

# Parveen and the Big Mac

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*Amid the cacophony of blasting horns, the smog emitted from the exhausts of hundreds of vehicles scream the advantages of the new wave of globalization. Little Parveen dodges her way through the traffic at a major intersection in Delhi. Nothing much has changed for her. She has worked as long as she can remember. At 11 she has never dared to dream and even if she does, it is not overly extravagant – just to become a teacher. This dream appears to have become more illusive.*

*Actually things have changed. When she first came from her village and began rag picking, she used to sort through the piles of garbage in silent companionship with the cows. She would collect the paper, tins, magazines and cloth while the cow munched on the banana leaves and scraps of food. She sold these to wholesalers who in turn recycled them. Now all she finds is Styrofoam cups, bubble wrap, plastic, discarded mousse, keyboards and CDs. No re-sale value for these.*

In August 2005 an interesting battle erupted in Chennai, India between Coca-Cola and the photographer Sharad Haskar. He had been using a billboard for three years to focus on social issues affecting India through photographs. One displayed in 2005, showed a line of empty water pots waiting to be filled at a hand-pump with a Coca Cola logo in the background. It was a commentary on the water shortages the country was experiencing. Coca Cola India sent a copyright infringement notice to Sharad who responded by saying that he had not infringed any law and was only exercising his freedom of expression.

Activists have been claiming that water shortages due to depleting ground water usually accompany the arrival of Pepsi or Coca Cola bottling factories in the area. Unsurprisingly these allegations have been strongly denied by the companies. Now, three years later, many institutions and even states have banned Coca Cola, claiming that the level of pesticides found in these soft drinks are far beyond the permissible limits.

*Parveen extracts a half eaten big Mac from the dustbin. She munches on it as she gazes at an advertisement 'Power Lunches' for busy executives at a 5 star hotel. A steaming plate of food stares at her whilst she munches on dry bread. So different from the occasional packet of curd, rice or chapatti and subjhi that she used to find. This dry and tasteless meat sandwiched between white flavorless bread is difficult to swallow and will barely satisfy her hunger.*

Though economists promoting liberalisation and 'free trade' suggest that trade improves living standards, it is a controversial proposition that is widely debated in development circles. Experience has shown that trade does not necessarily promote economic growth. Even if trade boosts the economy, the benefits either do not trickle down to most citizens or are offset by the costs. These potential costs may include environmental degradation, increased exposure to disease, decreased public spending due to lower ability to tax capital,

increased exposure to international financial crises, demand for low skill and child labour and subsequent reduced returns to human capital acquisition.

*Back in her village, Parveen's 13 year old sister spends 12 hours a day spraying fertilizer on crops. She works as a daily wage labourer in the farms of a multinational agro-corporation that through a chain of stores sells vegetables, fruit and other agro-products. She is paid 15 rupees a day of which the contractor takes a cut.*

*Her brother, aged 14, works as an unskilled labourer in the iron ore mines, digging for ore and loading trucks. It is back-breaking work in extreme conditions. The temperature is 45 degrees in summer, there is no water in that drought-prone region, and the ore dust causes chronic respiratory ailments. He is paid 30 rupees a day and also pays his contractor a cut, but together they are able to feed themselves and their grandmother and put a little aside for days when there is no work.*

An often asked question is whether a country's openness to the international economy affects investments in children's health and education. This question goes to the core of the debate on globalisation. Child health and education are important ends in their own right. Health and education are two of the important means of achieving long-term economic sustainability and experience has shown that trade is unlikely to be a long-lasting propeller of overall development, especially as it not only spurs economic growth, but substantially harms health and education through reduced public spending and the removal of safety nets. Trade also influences the degree to which governments are willing and able to fund public health and education. More generally, in open economies, governments have a hard time taxing capital and, in fact, may end up largely subsidising capital at the expense of investment in children.

To draw from Adam Smith, policies such as structural adjustments have contributed to the 'greatest peacetime transfer of wealth from the periphery to the imperial centre in history'. And this has been achieved with very limited attention. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank prescription to developing nations at the behest of the rich and powerful countries, is that developing nations should open up to allow for more imports and export more of their own commodities. This is precisely what contributes to poverty and dependency. Mainstream economists and politicians have long been criticised for concentrating on economic growth in ways that ignores humanity and the environmental costs. Perhaps one of the harshest ironies is how food and farm products flow from areas of hunger and need, to areas where money and demand is concentrated. Farm workers, and especially women, are amongst the world's most hungry.

