



## Plight of Child Ragpickers

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### Abstract

*Child labour, and in particular child ragpickers reflect the callous attitude of our society. The apathy, with which child ragpickers are treated, must disturb the conscience of the society, the planners of the countries progress. While this malaise is recognized and acknowledged as a serious and challenging issue in the civilized world around the globe, the problem still remains in most developed countries, with its creeping ill effects. A child ragpicker is deprived of his human rights even as a child. He/she is prone to unhealthy risks, habits and disease. The child thus ends up as a deprived adult, with his/her human development deformed and stunted. This certainly must be remedied with all resources available at hand.*

**Keywords:** Child Ragpickers, Working Conditions.

### Introduction

Though we are at the dawn of 21<sup>st</sup> century, child labour persists on a mass scale in most of the developing countries and India has the dubious distinction of having the largest number of number of child labours in the world.

Child labour is the work by children which interferes with their full physical development and their opportunities for a desirable minimum education and recreation. Child labour is economically unsound, psychologically disastrous and physically as well as morally dangerous and harmful<sup>1</sup>.

According to UNICEF, rag picking is the worst form of child labour<sup>2</sup>. Ragpickers have emerged as a community in almost all, the cities of every developing country. They are quite vulnerable in the society and prone to diseases. As it is well know, ragpickers collect recyclable things from the garbage and also from dumping sites usually in the outskirts<sup>3</sup>.

Rai writes in his book "Child Labour-A Reality" about the informal non-wages sector-ragpicking that children earn an income in the informal non-wages sector such as garbage collecting. It also includes such illegal activities like begging, petty theft and prostitution. Their activities are vital to the survival of poor people, especially in urban areas<sup>4</sup>.

Misra explains in his work "Problem of Child Labour in India" about the working condition of child ragpickers. Most dangerous, demanding and destructive of self worth is the job of scrap-collectors or ragpickers. They scrounge dustbins and garbage dumps in search of paper, rags and scraps of tin, iron, glass and even food that others have thrown away. Sometimes they are seen fighting with dogs for a piece of mildew bread<sup>5</sup>.

In spite of a great deal of debate and discussion condemning the involvement of children in rag picking the problem is so acute in a developing country like India that the number of children working and their suffering increases day by day.

Thus there are many studies and researches that have shown the existence of the universal phenomenon of the child labour in the world. But there are no researches and studies that have examined the unhealthy and hazardous working conditions confronted by child ragpickers engaged in urban areas.

The present study is aimed to understand the plight of the child ragpickers and it is carried out in the slum areas of Bijapur, a drought prone District in Karnataka state, India. It is an exploratory study.

**Hypothesis of the Study:** Child ragpickers work in unhealthy and hazardous conditions.

### Methodology

**Concept:** The word rag picking has no precise meaning. However, it has been defined as a refuse occupation, which can support people when they have no other opportunity for earning. More precisely, the rag or paper picker is defined as one who makes his/her livelihood, by picking up waste paper, plastic, rags, bottles, tins, metal pieces, discarded and broken containers from road side dustbins, streets, garbage heaps and sells them to nearby retailers. Rag picking is one of the most inferior economic activities in the urban informal sector, largely undertaken by children belonging to weaker section of the society, for the survival and for supplementing their family income<sup>6</sup>.

**Objective of the Study:** The main objective of the study is to examine the plight of child rag pickers.

**Method of Data Collection and Analysis:** For the present study, Bijapur, a drought prone city in Karnataka was selected. According to statistics available at the Labour Department, there are 1252 child labours in Bijapur District. Among them approximately 626 are child rag pickers, residing in Bijapur city itself. Among them 40 percent of (i.e., 250) child rag pickers are selected as sample, on the basis of random sampling method for the present study. There are 40 slums in Bijapur city, of them 12 slums were considered for data collection. The field research was conducted in different slums of Bijapur city.

The present study is an empirical nature. The primary data is collected with the help of structured questionnaire along with interview method. The secondary sources like, published and unpublished works related to the subject were also used. The collected data were processed by SPSS package. The data related to profile is presented in the form of percentage.

### Results and Discussion

Ragpicking as a profession appears to violate all norms of child labor protection as per law. Table-1(a) gives information about the duration (in years) that child ragpickers engaged in ragpicking. It is seen that 38.4 percent of the sample involve in this job for up to 2 years period. This is followed 22.8 percent for 3-4 years, 17.6 percent for 5-6 years and it is 21.2 percent of for 7 years and above. Majority of child ragpickers engaged in ragpicking for a long period. It is to be pointed that 21.2 percent of the sample is involved in this job for more than 7 long years indicating the future and fate of this hapless population.

