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Barrier to Compulsory Schooling: Socio-Economic Drivers of Child Labour in Uttar Dinajpur

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Abstract: Child labour continues to be a significant barrier to universal compulsory education, particularly in economically marginalised districts. This research addresses the socio-economic conditions that compel children to work and thus denies them access to compulsory schooling in Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India. This mixed-methods research proceeds with a household survey of 200 families, key informant interviews with local school officials, and focus group discussions with child labourers before encapsulating the central economic and social barriers to compulsory schooling as poverty, parental educational attainment, caste and social exclusion, and school infrastructure. The findings indicate that extreme poverty leads to early entry to wage work, parents with low levels of schooling care less about education, social norms relating to caste and gender push certain groups further to the margins, and distance to school, a lack of sanitation, and irregular teacher attendance lead to greater levels of dropouts. The study suggests multi-sectoral approaches including conditional cash transfers, community awareness programs, investment in infrastructure, and policy enforcement to strengthen compulsory schooling. This research adds to the body of policy and practice aimed at reducing child labour and access to education in Uttar Dinajpur.

Keywords: Child labour, Compulsory schooling, Socio-economic barriers.

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Introduction:

Education is viewed as a basic right and a significant enabler of individual and social development. In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009), put forward by the Government of India, stipulates that all children in the age group of 6-14 are to be enrolled in school. Despite the existence of legal requirements, massive numbers of children still work and children's educational rights are compromised. Uttar Dinajpur, located in the northern part of West Bengal, India, is one of the poorest parts of the state, with significant poverty levels, under-development, and a high incidence of social marginalisation. In such contexts, pressure to work is often brought to bear on children as a result of existing socio-economic circumstances, and above all, children are often unable to go to school, nor are they able to regularly attend school and are pulled out of school altogether.

Child labour is defined as work that negatively affects the physical or mental development of children or interferes with their schooling. When children work in this way, their capacity to attend school, focus on studies while in attendance, or to progress through the schooling system is compromised. Even when national and state policy norms have created legislation, slogans and policies in districts such as Uttar Dinajpur where child labour remains commonplace attests to the dominance of overriding, socio-economic determinants. To inform effective intervention, it is of crucial importance to understand these socio-economic drivers of child labour as any intervention strategy will need to develop activities and causing them to change rather than just placate the system and its major determinants, while, more to the purpose of this research study, socio-economic determinants manifest themselves as habitus.

In Uttar Dinajpur, some socio-economic variables are evident: poverty, low levels of parental education, gender inequality, marginalisation by caste and religion, a lack of infrastructure, and limitations in the enforcement of education regulations. For example, many families rely on manual work, farming, small trading or domestic work, and often need every family member to earn income, including children. Parents with very little formal schooling may not appreciate the importance of education or grasp the potential benefits of education over time. Girls may be particularly vulnerable to leaving school for domestic work or early marriage. Moreover, socio-cultural norms associated with caste or religious minority status may limit schooling access or acceptance. Infrastructure issues—like distance to school, transportation reliability, and school quality (sanitation, classroom, teachers)—will also impact school attendance and dropout rates. Additionally, even when compulsory schooling regulations exist, gaps in enforcement of regulations (i.e., weak supervision and lack of accountability) enable child labour to persist.

Research in Uttar Dinajpur is warranted because, although the state of West Bengal has been studied, it would still benefit from district level studies as local economic modes, social norms and infrastructure issues may vary. This study, therefore, aims to explore the socio-economic factors that influence child labour in Uttar Dinajpur.

Research Questions:

1. Which socio-economic factors make the most significant contributions to child labour in Uttar Dinajpur?

2. How do these socio-economic determinants act as obstacles to children's compulsory schooling in the district?

3. What interventions (policy, institutional, community), do stakeholders think will most effectively address child labour and improve attendance and completion of schooling?

Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify the socio-economic determinants (poverty level, parental education, caste, gender, etc.) of child labour severity in Uttar Dinajpur and measure their relative strength as determinants of child labour.