*Though their family was not considered poor, they were small farmers; education beyond grade 4 was never an option for*

*Parveen and her siblings. Living in a drought prone area, Parveen at the age of 10 had to walk 6 K to collect water for the family every day. Her brother and sister would take the goats in search of grazing land. As pastures are scarce in this district, it would be several days before they returned only to pack another bundle of dry rotis and set out again. Her mother and father worked in the fields.*

*After four years of continuous drought, her family could no longer service their debt and her father committed suicide. Parveen left her village with her mother and younger siblings and came to Delhi to find a way to survive, leaving behind her old grandmother, elder sister and brother to manage the little land they had left.*

The Progress of Nations 1999 report by UNICEF suggests that debt is killing children. It states that, as countries divert resources away from social provisions to pay debt, those most affected are the poor, especially women and children. The UNICEF *State of the World's Children Report* (2000) claims that, in 1960, the income gap between the richest 1/5 of the world's population and the poorest 1/5 was 30-1; in 1997 the income divide more than doubled to 74-1.

'Trade not Aid' is regarded as an important part of the development approach promoted by some nations. However, in the context of international obligations, it is criticised by many as an excuse for rich countries to cut back aid that has been agreed and promised by the United Nations. A coalition of Indian organisations spearheaded by the *Centre for Child Rights* is campaigning for trade justice – not free trade, with the rules weighted to benefit poor people and the environment. They are calling on "world leaders to change the rules that govern international trade so that the poor countries have the freedom to help and support their vulnerable farmers and industries".

*Parveen remembers how her father together with other farmers, some years ago, had dumped their tomatoes on the highway as the selling price had dropped 90 paise per kilogram. Her father was a proud man and did not believe in handouts. He would save money before each festival to buy clothes and treats. What a joy it was to dress up and go with the family to the market to choose the fruit and vegetables that would go into making the festive meal and buying bangles and sweets. What different days they were.*

*Parveen also remembers how her father was told about the new economy. 'Buy now and pay later'. He finally fell into the trap and took a loan, not knowing that his profession was not sustainable. She thinks of new TVs and cars and scooters that are displayed outside factories offering fantastic schemes: a car for a down payment of 999 rupees! She wonders how sustainable these city jobs are.*

UNICEF in *'The State of the World's Children'* (2006), passionately pleads for nation states to focus on 'creating a world fit for children'; they continue by adding 'it may seem impossibly far away but achieving it is as simple as this: we must do everything in our power to keep our commitments to children. These commitments are clear and unambiguous. What is now required is the understanding that a commitment is a pledge with both moral and practical obligations. In a moral sense, a commitment signifies a relationship of duty. In practical terms, a commitment binds those making it to a course of action'. It seems that the UNICEF report is desperately trying to counter the effects of corporate globalisation and, without stating as such, making an emotional plea that plays on nations' moral values.

The report also claims that 'at the extremes, children can become invisible, in effect disappearing from view within their families, communities and societies and to governments, donors, civil society, the media, private sector and even other children. For millions of children the main cause of their invisibility is violations of the right to protection'.

Child labour is now banned in India and children are periodically rounded up and removed from their work situations. However, the alternatives offered them are largely unviable or unsustainable. The most detrimental aspect of this strategy is that children working in the banned sectors have no protection whatsoever and are considered law-breakers. This criminalisation of child labour has forced children into hidden forms of work and rendered them invisible. In November 2005, *The Daily Pioneer* reported a drive against child labour in which over 500 children working in inhumane conditions within embroidery factories in Delhi were rescued on simultaneous raids. The next day the same paper published an investigative report on the same issue. They described the intervention as 'children rescued from a cage and incarcerated in a pigeon hole'. The report claims that the:

*"477 children who were rescued...amid much publicity...now faced an even more uncertain future. Investigations revealed that rather than concern for the rehabilitation of the children, utilization of funds under an UN funded scheme prompted the raids. Neither the government, nor the NGO which carries out the operation has an answer about their future. This would mean sending the children back to the same homes they had fled to escape hunger and disease. It was revealed that the raids were carried out to facilitate utilization of funds received by the Labour Department from the International Labour Organisation, a UN body, for carrying out programmes to eradicate child labour. Sources in the Delhi government said that such raids are planned with a lot of media hype and positive media reports are submitted to ILO to embellish the application for the release of more funds."*

A Delhi government official is claimed to have said that:

*'There is no rehabilitation of children rescued under the Child Labour Act. The NGOs and the Delhi government's claim that they would help rehabilitate the children is hogwash. The Labour department has coordinated with the NGO only to the extent of rescuing and deporting these children from Delhi.'*

In India there has been a lowering of standards in education, basic health, nutrition and shelter as a result of reduced public expenditure in the social sector. The policies, programmes and development initiatives framed by the government of India based on the dictates of the World Bank, increasingly deprive communities and families of resources on which they have traditionally depended. Loss of control over and access to land and forest resources; fuel, fodder and water; privatisation of social sector benefits such as education, health and provision of water, are clearly taking their toll on millions of children. The symptoms of this negative fall-out are visible. Children deprived of even basic social benefits and livelihood securities for their families are forced to migrate to urban centres in the hope of finding a means for survival. There has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of street children in urban centres with an increasing number of children being

trafficked across borders and mounting numbers of children engaged in full or part-time labour.

