Young slaves of Mumbai

The death of two young boys in the sweatshops forced the State government to set up a task force.

Twenty thousand children have been liberated from their “owners”, but many have nowhere to go.

WALKING through the lanes of Govandi, past shanty-type structures, open sewers and garbage-filled passages is like going through any of Mumbai’s sprawling slums. Unless you know what to look for, nothing would suggest that this slum, located in one of India’s most progressive cities, harbours perhaps the worst form of human exploitation – bonded child labour.

Bits of fabric, gold threads, glitter beads and tiny fake pearls are some signs that invariably guide you to the dens of misery called “zari factories”. Steep staircases lead to a trapdoor, which open into hovel-like rooms that house the zari units. Until recently, boys between the ages of six and 14 were found kneeling at low work tables sewing beads and coloured threads on to vast lengths of fabric. There are thousands of these factories in Mumbai spread across not just Govandi but other slums such as Dharavi and Madanpura.

The boys work 20-hour days, seven days a week, in dingy 10’ x 10’ sized rooms. The rooms have hardly any ventilation and the floors are grimy. Each room has a small smelly bathroom located in one corner. Another corner serves as a basic cooking area. They sleep, bathe and eat in this same room. They are given two meals a day and, if lucky, two cups of tea. “It’s a life of wretchedness,” says Satish Kasbe, a social worker with Pratham, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works in rescue and rehabilitation of child labour.

The boys are rarely allowed to leave the room. If they must, they do so with an older boy who is a karigar (craftsman). And if they are lucky, the owner takes them on an occasional Sunday outing. Sometimes the owner locks the trapdoor, to open it only the next morning. Some rooms have two trapdoors. So if there is a raid, the children are shunted down the other one, which is then covered with a work-bench.

Zari workers are split into shagirds (apprentices), karigars and owners. Most of the young boys are shagirds. In addition to doing some basic embroidery, a shagird does the cleaning and washing of clothes and some cooking for the unit. For this he is paid about Rs.50 a month. Eventually he becomes a karigar. Physical and sexual abuse is part of this sad existence. In April 2005, 12-year-old Afzal Ansari, who worked in a unit in Govandi, died after contracting hepatitis. When Ansari fell ill, his employer did not treat him. Instead he asked a relative to take the boy away. Ansari died on the way to hospital. A post-mortem revealed marks left by burning cigarettes all over the boy’s body and several signs of sexual abuse.

In June 2005, 11-year-old Ahmed Khan, another zari worker in Govandi, died after being beaten severely. According to his co-workers, the employer made the little boy massage his feet every evening. Khan did not do a very good job one day and the employer began thrashing him. Among other forms of torture, he pulled out the boy’s fingernails.

Data collected from the State Labour Department say 90 per cent of children in the zari units in Mumbai are migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They come from very poor districts such as Rampur and Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh and Madhubani and Sitamarhi in Bihar. West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh are some of the other States from where children are brought.

Kasbe, who has rescued and taken several chil-
WORK IN PROGRESS at a zari unit at Govandi in Mumbai.
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dren back to their families, says the areas come from are extremely backward. There are no schools in the villages or even close by. Most families are landless and work for a daily wage – that is if they can find work. “It could be as little as Rs.10-20 a day,” he says. Some have land but suffer through drought or other calamities and therefore have no resources to bring up children. In several cases, he says, one parent has died so the ablest child is sent to work to support the family.

“When we return the kids, we ask the parents why they sent them,” says Kasbe. Many say they cannot afford to look after them. Some believe that by sending the children they save them from a miserable life in the village. Those who live in border areas say sending children to Mumbai prevents them from joining terrorist or naxalite outfits. In Mumbai, they believe the child, will get at least an education and the opportunity of a better existence.

Zari owner Shankar Jha used to employ 15 children in his unit. “Their parents send them knowing full-well what the children will be doing. They are very poor and this fetches them some money and saves them from things such as bonded labour,” he said. As to why they are kept like bonded labour, he says: “We try to do the best for the boys but our margins are so low that we can only spend a small amount on their well-being.”

Middlemen, says Kasbe, prey on these families. They go to vulnerable areas and convince families to send children to Mumbai by promising them an education. Some talk to children directly and lure them to big cities promising a better life. Others just kidnap them, he says.

Twelve-year-old Umesh Paswan, rescued recently from a zari factory in Govandi, says he came to Mumbai from Sitamarhi after an uncle promised to send him to school. His mother had died and his father had abandoned him. Paswan had nowhere to go. Mumbai seemed a good option. “I used to work from 5 a.m. to midnight. My eyes would water and my back and legs would hurt all the time. If the work was not good, I would get beaten.”