**Table -1  
 Work History of Child Ragpickers**

Sl. No	Work History of Child Ragpickers	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>a</b>	<b>History of ragpicking</b>	-	-
1	Up to 2 years	96	38.4
2	3-4 years	57	22.8
3	5-6 years	44	17.6
4	7 and above years	53	21.2
	N	250	100.0
<b>b</b>	<b>Age at entry into ragpicking</b>	-	-
1	5-7 years	81	32.4
2	8-10 years	97	38.8
3	11-13 years	44	17.6
4	14-16years	28	11.2
	N	250	100.0
<b>c</b>	<b>Inspiration for the present work</b>	-	-
1	Parents	107	42.8
2	Relatives	14	5.6
3	Self	90	36.0
4	Friends	39	15.6
	N	250	100.0

Source: Field Data

Table-1(b) indicates age at entry into ragpicking. It is shocking to note that nearly one third (32.4 percent) of child ragpickers entered into this at 5-7 years age group. Children between 8-10 years accounts for 38.8 percent. With the increase in the age it is reduced to 17.6 percent and 11.2 percent respectively for 11 to 13 years and 14-16 years. It would be an inference that children started to work at early age of 5 to 10 years make nearly 71.2 percent of the sample. They are truly exposed to very unhealthy, dangerous and appalling conditions of living. This reality sheds light on the divergence of the nation's policy intentions for the child welfare, and the ground reality of children belonging to the poor.

In the previous data, child enters into ragpicking at early age of 5 years; hence, it would be pertinent to investigate who is inspiring them to this work.

Table-1 (c) indicates the fact that it is the parents (42.8 percent) who are pushing these tiny tots to start working at the early age. Influence of relatives quite low at 5.6 percent. Child ragpicker appears to learn from his/her living environment and decides to undertake this job with self motivation. This group is quite substantial at 36 percent. Also the influence of friends is not insignificant. Nearly 15 percent of children belong to this category. It can be safely concluded that it is the parents who are mainly responsible to push the children to this job.

As shown in table-2(a) majority of child ragpickers collect all the materials (72.4 percent). Plastic is the most common material collected by child ragpickers as it is widely used.

Table- 2(b) depicts the details of separate clothes and equipments used for ragpicking by children. Majority of child ragpickers (90.8 percent) do not use any separate clothes and equipments during ragpicking. Only 9.2 percent of child ragpickers are using separate clothes and equipments during ragpicking

Table -2(c) reveals that 7.6 percent of child ragpickers use equipments like wooden stick during ragpicking and remaining 1.6 percent of child ragpickers use iron rod.

According to the table-2(d) majority of children (84.8%) are picking up the rags regularly. These children are not going to school and also they are very poor. According to survey, majority of child ragpickers are female. Only five children especially boys and school going children of the total, comprising of 15 percent are doing this job occasionally.

Table -2(e) gives details of the duration of ragpicking in a year. Majority of children (79 percent) works as rag pickers for a whole year. Only 15 percent of respondents work for 8 months and a small portion of ragpickers work for 4 months i.e., 5.6 percent.

**Table-2**  
**Nature of Work of Child Ragpickers**

Sl.No	Nature of Work of Child Ragpickers	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>a</b>	<b>Type of things picked</b>	-	-
1	Plastic	40	16.0
2	Papers	1	.4
3	Tins	16	6.4
4	Cardboard	12	4.8
5	All the above	181	72.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>b</b>	<b>Use of separate clothes and equipments for ragpicking</b>	-	-
1	Yes	23	9.2
2	No	227	90.8
	N	250	100.0
<b>c</b>	<b>Separate equipments used</b>	-	-
1	Not Applicable	227	90.8
2	Wooden stick	19	7.6
	Iron rod	4	1.6
	N	250	100.0
<b>d</b>	<b>Type of job</b>	-	-
1	Regular	212	84.8
2	Occasional	38	15.2
	N	250	100.0
<b>e</b>	<b>Number of months in a year doing ragpicking</b>	-	-
1	12 months	198	79.2
2	8 months	38	15.2
3	4 months	14	5.6
	N	250	100.0
<b>f</b>	<b>Working hours</b>	-	-
1	1 to 3 hours	104	41.6
2	4 to 6 hours	146	58.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>g</b>	<b>Weight of rags</b>	-	-
1	Up to 2 kgs.	133	53.2
2	3 to 4 kgs.	30	12.0
3	5 to 6 kgs	87	34.8
	N	250	100.0

Source: Field Data

Table -2(f) shows the working hours of child ragpickers in a day. Working long hours is vital for child ragpickers. Majority (58 percent) of child ragpickers works from four to six hours in a day. Remaining (42 percent) work one to three hours in a day, and these children attend school.

