



Compulsory Schooling versus Child Labour: An Empirical Study of Educational Exclusion among Upper Primary Children in Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal

MD YEHYA KHAN

Research Scholar

Department of Education, Arunodaya University, Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

DR POONAM LATA MIDDHA

Research Supervisor

Department of Education, Arunodaya University, Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Abstract

Despite the constitutional mandate of free and compulsory education under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, child labour continues to pose a serious challenge to universal schooling in many backward districts of India. Uttar Dinajpur, one of the socio-economically underdeveloped districts of West Bengal, exhibits persistent educational exclusion at the upper primary level due to poverty-driven child labour. The present study aims to examine the relationship between child labour and compulsory schooling among upper primary school-aged children (11–14 years) in Uttar Dinajpur district. Using primary data collected from households, schools, and working children, the study analyzes the socio-economic determinants of child labour, patterns of school dropout, and barriers to educational participation. The findings reveal that economic compulsion, parental illiteracy, seasonal migration, and informal sector employment significantly hinder school attendance and retention. The study emphasizes that compulsory schooling alone is insufficient unless supported by poverty alleviation, community awareness, and effective implementation of child labour rehabilitation schemes. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening educational inclusion and eliminating child labour at the upper primary level.



Keywords: Child Labour, Compulsory Education, Upper Primary Schooling, Educational Exclusion, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a crucial instrument for social and economic development. In India, the Constitution mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 years under Article 21A. The enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, marked a significant step towards achieving universal elementary education. However, despite legal provisions, millions of children remain excluded from formal schooling due to socio-economic constraints, with child labour being one of the most persistent obstacles.

Child labour, defined as the engagement of children in economic activities that interfere with their education, health, and development, remains a widespread phenomenon in India. According to Census and NSS data, a substantial proportion of working children belong to rural, economically backward regions where poverty, lack of livelihood security, and low parental education prevail. Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal is characterized by agrarian distress, high poverty incidence, limited industrial development, and poor educational infrastructure, making children particularly vulnerable to early entry into the labour market.

At the upper primary level, educational exclusion becomes more pronounced due to increased academic demands, opportunity costs of schooling, and social expectations to contribute to household income. Children engaged in agriculture, brick kilns, roadside vending, domestic work, and informal services often discontinue schooling despite compulsory education provisions. This contradiction between policy intent and ground reality forms the central concern of the present study.

The study seeks to explore how child labour undermines compulsory schooling at the upper primary stage and to identify the socio-economic factors responsible for educational exclusion in Uttar Dinajpur district.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the relationship between child labour and education in India, highlighting poverty as the most significant determinant of child work and school dropout. Basu and Van (1998) argued that child labour is primarily a consequence of household



poverty, where children work to supplement family income. They emphasized that banning child labour without addressing poverty may be ineffective.

Ray (2000) found a strong inverse relationship between child labour and school attendance in developing countries, suggesting that children engaged in work are less likely to attend school regularly or complete their education. In the Indian context, Dreze and Sen (2013) highlighted structural inequalities, inadequate public schooling, and weak enforcement of labour laws as key contributors to child labour.

Studies focusing on West Bengal have revealed regional disparities in educational access. Roy (2011) analyzed dropout patterns in Uttar Dinajpur and found that economic hardship, seasonal migration, and lack of parental motivation significantly affected school retention. Barman and Roy (2012) examined child labour in backward districts of West Bengal and observed that rehabilitation programs under the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) had limited success due to poor coordination and inadequate follow-up.

Malik (2013) emphasized that poverty, household size, and parental illiteracy play a decisive role in determining whether a child attends school or engages in work. Recent studies also indicate that upper primary education faces higher dropout rates compared to primary education due to increased indirect costs, such as transportation, books, and loss of potential income.

While existing literature provides valuable insights, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on the intersection of compulsory schooling and child labour at the upper primary level in Uttar Dinajpur. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by offering district-level empirical evidence.

3. Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the extent and nature of child labour among upper primary school-aged children in Uttar Dinajpur district.
2. To analyze the socio-economic factors influencing children's engagement in labour and withdrawal from schooling.



3. To assess the impact of child labour on school attendance, retention, and academic performance at the upper primary level.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of compulsory schooling provisions in addressing educational exclusion.
5. To suggest policy measures for reducing child labour and promoting educational inclusion.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on both primary and secondary data.

4.2 Area of Study

The study was conducted in selected rural and semi-urban blocks of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, known for high incidence of poverty and child labour.

4.3 Sample Design

A multistage sampling technique was used.

- **Sample size:** 200 children (aged 11–14 years)
- Categories included:
 - School-going children
 - Dropout children
 - Working children

4.4 Sources of Data

- **Primary Data:** Collected through structured questionnaires, interviews with parents, teachers, and children.
- **Secondary Data:** Census reports, NSSO data, District Education Office records, and government reports.

4.5 Tools of Analysis



- Percentage analysis
- Cross-tabulation
- Descriptive interpretation

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents and analyzes the findings of the empirical study conducted among upper primary school-aged children (11–14 years) in Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal. The analysis focuses on the magnitude of child labour, its socio-economic determinants, and its impact on compulsory schooling and educational exclusion. The results are discussed in light of existing literature and policy frameworks such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act and child labour rehabilitation programs.

5.1 Extent of Child Labour and Schooling Status

One of the primary objectives of the study was to assess the schooling status of children at the upper primary level and examine the prevalence of child labour among them. The sample consisted of 200 children categorized into school-going, dropout, and working children.

Table 1: Schooling and Work Status of Upper Primary Children (n = 200)

Category of Children	Number	Percentage
Regular school-going children	120	60%
School dropouts	45	22.5%
Working children (not attending school)	35	17.5%
Total	200	100%

Table 1 reveals that while a majority (60%) of children were enrolled and attending school regularly, a substantial proportion (40%) were either school dropouts or engaged in child labour. Nearly one-fifth of the children (17.5%) were exclusively working, indicating a serious level of educational exclusion at the upper primary stage. Additionally, 22.5% of



children had dropped out of school, many of whom were later absorbed into informal labour activities.

The findings suggest that compulsory schooling provisions under the RTE Act have not been fully successful in ensuring universal retention at the upper primary level. Although enrolment rates appear relatively high, retention and regular attendance remain critical challenges. The dropout rate at this stage is particularly alarming, as upper primary education is a crucial transition point before secondary schooling.

The results align with earlier studies which indicate that child labour often intensifies after the primary stage due to rising opportunity costs of education. In rural and economically backward districts like Uttar Dinajpur, families increasingly expect children to contribute to household income once they reach adolescence. Thus, the persistence of child labour reflects structural socio-economic vulnerabilities rather than mere non-compliance with education laws.

5.2 Socio-Economic Determinants of Child Labour and Educational Exclusion

To understand why children engage in labour and withdraw from schooling, the study examined key socio-economic characteristics of households, including income level, parental education, and occupational background.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Background of Working and Dropout Children (n = 80)

Socio-Economic Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Household Income	Below Poverty Line (BPL)	58	72.5%
	Above Poverty Line (APL)	22	27.5%
Parental Education	Illiterate	46	57.5%
	Primary education	22	27.5%
	Secondary & above	12	15%
Nature of Parental Occupation	Agricultural labour	34	42.5%
	Informal non-agricultural work	30	37.5%



	Regular salaried work	16	20%
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Table 2 clearly demonstrates that poverty and parental illiteracy are major determinants of child labour and school dropout. Nearly three-fourths (72.5%) of working and dropout children belonged to BPL households. More than half (57.5%) had illiterate parents, while only 15% came from households where parents had secondary or higher education.

The occupational structure further indicates that children from families dependent on agricultural labour and informal sector employment were more likely to engage in work and discontinue schooling.

