

# Maid's Cries Cast Light on Child Labor in India

By JIM YARDLEY  
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NEW DELHI — The girl's screams were brittle and desperate. Neighbors in the suburban housing complex looked up and saw a child crying for help from an upstairs balcony. She was 13 and worked as a maid for a couple who had gone on vacation to Thailand. They had left her locked inside their apartment.

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has created a surging demand for domestic workers, jobs often filled by children.

The Indian news media, usually a bullhorn for middle-class interests, ran outraged front-page articles. But the case was hardly unique. Last week, an 11-year-old Nepalese girl, working as a servant, said that her employer had beaten her with a rolling pin, according to the police.

Indian law offers limited safeguards and limited enforcement to protect such children, and public attitudes are usually permissive in a society where even in the lowest rungs of the middle class, families often have at least one live-in servant.

“There is a huge, huge demand,” said Ravi Kant, a lawyer with [Shakti Vahini](#), a nonprofit group that combats child trafficking. “The demand is so huge that the government is tending toward regulation rather than saying our children should not work but should be in school.”

The International Labor Organization has found that India has [12.6 million laborers between the ages of 5 and 14](#), with roughly 20 percent working as domestic help. Other groups place the figure at 45 million or higher. Unicef has said India has more child

After a firefighter rescued her, the girl described a life akin to slavery, child welfare officials said. Her uncle had sold her to a job placement agency, which sold her to the couple, both doctors. The girl was paid nothing. She said the couple barely fed her and beat her if her work did not meet expectations. She said they used closed-circuit cameras to make certain she did not take extra food.

In [India](#), reported to have more child laborers than any other country in the world, [child labor](#) and trafficking are often considered symptoms of poverty: desperately poor families sell their children for work, and some end up as prostitutes or manual laborers.

But the case last week of the 13-year-old maid is a reminder that the exploitation of children is also a symptom of India's rising wealth, as the country's growing middle class

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laborers than any other country in the world.

Many of these children come from India's poorest states, either through shadowy job placement agencies or by kidnapping. In 2011, more than 32,000 children were reported missing in India, according to government crime statistics.

Mala Bhandari, who runs Childline, a government hot line for child workers, said India's urbanization and the rise of two-income families were driving demand for domestic help. Children are cheaper and more pliant than adults; Ms. Bhandari said a family might pay a child servant only \$40 a month, less than half the wage commonly paid to an adult, if such servants are paid at all.

Indian law deems anyone younger than 18 a minor. But the Juvenile Justice Act of 2000 also creates a loophole: Children between 14 and 18 are allowed to work a maximum of six hours a day in nonhazardous work. Children younger than 14 are prohibited from working as servants, a statute that is widely flouted. Employers are required to provide daily education and document the child's daily break hours, though most families ignore such requirements because enforcement is largely nil.

"What happens within the four walls of a home, nobody knows," said Ms. Bhandari, who contended that while abuse was not the norm, it was not rare.

Domestic work employs millions of people in India, most of them adults. India's rich often have a retinue of servants, drivers and other helpers. Mukesh Ambani, the billionaire industrialist, reportedly has several hundred domestic workers in [his skyscraper residence in Mumbai](#), the country's financial capital, with some of his servants trained by one of India's elite hotels. Some Indian families living abroad also take a servant; last month, an Indian maid in New York [won a \\$1.5 million judgment](#) against an Indian diplomat and her husband for abusive treatment.

Societal attitudes toward servants are often shaped by ingrained mores about caste and class. Many servants, especially children, come from poor families among the lower Hindu castes or tribal groups, often from poor states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal.

Santosh Desai, a columnist for The Times of India, the country's largest-circulation English-language newspaper, [warned in February](#) that India's upper and middle class were growing flabby and indolent through their dependence on cheap household help, and that they also wrongly held "an implicit belief in possessing an intrinsic superiority, an assumed right to lord it over someone lesser."

"As a child nobody dreams of growing up one day and driving somebody else's children to school or washing their clothes," he wrote.

The middle-class families in the housing complex where the 13-year-old girl worked, in the suburb of Dwarka, professed shock over her treatment. Originally from Jharkhand, the girl is now being cared for at a government-run shelter for women. After she was rescued, she was interviewed by counselors with Shakti Vahini, the nonprofit group. They said she told them she had also been required to clean the couple's medical clinic.