*While Parveen picks rags and begs, her younger brother and sister jump through hoops and turn somersaults to amuse the bored executives as they wait at the traffic lights. Their bodies have been trained at an early age to do these tricks and when they are older they will graduate to rag picking with Parveen.*

*Her mother works as a daily labourer when she can get work on a construction site. She is pregnant and doesn't know who the father is. She has been violated so many times she's lost track. This is a 'service' she performs in return for the policeman to ignore her presence on the street and she bears this torment with gritted teeth.*

In an ILO report issued in 2006 '*An end to child labour – within reach*', there are some tall claims and sweeping statements. One hopes there is some truth in the content as there is no-one who would not welcome an end to the consequences of children working. However, the claims remain on the boundary between rhetoric and wishful thinking. The report claims that child labour has been reduced globally by 11%. Statistics in this area have always been doubtful and dubious. The ILO sites on child labour contain a lengthy and complicated document called '*statistical information and monitoring program on child labour*'. The statistics that this document contains are all estimates and although the methodology for arriving at such conclusions are elaborate and detailed, in the latest update many countries that are said to have high populations of child labour, such as India, do not even get a mention!

Yet, if one gives the ILO the benefit of the doubt, the 11% reduction claim is impressive. However, if one reads carefully between the lines, the claim has been made only for children working in the most intolerable forms. This would mean that for every 10,000 children working as child prostitutes in Thailand, now there are only 8,900. Lucky for the 110 who got away, though one wonders where they are now and how they are faring. Or have they just grown up and crossed the line of 18 and are now considered adult sex workers? If this is the progress shown by the ILO in the decade since the ratification of the Convention of Protection of Children, when will the end be in reach for the remaining 8900 child prostitutes and how will it be achieved?

It is unfortunate that the ILO, the last surviving body to be formed as a result of the Versailles Treaty, has gone the way of so many other UN agencies. As the doctrine of 'free trade' has increased, most UN agencies have been slowly and surely dismantled and rendered increasingly powerless. With the setting up of the International Programme for Elimination on Child Labour (IPEC) or ILO - originally a regulatory body and protector of workers' rights - became an implementation body as well. This program is largely funded by the USA and therefore directed to serve various trade agendas. The IPEC is also the only growth area within the ILO and the program keeps the organisation afloat with all other sections having been reduced to mere tokenism.

The ILO was set up to be a tripartite body consisting of representatives of governments, workers and employers. However, when it has come to decisions on child labour, the ILO has refused to recognise the right of working children to represent themselves and this was not for want of trying on the

part of working children's movements. Instead, the ILO chose to select some first-world children to be their ambassadors to end child labour and turned a deaf ear to the solutions offered by working children themselves. Excluding them from the debate and criminalising their means of livelihood without offering any viable solutions, the ILO resorted to a well-publicised football match with children from the Geneva International School and the Signal de Bernex Football Club, two sets of very privileged young people who will never experience the complexity of child workers' lives, the ensnarement of poverty and the pain of working children who have no choices. The young people played in the presence of football stars that '*kicked the ball*' against child labour and issued red cards to child workers around the world. Footballers are shown the red card for misdemeanours they have committed, but working children were shown this card by the privileged for no fault of their own. They work because of the political and socio-economic conditions that prevail in a world that is zealously engaging in globalising our planet along corporate lines and which is too busy to offer solutions to their predicament.

To quote Palagunmi Sainath in '*Everybody Loves a Good Drought*':

*"Development is the strategy of evasion. When you can't give people land reform, give them hybrid cows. When you can't send children to school, try non-formal education. When you can't provide basic health to people, talk of health insurance. Can't give them jobs? Not to worry, just redefine the words 'employment opportunities'. And one may add 'if you don't really want to solve the causes of child labour – just ban it and hope it will go away.'" (1996: 4)*

Interestingly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) did not include the elimination of child labour, but made a strong call for '*fair globalisation*' and '*full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people*' and combined this with a central objective of '*poverty reduction strategies*'. The MDG went further to resolve to '*ensure full respect for the fundamental principles and rights to work*'.

The irony, of course, is that whilst multi-national companies are demanding more deregulation of industry and lowering of labour standards to give them more freedom to be 'efficient', they are also clamouring for increased regulation of child labour laws to reduce competition from domestic industries. Neither is acceptable. On the one hand, deregulation can lead to enabling corporations to undermine basic social and human rights; whilst on the other, overbearing regulations with regard to child labour give too much power to a few and leads to unfair trade and violation of basic human rights.