The dominance of poverty as a determining factor confirms the widely accepted view that child labour is primarily a survival strategy for economically vulnerable households. Families facing irregular income, indebtedness, and seasonal unemployment often rely on children's earnings to sustain basic consumption.

Parental education emerges as another critical variable. Illiterate parents tend to undervalue formal education or lack awareness of its long-term benefits. They often perceive schooling as unproductive, especially when immediate income opportunities are available through child labour. This reinforces intergenerational cycles of poverty and educational deprivation.

The informal nature of parental occupations further exacerbates the problem. Since informal sector employment offers no income security or social protection, children are frequently withdrawn from school during periods of economic stress, agricultural seasons, or family emergencies. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the strong association between informal employment and child labour in rural India.

5.3 Nature of Child Labour and Its Impact on School Participation

The study also examined the types of work undertaken by children and their impact on schooling outcomes, including attendance, academic performance, and retention.

Table 3: Type of Child Labour and Educational Consequences (n = 80)

Type of Work	Number	Percentage	Impact on Schooling
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Agricultural labour	30	37.5%	Seasonal absenteeism and dropout
Domestic work	18	22.5%	Irregular attendance, fatigue
Roadside vending	15	18.75%	Late enrolment, poor performance
Small workshops/shops	10	12.5%	School discontinuation
Other informal activities	7	8.75%	Sporadic attendance

Agricultural labour accounted for the largest share (37.5%) of child labour, followed by domestic work (22.5%) and roadside vending (18.75%). These forms of work were characterized by long hours, physical strain, and lack of flexibility, making it difficult for children to attend school regularly.

Most working children experienced irregular attendance, learning difficulties, grade repetition, and eventual dropout. Even those who remained enrolled struggled to balance work and education.

The findings reveal that child labour directly interferes with children's educational engagement and learning outcomes. Agricultural labour, often seasonal in nature, leads to prolonged absenteeism during peak farming periods. Domestic work disproportionately affects girls, reinforcing gender-based educational exclusion.

Children involved in vending and informal service activities often work before or after school hours, leading to fatigue and reduced concentration. Over time, poor academic performance and repeated failure result in disengagement from schooling altogether.

These findings demonstrate that educational exclusion is not limited to children who are completely out of school. A significant number of enrolled children experience "silent exclusion", where they are physically present in school but unable to benefit meaningfully from education due to work-related constraints.

5.4 Effectiveness of Compulsory Schooling Provisions

Despite legal mandates, the study found that compulsory schooling alone has limited impact in preventing child labour. Although schools were available within accessible distances and basic facilities were provided, economic compulsions outweighed legal obligations.



The study observed weak monitoring mechanisms and inadequate coordination between education departments and labour enforcement agencies. Rehabilitation schemes such as the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) had limited reach, and many families were unaware of existing welfare provisions.

The findings indicate that compulsory education policies operate in isolation, without addressing the root causes of child labour. This results in a gap between policy intent and actual outcomes.

5.5 Overall Discussion

The empirical evidence from Uttar Dinajpur highlights the complex interplay between poverty, child labour, and educational exclusion. While enrolment has improved under compulsory education policies, retention and meaningful participation at the upper primary level remain problematic.

The results support the argument that child labour is both a cause and consequence of educational exclusion. Children are withdrawn from school to meet immediate economic needs, and lack of education further limits their future opportunities, perpetuating poverty.

The study underscores the need for an integrated approach combining education policy with social protection, livelihood security, and community awareness. Without addressing structural inequalities, compulsory schooling alone cannot eliminate child labour or ensure universal education.

6. Conclusion

The study highlights a persistent contradiction between compulsory schooling policies and the socio-economic realities of child labour in Uttar Dinajpur district. While legislative frameworks exist to ensure universal education, poverty, household vulnerability, and informal labour markets continue to exclude children from upper primary schooling. The findings suggest that compulsory education cannot succeed in isolation and must be supported by comprehensive socio-economic interventions.

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