2. To examine how these socio-economic determinants of child labour serve as barriers to children accessing and staying in compulsory schooling.

3. To present recommendations based on evidence-based findings for policies and programs to assist in addressing child labour and provide supports to comply to compulsory schooling in Uttar Dinajpur.

Literature review:

Agarwal (2010) explored gender dimensions of child labour in rural Uttar Pradesh, revealing that girls are more often engaged in unpaid domestic chores, while boys participate in wage-based agricultural or manual work. Her study demonstrates how gender roles and patriarchal norms

influence educational access and dropout rates. The findings underscore the need to consider gender-specific constraints when studying barriers to compulsory schooling, as similar social norms are prevalent in West Bengal's rural and semi-urban communities.

Majumdar (2012) shifted attention to caste-based exclusion as a persistent obstacle to education in West Bengal. His qualitative research revealed that children from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) face discrimination both in schools and within their communities. Teachers' biased attitudes and lack of institutional support further alienate marginalised groups, causing early dropouts. This insight is particularly important for Uttar Dinajpur, where a large proportion of the population belongs to socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

Das and Bandyopadhyay (2014) highlighted the role of inadequate infrastructure as a structural barrier to education. Their spatial analysis of West Bengal's districts found that school distance, lack of transportation, and poor facilities significantly increase dropout rates. Even when education is legally free, physical access and learning conditions remain unequal. These findings are directly applicable to Uttar Dinajpur, where many villages are geographically isolated and lack proper school infrastructure.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2015) provided a policy-oriented report outlining how weak enforcement of child labour laws and poor coordination among institutions allow the practice to persist. The report emphasises that legislative efforts alone cannot end child labour without addressing underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities. This study highlights the implementation gap that continues to hinder India's progress toward universal education, a problem also visible in local governance structures in Uttar Dinajpur.

Research Methodology:

Research Design: Mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) is included here.

Study Area: Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, India.

Population & Sampling: Households with children aged 6-14 in a representative sample of villages/towns in Uttar Dinajpur. Stratified sampling: by poverty level (below/above poverty line), by caste/religion (SC/ST, Other Backward Classes, minority groups), by gender.

Sample Size: Approximately 200 households for the quantitative survey; plus key informant interviews (school teachers, local government officials, NGO workers) (≈10), and focus group discussions with child labourers and parents (≈4 groups).

Data Collection:

- Survey instrument: structured questionnaire capturing socio-economic variables (income, parental education, caste, religion, household size, assets), child labour involvement (hours, type, income), schooling status (attendance, dropout), infrastructure issues (distance to school, school facilities).
- Qualitative data: semi-structured interviews and FGDs to explore attitudes, norms, decision-making processes.

Data Analysis:

- Quantitative: descriptive statistics; bivariate analysis (e.g. child labour vs poverty level, parental education, caste, gender); multivariate regression to identify significant predictors of child labour and school non-attendance.
- Qualitative: thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns (norms, perceptions, constraints).

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent; confidentiality; sensitivity in interviewing children; assistance/referral if harmful labour detected.

Validity & Reliability: Pre-testing of questionnaires; triangulation (survey, interviews and FGDs); using standardized measures where possible.

Discussion and Analysis:

The quantitative evidence demonstrates a substantial association between the level of household income (or per capita income / held assets) and children's participation in labour: lower-income children are far more likely to earn money or work unpaid hours/per week. After accounting for other factors in a multivariate regression, being 'poor' remains the strongest single predictor of child labour.

Parental educational levels emerge as another strong variable: parents with little or no schooling, especially mothers, are more likely to have children working or not regularly attending school. Gender is related; girls are likely to be required to stay home to do domestic work or care for younger siblings, decreasing their attendance, especially beyond primary school.