They said she also told them of other abuses: On some occasions, the couple reviewed footage from the cameras in the apartment and beat her if they found behavior that displeased them. She said she was provided with two chapatis, pieces of flat bread, as her daily meal. Earlier in the week, the police said they had not yet been able to confirm the presence of cameras in the apartment.

Raj Mangal Prasad, a children's welfare official in New Delhi, said the government was not staffed to carry out raids to look for illegal servants. But if it were, Mr. Prasad estimated, several thousand cases would probably be discovered throughout the capital. He estimated that one household out of 20 employed an under-age servant. "It's plain for everyone to see," he said.

The girl's employers, identified by the police as Dr. Sanjay Verma and Dr. Sumita Verma, were arrested Wednesday after their return to India and remanded to police custody. The police have filed preliminary charges of violations of the Juvenile Justice Act, the Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act and other violations of the criminal code.

Their lawyer denied the charges at a bail hearing.

But Mr. Kant, the lawyer with Shakti Vahini, said the courts rarely issued harsh judgments in cases involving the rights of domestic help.

"There is a general feeling that we need these people," Mr. Kant said. "Cases aren't taken so seriously. There is no fear of the law."

*Nikhila Gill contributed reporting.*

A version of this article appeared in print on April 5, 2012, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Maid's Cries Cast Light on Child Labor in India.

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**Buzzramjet** Solvang, CA

This is hardly new news. This has been going on in India, and here, where people from India bring their slave labor with them usually smuggled in, for a very long time.

The most shocking aspect of it, besides the outright slavery, is how cruel they always are to the slaves. The Times itself ran a story long ago about an Indian couple who were charged with slavery and their insane defense was it was none of our business and they treated their slave better than in India.

Slave labor of children has been a staple of middle class and upper class India for centuries. Killing them has also been without punishment. Parents sell their girls as they are considered worthless. As in China, India is suffering an acute shortage of women, girls are aborted, murdered upon birth or treated like dirt if they are allowed to live. In India when a young woman is married off the family is expected to provide a large dowry to the Groom and his family

Even though India has "officially" outlawed dowry's nothing has changed. Just like slavery has been outlawed, there is no punishment and thus no incentive to stop the buying and selling of children for slavery or sex. The only way this will change is harsh and severe public punishment.

International public condemnation would be helpful as well but because we use so much of that slave labor ourselves in India, corporations will fight tooth and nail to keep that from happening for fear of their bottom line being affected.

April 5, 2012 at 6:03 a.m. RECOMMEND 113



**anita mathew** Goa, India

We all see young children being ill treated or employed but how many of us take action-we are too busy with our lives to get embroiled with the police or the right people who can help the children-so we need to stop writing just

comments and act please... when you see a child being made a slave you have the right to go and question and report.

April 5, 2012 at 7:20 a.m. RECOMMEND 32



**Kalidan** NY

The reality is actually far worse than what you are describing. We Indians have developed a culture where it is natural to prey on each other; we have no notion of how wrong that is. Our religion (Hinduism) has not a word to say about how to treat each other. Its practice is entirely about bribing one's way into heaven, while living like beasts down here.

I am not sure whether you are familiar with the Jallianwalla bagh incident, where a British general (Dwyer) ordered Indian troops to shoot and massacre unarmed Indians. Not one of the Indian troops turned his rifle and shot Dwyer for this beastly, inhuman order. They massacred their brothers and sisters exactly as ordered. Why Indian soldiers wore a British uniform, why not one of them shot down this British Nazi, is never questioned in India.

Note: they did not lock up their brethren and leave on vacation for a week, they shot them.

The rot is deep. Rudyard Kipling - who saw no difference between an Indian child and animals - actually feted the unrepentant General Dwyer because he was chastised by the British establishment. Yet, Indian children are forced to read this imperialist's pap (Jungle Book) in schools - even as the more sophisticated Indians affected a British accent and lifestyles (at least they did in the 1960s and 1970s when I lived there).

India cannot be taken as a serious power, never emerge from its colonial roots, unless we confront this cultural rot head on.