Activists and social workers have been fighting a long battle to get the Maharashtra government to tackle the problem. “It seemed like the number of children working in these factories kept increasing,” says Bhavana Kamble, a social worker in Govandi and Dharavi. “Either they are wearing blinkers or they do not think it’s a big enough problem.”

It took the tragic deaths of Khan and Ansari, reported widely in the media, for the State government to initiate some action to rescue the thousands of children working in completely inhuman conditions.

Immediately after the boys’ deaths, 400 children were rescued in a dramatic raid in the Madanpura area, which has perhaps the highest number of zari factories in Mumbai. In the following months, about 16,000 children were rescued and sent back to their villages. Another 1,080 were rehabilitated in shelters. The Labour Department says there must be at least another 25,000 children working in this sector, whom it plans to rescue.

Towards the end of 2005, the State government set up a Special Child Labour Task Force. In February 2006 Deputy Chief Minister R.R. Patil declared that Maharashtra would be “child labour free” by August 15 – an ambitious goal given the complexities of the problem but nonetheless a move in the right direction. Furthermore, Patil announced that employing children would be made a non-bailable offence in the State.

While a task force may solve the immediate problem, the child labour situation in Mumbai is so grim that the greater issue that needs addressing is why these children come here and what happens to them once rescued, says Ashok Agarwal, lawyer and civil rights activist. With no long-term rehabilitation plan, many of the children “saved” return to these sweatshops. “This is nothing but recycling of child labour,” says Agarwal.

According to the Central Labour Department, India has about 10 crore children in the workforce. Maharashtra comes eighth among the top 10 States that employ child labour on a large scale. Why the government has suddenly become proactive in an area that has been screaming for attention for so many years is unclear. None of the officers Frontline spoke to would comment directly on this. Additional Labour Commissioner P.T. Jagtap came closest to answering, saying that child labour is a responsibility spread across many departments. Since there was little coordination between them, the issue slipped through the cracks.

“The task force has solved this problem. It makes us work together,”

ONLINE
Census statistics on child labour in India http://www.labour.nic.in/cwl/ChildLabour.htm

YOUNG BOYS IN an embroidery workshop in Mumbai.
he says. “Before the task force came we did not have the authority to arrest anyone who employed children. If a rescue operation had to be carried out we needed the cooperation of the police and the Municipal Corporation,” says Jagtap. Chaired by the Labour Commissioner, the task force comprises representatives from the Finance, Education, Women and Child Welfare and Home Departments as well as from the police, the Municipal Corporation and NGOs.

“Our aim is to conduct mass raids, which involve 50-60 officers who target an area and begin a ‘combing operation’. If we raid one owner, the others get to know very fast and chase the children to hideaways. We need to go in there and attack as many factories as possible in one go,” says Jagtap. The children that are rescued are taken to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), which takes them home. Those who have nowhere to go would be given shelter. Currently they are kept in an observation home. But they are not delinquents, so they should not stay there. The Chief Minister has promised to set up residential schools for these children, says Jagtap.

“If there is political will, it is much easier to eradicate child labour,” says Farida Lambay, Vice-Principal of the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work. “It’s not just about rescuing children, we need to tackle the problem at its shores.” Compulsory education that is accessible to all is what we must work on, she says.

Gaps in legislation are the prime cause for the increasing rate of child labour, says Ashok Agarwal. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, prohibits the engagement of children in certain employments (such as hazardous industries) and regulates the working conditions of children in certain other jobs. “The important thing is that the Act does not prohibit child labour in all its forms, nor does it lay down any provision for educational opportunities for rescued child labour.” Agarwal has filed a public interest petition in the Supreme Court seeking the abolition of child labour in all forms and compulsory education for every child between six and 14 years, which is mandated by Article 21-A of the Constitution.

Furthermore, the penalty for employing children is so low that it is hardly a deterrent. The law says those caught employing children will pay fines between Rs.10,000 and Rs.20,000 or serve imprisonment from two to five years.

Additionally, says Agarwal, none of the other laws which protect children, such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment Act), 1966, and the Factories Act, 1948, provide for any form of rehabilitation for rescued children. In fact, laws are so skewed that the Apprentice Act, 1961, and the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, actually permit children to work. “If the lawmakers have decided to eradicate child labour, they must first make the laws cohesive,” says Agarwal.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to children working. One believes that as long as children are first educated, it is all right for them to work for the rest of the day. This would provide a poor family with some income. The other school seeks a blanket ban on children working. Unfortunately, activists and lawmakers seem stuck in this argument; as a result children continue to lose out on their childhood.

If working at the age of six to earn Rs.50 a month is a better life, then clearly India has a long way to go before it can claim to be an emerging economy that has become a favourite in the global market.