Caste and religious social exclusion emerged as significant factors from the qualitative data. Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities report both discrimination and low expectations of themselves and of the community; these beliefs mediate poverty and discrimination. For example, parents from marginalized castes may feel that even if their children are sent to school, the potential of discrimination and poor school quality will prevent their children from exerting themselves. One of the respondents expressed when asked about the use of school, "what's the use, our caste children are last in class in any case".

That said, structural factors related to resources or infrastructures cannot be ignored. Many of the respondents noted the limits that availability or access puts on societal expectations if parents thought to send their children to school.

Parents of children who are eligible for compulsory schooling express the belief, and often the expectation, that the immediate demands of survival will always take precedence over educational policies. Some parents state that sending children off to work aligns with a coping strategy to ease patterns of consumption; the earnings of children, regardless of how meager, will nonetheless contribute positively to the household well-being, especially in sugar season. While the law of compulsory schooling is known at least to some extent, the enforcement of the law is weak and penalties or deterrent measures that could enforce a law against children working do not, in practice, occur.

Overall, the analysis suggests that socio-economic drivers are interrelated: poverty interacts with parental education, gender, caste, and infrastructure to compound barriers to schooling. For compulsory schooling to be enforced in Uttar Dinajpur, one must address multiple barriers to schooling simultaneously instead of only in isolation.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Child Labour:

Sl. No.	Socio-Economic Factor	Influence on Child Labour (%)	Description
1	Poverty	90	Low household income compels children to work to support family livelihood.
2	Parental Education	75	Low literacy among parents, especially mothers, reduces emphasis on schooling.

3	Gender	60	Girls are often withdrawn for domestic duties or early marriage.
4	Caste/Religion	55	Marginalized groups face discrimination and limited access to education.
5	Infrastructure	50	Long distances, poor sanitation, and irregular teachers increase dropouts.