Table -2(g) indicates that the majority (53 percent) of child ragpickers collect rags in a day up to 2kgs. The data also shows that 34.8 percent of child ragpickers collect rags 5 to 6 kgs in a day and only 12 percent collect 3 to 4 kgs rags in a day.

Increased weight of rags carried on the back of children leads to health problem, shoulder and backbone pain. This directly affects physical growth of children.

**The Hypothesis “child rag pickers work in unhealthy and hazardous conditions” is proved on the basis of above analysis.**

**Table-3**  
**Leisure and Subsidiary Occupation of Child Ragpickers**

Sl. No	Leisure and Subsidiary Occupation	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>a</b>	<b>Other time spent</b>	-	-
1	House Work and care younger children	130	52.0
2	Go To School	50	20.0
3	Playing	32	12.8
4	Watching Movies	12	4.8
5	Taking Rest	26	10.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>b</b>	<b>Income of ragpicking</b>	-	-
1	Less than 300 Rs.	163	65.2
2	301 to 600 Rs.	61	24.4
3	601 to 900 Rs.	22	8.8
4	900 and more	4	1.6
	N	250	100.0
<b>c</b>	<b>Other work done</b>	-	-
1	Yes	85	34
2	No	165	66
	N	250	100.0
<b>d</b>	<b>Type of subsidiary work</b>	-	-
1	NA	165	66.0
2	Domestic servant	38	15.2
3	Work in tea shop / pan shop	24	9.6
4	Begging	23	9.2
	N	250	100.0

Source: Field Data

Table -3(a) shows the details of child ragpickers how they spend their other time in a day. Majority (52%) of child ragpickers do house work and caring their younger siblings and these are mostly girls. 20 percent of child ragpickers go to school while 12.8 percent play, 4.8 percent of children watch movies and 10.4 percent of child ragpickers take rest and relax.

Almost all the children interviewed under the study did some work or the other for money. It is imperative for the children of the street to work because it is their only way to survive. Child ragpickers who live with their families also worked, either because the parents ask them to do so or because they want to do themselves. Many child ragpickers are living with their families and contribute to the family income or reduce the economic burden of their parents by their self reliance supporting themselves. Sometimes, even their unemployed or underemployed parents also depend on their income.

Table -3(b) shows that 65.2 percent of child ragpickers earn less than Rs.300 in a month. 24.4 percent of child ragpickers stated that they earn Rs.301 to Rs. 600 monthly. 8.8 percent of child ragpickers stated that they earn Rs. 601 to Rs. 900 monthly and only 1.6 percent of child ragpickers earn Rs. 900 and more monthly. Since most of these children worked as ragpickers, this amount of monthly earning is slightly more ambitious. It is, however, possible to earn this amount at times, when child ragpickers find more expensive recyclables such as plastic, cardboard, papers and tin etc. They spend money for food and other necessities and entertainment.

Table -3(c) reveals the other work done by child ragpickers. The child ragpickers who are engaged in other works apart from ragpicking accounts for 34 percent. It is also important to note that 66 percent of child ragpickers not do any work apart from ragpicking.

Table -3(d) gives the kind of jobs children are doing along with ragpicking. It appears that they are working as domestic servants, helpers in tea shop and pan shop and begging. 15 percent of child ragpickers are working as domestic servants, 10 percent work in tea shop or pan shop. Remaining 9 percent of child ragpickers do begging.

One of the attractions of the street life for child ragpickers is the quick money they make in the street. Having their own money means having the freedom to acquire commodities such as eatables, going to movies, purchasing clothes, gutaka/pan etc.

Table -4(a) shows child ragpickers' earning from other sources in a month. It is seen that 27 percent children earn less than Rs.300 in a month and those who earn between Rs. 301 to Rs. 600 in a month are 7 percent. Even this meager amount helps them to support their family and also meet their petty personal requirements.

