

Activists Say Child Labour Act Locks in Caste-Based Occupations

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Young street vendor with smoke, Varanasi Benares India. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

New Delhi: A group of organisations and activists, including Apne Aap Women Worldwide, the Human Rights Law Network, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch, Gloria Steinem, and MPs Sharad Yadav and Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo held a press conference on Tuesday to object the passing of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016.

“In a shameless hoax, the Act claims to have made child labour illegal under 18 and to have imposed fines upto Rs 50,000 on employers, but in reality it has removed all age limits in the so-called “Family and Family-based enterprises”,” read a press release by the activists.

While the Act [appears to outlaw](#) any form of labour by children under the age of 14, it has [introduced a provision](#) that lets children up to 14 years of age help out after school in family-based endeavours such as work in the fields, home and forest.

The groups condemning this Act stated in their press release that, “The Act has legalised 90% of India’s Child Labour by legalising child labour in “family and family-based enterprises” and the “audio-visual entertainment”. Their statement of condemnation joins the chorus of opposition that is afraid that the Act legalises the child labour used by home-based units for rolling *beedis*, making *agarbattis* and *papad*, and doing *zari* and embroidery work.

Additionally, the changes to the Act are in contradiction with the Juvenile Justice Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as it neglects to define the number of hours children can work. The group is concerned that “this will result in poor-low caste children being pushed to work long hours and increase school drop-out.”

The release also pointed out that the Act penalises poor low-caste parents by imposing high fines, ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000, for not sending their children to school before and/or after work hours. According to the group, this ensures that people who are “already debt slaves of contractors, landlords and employers will be punished for something they have no control over” and that this will further ensure that “this Act will lock our children in caste-based occupations further.”

According to the 2011 census, there are 43,53,247 children between the ages of five and fourteen, who are employed as main workers and another 57,75,416 who work for less than six months a year, adding up to a total of 1,01,28,663 child labourers in the country.