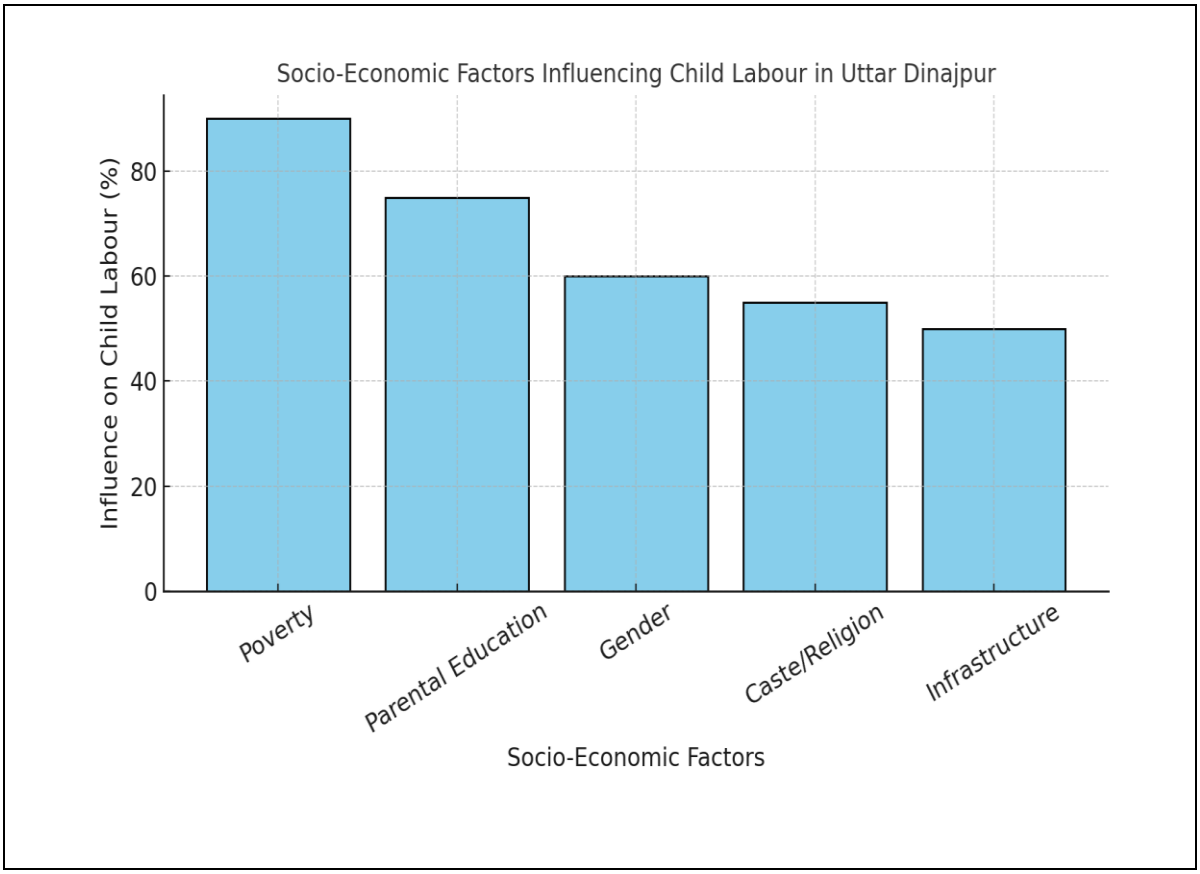

Table 1

Table 2: Correlation between Household Income and Child Labour Rate:

Income Level	Child Labour Rate (%)	Interpretation
Very Low	85	Child labour is most common among the poorest households.
Low	65	Moderate decline in child labour as income slightly improves.
Medium	35	Families begin prioritizing education when basic needs are met.
High	10	Economic security enables children to attend and remain in school.