In reply to Buzzramjet April 5, 2012 at 7:56 a.m. RECOMMEND 28



**FZ** UK

The article (and the accompanying comments) assume that the problem is getting worse as India is getting richer. This is not the case. Servants are more difficult to hire nowadays and the pay has increased over the years. As India develops further and more employment opportunities are created, the problem will get better. Meanwhile, abuse should not be tolerated and the employers (doctors, no less!) who can go on an expensive holiday and would rather spend money on cameras than feed an hungry child should be punished severely.

April 5, 2012 at 8:09 a.m. RECOMMEND 26



**Rudolph** New York, NY

This really is quite standard in India. So is chopping of an arm or leg of small kids so they are allowed to be beggars - they are all over New Delhi. All the beautiful carpets we buy here in New York are forced labor of little kids causing blindness. India is India.

April 5, 2012 at 8:13 a.m. RECOMMEND 26



**A Reader** Detroit, MI

This infuriates me! I have only one question: what can we do to help these children?

April 5, 2012 at 8:18 a.m. RECOMMEND 17



**Opposite day** New York

I'm wondering if all of us who have household help of imperfect immigration standing (not me, Mr. INS, honest!) shouldn't take a moment and think about whether we treat/pay/consider them quite as we'd like to be treated/paid/considered.

April 5, 2012 at 9:20 a.m. RECOMMEND 32



**Sumukha Ravishankar** Short Hills, NJ

This problem has been in existence all along in India. This is not a recent phenomenon, yes the demand has gone up because more people are in the middle class and aspire to be upper middle class. the division of labor is so entrenched in the Indian psyche, that we do not even know if it is class or cast issue. an average Indian who aspire to look like an upper middle class will not go do any manual labor inside or outside a house, gardening, or cleaning etc etc.

When I was growing up with in the campus of IIT(Delhi) a premier education institution, we had plenty of neighbors who had live in domestic servants who were probably indentured. almost slaves. nobody complained about them, non or the professors made a big deal about them. we were told to just look away. this particular house had an immigrant Bangladeshi girl who came in when she was probably 6 or 7 and worked from 5am to 11pm non stop. that house was hand wiped clean twice a day, their cement floors looked like mirrors all at the expense of this girl who looked like a 50 year old woman by the time she was 25, all stooped and wrinkled and shriveled up. She spoke only Bangla, did not ever learn Hindi which is spoken in Delhi, never went home to visit, and if my memory is not that far off, tried to run away a few times before they finally gave up and took her back. I have no idea where she went, what happened of her. Bad Karma, haunted that family for ever. no more shall be said:(

April 5, 2012 at 1:27 p.m. RECOMMEND 5



**ST** Delaware

Live-in servants are much more vulnerable to exploitation since they most likely do not have families or any other sort of support nearby. Most maidservants do not live with their employers unless the employers are quite rich. The majority of middle class folks in India cannot afford live-in servants and the servants are not uniformly ill treated. In many households the servant has become an indispensable part of life and most do know that. Wages for servants are going through the roof. Sadly, this has resulted in young children being put to work in greater numbers. I grew up in a small suburb of Chennai and through my school and college years we had as servants an illiterate woman from the nearby slum and her 3 daughters. Her husband was an alcoholic and doing a maidservant's job was the only way for the family to keep a roof over their heads. Apart from paying their wages, my parents took them to the doctor when they fell sick, bought them gifts for festivals and contributed what they could when each of the daughters got married. I think their lives were made better by working for my family. In a perfect world they would have all attended schools and had better living conditions. But India with its lack of a social net and population pressures is a long way away from what we see in the US and will always be different. While more awareness, compassion and justice are needed in India, it does not deserve the wholesale condemnation I see in some of the comments here.

April 5, 2012 at 3:12 p.m. RECOMMEND 1



**Dan Jones** NY

Why is this a surprise? This is what happens when you have an entire society living under a caste hierarchy. Look at the way wealthy Indians behave towards others in THIS country. If you aren't a peer or a "social superior" they treat you as a servant or ignore you altogether. These habits are a societal norm in a caste-culture. We may think of it as disgusting but Indians don't think twice about it. Slavery only applies to humans. For the millions of Indians in the lower classes (or worse if an "untouchable") they are considered sub-human and therefore, anything goes.

April 5, 2012 at 3:26 p.m. RECOMMEND 3

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