Table -4(b) shows that 24 percent of child ragpickers' payment is received by their father, 40 percent is received by mother and 19 percent is received by both. 11 percent of child rag pickers spend their payment for self. 5.6 percent of child rag pickers' payment is received by their relatives.

**Table-4**  
**Economic Aspects of Child Ragpickers**

Sl.No.	Economic Aspects of Child Ragpickers	No. of Respondents	Percentage
<b>a</b>	<b>Earnings from subsidiary occupation</b>	-	-
1	NA.	164	65.6
2	Less than 300 Rs.	69	27.6
3	301 to 600 Rs.	17	6.8
	N	250	100.0
<b>b</b>	<b>Payment receiver</b>	-	-
1	Father	60	24
2	Mother	100	40.0
3	Both	48	19.2
4	Self	28	11.2
5	Relatives	14	5.6
	N	250	100.0
<b>c</b>	<b>Pocket money from parents</b>	-	-
1	Yes	214	85.6
2	No	36	14.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>d</b>	<b>Amount of pocket money</b>	-	-
1	NA	36	14.4
2	1 to 5 Rs.	122	48.8
3	6 to 10 Rs.	66	26.4
4	11 to 15 Rs.	26	10.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>e</b>	<b>Utilization of pocket money</b>	-	-
1	Food	152	60.8
2	Clothing	28	11.2
3	watching movie	33	13.2
4	Gutaka, pan etc.	37	14.8
	N	250	100.0
<b>f</b>	<b>family indebtedness</b>	-	-
1	yes	134	53.6
2	no	116	46.4
	N	250	100.0
<b>g</b>	<b>Source of loan</b>	-	-
1	N.A.	116	46.4
2	Junkyards	78	31.2
3	Brokers	14	5.6
4	Shopkeepers	17	6.8
5	Friend	25	10
	N	250	100.0

Source: Field Data

Table –4(c) shows that 85.6 percent of children get pocket money from their parents. It is to be noted that 14.4 percent of children do not get any pocket money from their parents and this money is earned by these children is solely used for the family to support.

Table –4(d) indicates the amount of pocket money received by child ragpickers. Majority of child ragpickers (49 percent) get very little pocket money from their parents i.e., Rs 1 to 5 per day, 26.4 percent of child ragpickers get pocket money of Rs. 6 to 10 per day. Only few children state that they get pocket money of Rs. 11 to 15 daily. This pocket money encourages children to go for ragpicking.

Table –4(e) reveals how child rag pickers utilize their pocket money. 46.4 percent of child rag pickers utilize their pocket money for eating snacks, 11 percent of child rag pickers utilize their pocket money for clothing. 13.2 percent children spend their pocket money for watching movie. It is sad to note that 15 percent of child rag pickers spend their pocket money for chewing gutaka/pan etc.

Table –4(f) depicts the burden of borrowing money in the form of loan from private money lenders at very high interest rates. The table shows that 53.6 percent of child rag pickers' families had incurred heavy debts due to utter poverty.

Banks do not lend money to child ragpickers family as a loan. The informal banking system in the slum areas comprising money lenders, junkyards, shopkeepers, friends and brokers are willing to lend money to child ragpickers at very high interest rates.

Table-4(g) reveals that majority of child ragpickers' families (31.2 percent) had incurred loan from junkyards, where as 10 percent have borrowed loan from friends, 6.8 percent have taken money from shopkeepers and 5.6 percent have taken money from brokers.

## Conclusion

The present study has attempted to explore the plight of child ragpickers in the slum areas of Bijapur city, Karnataka.

According to findings the child ragpickers start to work at early age and work for longer hours per day. Most of the children are inspired by parents to ragpicking. The parents are mainly responsible to push their children to this job. Many children do not use separate clothes and any other equipment like wooden stick, iron rod, gloves etc. Because of this, majority of child ragpickers are suffering from skin diseases, cuts and wounds. More number of child ragpickers earns less than Rs.300 in a month. A few percent of child ragpickers do subsidiary work apart from ragpicking. It is sad that some child rag pickers spend their pocket money for chewing gutaka/pan etc. Most of child rag pickers' families had incurred heavy debts due to utter poverty.

The study concludes that child ragpickers often face the situation of unhealthy and hazardous conditions. They are working under unhygienic conditions just for sake of earning their daily bread. They see their future in dark, as their life is in danger by the point of view of health degradation and polluted working environment. The work of ragpicking is very easy to start, as they need no investment in this work. Though these children desire to do better work alternately and if they got chance they will give up this dehumanized work. But they have no opportunity for that.

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