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Children labour for drinking water too

Chennai, July 8: Step out of your home and the crowd of images of child labour in manifest forms hit you hard, whether you are in a city or a village, even as you continue to nurse Dr Abdul Kalam's dream of India emerging as a super power in 2020.

Shotu, barely ten and peddling pani-poori outside an IT park in Guindy, is one such among the millions not only denied the joy of childhood but also exposed often to dangerous vocations to stave off hunger. This kid from Orissa has been brought by an agent paying his family a tiny sum last year. There are quite a few younger than Shotu in his shanty of child labourers at Ambal Nagar.

"Our 'owner' has taught us a few Tamil words to be able to sell our wares, nothing more. I get Rs 800 a month as salary, which is sent to my parents directly. I get two meals a day," Shotu told this newspaper. When he pleaded for a chance to speak to his mother over phone, the boss shooed him away saying that the cost of the call would exceed his salary.

"Child labour is rampant everywhere, city or village," says a senior officer at an international child welfare outfit, who did not want to be named. "There is misconception that child labour only refers to kids in factories. What about the children employed as servants in homes or kids used by their families to roll beedis in Vellore or carpet-weaving in Kashmir?" In many cases, children are forced to work after their school hours.

Not all times does a child slog for money. In Salem, little girls must pick jasmine flowers in exchange for a pot of drinking water. "These girls are employed because they have slim and tender fingers; besides, the job is made easier as they are just as tall as the jasmine bushes," says Prof R. Chandra, a child rights activist. In fact, large tracts of paddy fields have been converted to floriculture since it's cheaper to employ kids to pick flowers than have adults for rice cultivation, she adds.

When contacted, a senior official of the state labor department first said that the Madurai blaze did not have child victims but later modified his stand. "We are verifying if that factory had employed children," he said, pleading inability to explain any further "because the Assembly is in session".