To quote Ha-Joon Chang in '*Kicking away the Ladder*':

*"The short answer to this question (how did the rich countries really become rich) is that the developed countries did not get to where they are now through the policies and institutions that they recommend to developing countries today. Most of them actively used 'bad' trade and industrial policies, such as infant industry protection and export subsidies – practices that these days are frowned upon, if not actively banned, by the WTO. Until they were quite developed (that is until the late nineteenth to early twentieth century), they had very few of the institutions deemed essential by developing*

*countries today; including such basic institutions as central banks and limited liability companies. If this is the case, aren't the developed countries, under the guise of recommending 'good' policies and institutions, actually making it difficult for the developing countries to use policies and institutions they themselves had used in order to develop economically in earlier times? It is a very common and clever device that when anyone has attained the summit of greatness, he kicks away the ladder by which he has climbed up, in order to deprive others of the means of climbing up after him."*

*Parveen remembers a time in her village when they had news of the 'golden road' or 'golden quadrilateral' that as being built some four kilometres away. The family decided to go on a picnic to see this marvel. They packed their rotis and chutney and went to view it. They ate their lunch on the divider. Parveen stared into the distance. It seemed like a mammoth black serpent had uncoiled itself slithering over villages, fields, lakes and forests. At dusk as they were returning home in their bullock cart they passed rows and rows of women defecating along the road. Villages here had no toilets and no water and sanitation. Women had to wait until dark to relieve themselves and the road was the safest place. Parveen thought back to what she had seen that day, the golden road, and wondered at the incredible creation. How it had subdued nature and human kind. If Mother India was capable of this why had she not bothered with the numerous problems her community suffered? Was mother India too busy or too tired? Had she no affection for them?*

The Chief Economist for the World Bank, Larry Summers (and later U.S. Treasury secretary under the Clinton administration), who was an ardent supporter of Structural Adjustment Policies, wrote a leaked internal memo in 1992 that exposed the extent to which international policies have an impact on countries around the world:

*"Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDC's (Less Developed Countries)? The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that... Under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently high compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. The concern over an agent that causes one in a million changes in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under five mortality is 200 per thousand."*

*Parveen coughs and tries to cover her mouth against the exhaust fumes. She often has a bad cough, but this time it has lingered. She suddenly tenses; she has heard the corporation van approaching with a convoy. This signals the periodic round up by the labour department in operation with the municipality and the police. She grabs her brother and sister and rushes for a gap in the wall of an old house where a multi-storied office complex is being constructed. She ducks behind some rubble just in time. They have managed to escape. What a relief. If not they would have been taken to the beggars' colony and would have to buy themselves out by paying 200 rupees each. She did not have that kind of money.*

It is common refrain that 'Child labour is not an easy issue to resolve'. While it seems noble to immediately withdraw

investments and cooperation with firms and factories that employ child labour, there are many who claim that this may do more harm than good. Many of the children are from impoverished families and work to pay for their family and/or their education. Depriving them of this income has led to some children seeking different, lower paid work including prostitution.

Shyamal Majumdar in a piece 'Child Labor ban: if wishes were horses' (2006), reflects on a recent piece of child labour legislation banning children from working as domestic servants or at hotels, tea shops, restaurants and resorts:

*"The report asks: 'Will the ban work? The answer is quite obvious, going by the track record so far. 'If wishes were horses, law could change men's minds,' says a former official in the Maharashtra labour department. 'That legislation can have only a negligible impact is apparent from the fact that child labour is nothing but a by-product of grinding poverty. These children are holding out a slim lifeline to impoverished families, or are just trying to keep themselves from starvation. The dilemma is similar to that of the ban of dance bars in Mumbai on the grounds that it would put an end to the exploitation of these women. What happened to those 70,000 odd bar girls after the ban? Some became prostitutes; some went back home only to be ostracized, and some committed suicide. As long as alternative sources are not found for families whose children work in the banned sectors, the law would continue to be flouted."*

*Parveen's dream of becoming a teacher is fast fading away. She stares at the new ad for jeans, a bare-chested man with his hand inside the waist band of his faded and frayed jeans. She looks down at herself, torn and faded skirt, loose fitting blouse, two sizes too big. She wonders how she fits in. Are these two sides of the same world? Will they ever become one? She watches her little brother and sister sharing a banana, each one making sure the other has had an equal share. Why didn't others do the same? They who had so little were so giving? What future did her siblings have she wondered? What would become of them? They had no options and no choices. Each day was a struggle for survival and everything was changing so fast.*

Parveen and her siblings, like millions of other children around the world, will live on the fringes of society, never really counted, never considered an economic or social asset, never becoming consumers who are central to the current economy. They will remain excluded and invisible, a mere embarrassing statistic to be hidden amid the folds of political rhetoric.

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