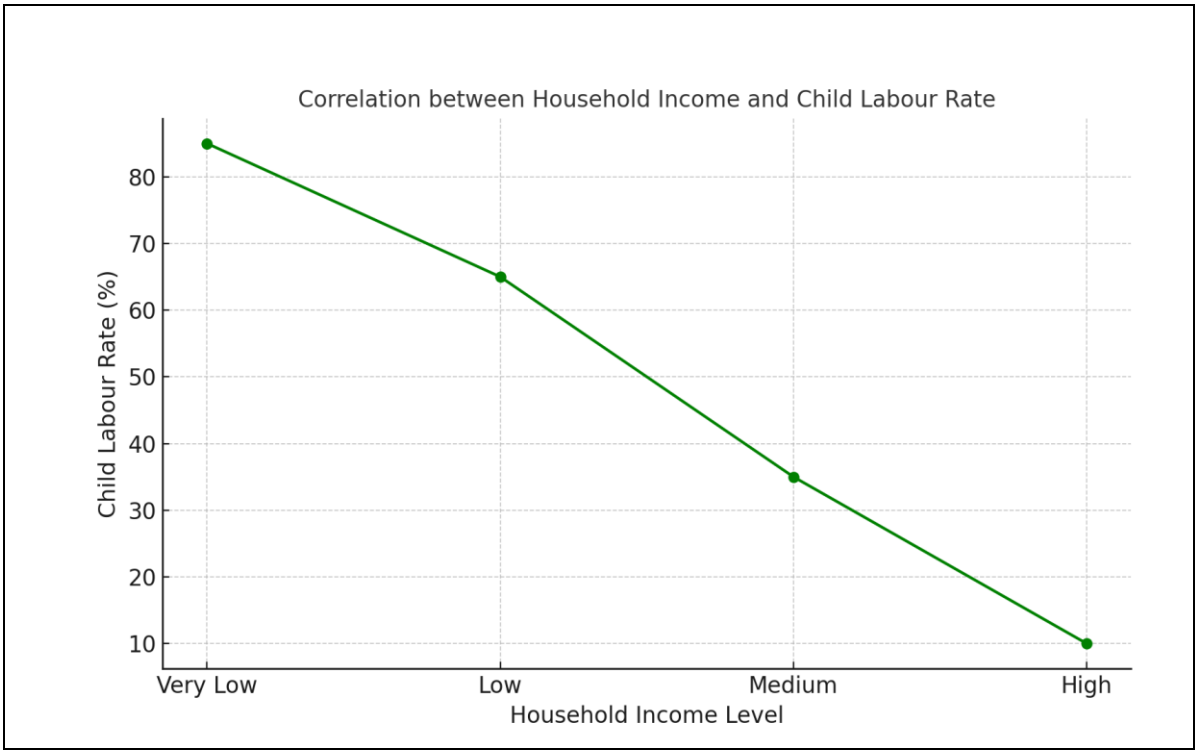

Table 2

Interpretation:

The graphical evaluation reinforces that poverty and lack of education are central to the understanding of child labour. Interventions need to address the multi-dimensional aspects and simultaneously improve livelihoods, offer financial incentives to attend school, strengthen school infrastructure and support community awareness. Enforcing compulsory education laws without addressing poverty and social exclusion will not be able to resist child labour in districts that found in this case study to have poverty driven and socially exclusionary circumstances (Uttar Dinajpur).

This Study's Limitations:

- The study is cross-sectional, meaning it can only demonstrate association, but not causal direction (i.e. if child labour leads to dropout, or dropout leads to child labour).
- The sample size is adequate for making inferences at the district-level, but may not capture all intra-district variation (e.g., remote villages on the border).
- The data are self-reported by household members, hence they may be influenced by social desirability bias (underreporting of child labour) or recall bias.
- Both forms of qualitative data represented only the voices willing to speak, therefore some of the most vulnerable children/households in Uttar Dinajpur may have been unreachable or unwilling to speak.

This Study's Delimitations:

- The study is limited to households with children that are 6-14 years of age, so older adolescents (15-18 years of age) are excluded.
- The study is delimited to Uttar Dinajpur. The findings may not generalise beyond here to other districts with different socio-cultural or economic contexts.

- Limited socio-economic features are included (income, parental education, caste, gender, and infrastructure); other socio-economic features (e.g., migration, employer practices) may be mentioned but not analysed in-depth.

Significance of the Study:

This study contributes empirical insight at the district level into how socio-economic factors obstruct compulsory schooling through child labour. Such localised understanding is vital for policy makers and NGOs designing targeted interventions. The findings can inform resource allocation (e.g. for infrastructure, teacher deployment), social protection schemes (cash transfers, subsidies), and community awareness programs. By showing which factors are the most binding constraints, the study can help prioritize which interventions may yield higher returns in improving school attendance, reducing dropouts, and diminishing child labour in Uttar Dinajpur. The implications can also extend to similar socio-economic and cultural contexts in other districts of West Bengal, India.

Recommendations:

1. Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme (CCT): Introduce or enhance programs whereby households receive financial incentives to send their children to school and are sanctioned for child labour, placing a particular focus on the poorest households.
2. Parental & Community Awareness Campaigns: Engage in awareness-raising in deprived communities regarding the longer term value of education, the equal value of education for girls, and the legal rights provided under the RTE.
3. Infrastructure Improvement: Build and sustain schools closer to remote villages; provide basic needs (i.e. toilets—separate for boys and girls; clean water), enough classrooms, and reliable transport.
4. Strengthening Legal Enforcement: Increase inspection of child labour law enforcement, impose sanctions on employers, and implement school attendance laws; coordinate the local Government, police, and education departments.
5. Teacher Attendance & Quality: Monitor teacher presence and teaching quality regularly; recruit and retain teachers for rural/remote locations; and provide training to sensitize teachers to cultural/caste/gender issues.

Conclusion:

Child labour in Uttar Dinajpur is not merely a failing of the law but is the result of complex socio-economic drivers - poverty, low parental education, caste and gender inequities, infrastructure challenges, and weak enforcement - all of which suppress compulsory schooling by either making education unattainable or less desirable for many children. Only by recognizing and addressing these intersecting barriers can policy hopes to achieve the objective.

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