts to address the problem of child labour in general and child labour in cottonseed farms however after the change of government in the state in 2004 this became a non-priority issue for the government.
- The response from seed industry as a whole to address the problem of child labour in cottonseed industry has also not been very encouraging.
- Due to a campaign initiated by local and internal NGOs, social investor groups, media, several national and multinational companies acknowledged the problem of child labour in the seed industry. Despite acknowledging the problem, many of the companies have not taken any serious steps to address the problem in their farms. Though few companies, mostly MNCs, initiated some measures, but due to limited coverage of their area, their efforts have a very minimal impact on the overall magnitude of child labour in the industry.

Response from NGOs

- In AP, MV Foundation, an NGO actively working on elimination all forms of child labour initiated a campaign against the employment of children in late 1990s. Hundreds of girl children working in cottonseed fields were withdrawn from work and were sent to schools. In AP few other NGOs also have been actively involved in campaign against child labour including child labour in cottonseed farms.
- Recently few NGOs in Gujarat and Rajasthan (DISHA, South Rajasthan Mazdoor Union) started active campaign against employment of child labour in cottonseed farms in Gujarat.
- Though the efforts made by these NGOs had some positive impact due to their limited coverage the impact on overall situation is minimal.

