

# Thespianism and Contemporary Child Labour

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## Abstract

There is no industry like entertainment industry. Undoubtedly, most of the people are under the spell of this showbiz. They want to earn quick fame and big bucks. Those who fail to do so often live their dreams in their children. They push their children into the glamour world at the cost of their health and education. They want their children to become superstars overnight. Children are made to join singing classes, dance classes, language and diction classes, aerobics, martial arts and what not. The child has to be a wholesome entertainment package. He should be able to dance on raunchy numbers, sing a song meant for adults or utter lines inappropriate for his age. He is prepared or coerced to take up any assignment that comes his way be it films, reality shows, soap operas, web series and so on. The gruesome auditions, hectic shooting schedules, parental pressure, the rehearsals and the fear of rejection have adverse effects on the child's mental health. As if this was not enough, there is also a need to look great on screen which pushes them into fitness and diet regime. Isn't this neo child labour? Aren't the parents bartering the child's future for their own selfish motives? The education of the child is jeopardised and this loss can never be compensated in terms of money. It's time for the Government of India to implement the already strict law viz The Child labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2016 in true letter and spirit so as to prevent child abuse in the entertainment industry. Let's not rob these little wonders of the sweetness of childhood. Let's give them some breathing space rather than setting unrealistic ambitions for them.

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## **Introduction**

Childhood is the most beautiful of all life's seasons. It is the formative phase of life. Human character takes its shape in childhood. Man gets everlasting impressions in his childhood. A child's mind is soft and can be moulded like the potter's clay. So human character should be properly shaped in childhood.

Unfortunately these days the priorities of parents have changed. There are pushy parents who make their children chase their own failed dreams. They expect their children to fulfill their unrequited ambitions as if their children are post-dated cheques that can be encashed one day. They want their children to pursue careers in sports or showbiz wherein there is big, fat money. It wouldn't be unfair to call such parents as narcissist as they want to compete through their children. *"Some parents see their children as extensions of themselves, rather than as separate people with their own hopes and dreams,"* said Brad Bushman, a professor of psychology. What's awful about this type of parenting is that it sends a clear message to the children that they aren't loved for who they are. *"They've got to perform. They've got to win to be accepted."*

This is the dismal scenario in all fields and Indian showbiz is no exception. Children strive to get *"too much, too soon."* Earlier children would participate in programmes like *'Bournvita Quiz contest'* that would certainly help them in widening their mental horizon. But now children are inclined towards singing, dancing, acting, anchoring, standup comedy and so on. Small screen offers numerous opportunities to child artists to showcase their talents through reality shows and soap operas. *"Reality shows are ruling the revenue lists and seem to be the one show every channel is interested in producing. Some of the shows even use children as anchors in order to garner eyeballs,"* says ShoojitSircar.

These children have a strong desire to get noticed wherever they go and TV is the passport to instant fame. These tiny bundles of enthusiasm enthrall us with their mind blowing performances. There is an increasing demand for shows having children. But the ground realities clearly indicate that show biz forms a breeding ground for neo child labour.

## **The Bleak Side Of Showbiz**

Showbiz demands that the child has to be a complete entertainment package. In case of reality shows, children can be made to dance to racy numbers and sing romantic songs. They utter lines and enact scenes inappropriate to their age. They are exposed to adult jokes. When they qualify or win a contest they are in the seventh heaven. But when they are criticized they are

completely shattered. Failure to qualify for the final rounds makes them depressed and frustrated. They even develop behavioral problems. The rehearsals are tedious and tiring. Children are made to work like bonded labourers. They need to rehearse for longer hours out of pressure to improvise their performances. One adverse comment of the judge can ruin their prospects of winning a show. Each performance has to be better than the previous one to propitiate the judges.

Imagine the humiliation of the child in front of the camera. The camera never fails to catch their emotions to increase the TRP. At times the judges even go to the extent of scolding or body shaming the children. A preteen could be asked to propose the female judge. Creativity at its lowest ebb indeed! These children become workaholics toiling in the studios at an age when they are supposed to be on the playgrounds. It's like depriving them of all the pleasures of childhood. Isn't it really sad that Harshali Malhotra of '*Bajrangi Bhaijaan*' fame was zeroed in after audition of 5000 children and that her tryst with camera began when she was hardly 21 months old?

Showbiz deprives the children of quality education. They miss out on school projects, science exhibitions, excursions and picnics, feasts, sports meet simply because it clashes with their shooting schedule. Many a time they have to compromise on the preparation of examinations because of their commitments. They spend long hours of precious time waiting and waiting for their turn in front of the camera. Child right activist and Nobel prize laureate Kailash Satyarthi has rightly said, "*If reality shows are creating problems in education, impacting health and freedom, and if there is an economic consideration involved—then that makes a young child a child labourer.*"

### **Entertainment Show or Show Of Child Abuse**

Let us get an understanding as to how the preteens are exploited in entertainment industry.

#### **Toddlers and Tiaras (American Television series that aired on TLC -2008 To 2013)**

This show gave us an insight into the event like beauty pageants for children. It was shocking to see how many mothers were living through their daughters. Little girls as young as three are made up to look like grown women, and have their nails done, wear heavy make-up, get fake tans, and are fed energy drinks and sweets in order to stay awake. It's definitely a form of child abuse.

#### **Here comes Honey Boo Boo (American Television series that aired on TLC-2012 To 2014)**

It's hard not to like little Alana Thompson (aka 'Honey Boo Boo'), she is cute. But, being thrust into the spotlight didn't come without some negativity. The online community did not hold back with nasty comments about how overweight Honey boo boo is. Nobody should have to deal with that, especially not a little girl.

**PehredaarPiya Ki (Indian Television series aired on Sony Entertainment in 2017)**

This soap opera had received a lot of negative attention ever since it first aired on TV. The show's plot deals with a bizarre love story of a 9-year-old boy with an 18-year old girl. The show was slammed for showing honeymoon and first night scenes of an eighteen-year-old girl with a boy half her age.

**The Bitter Realities of Reality Shows**

**Teen Paralysed after Rebuke on Reality Show (TNN, June 28,2008)**

ShinjiniSengupta, a 16-year-old class XI student of a reputed Kolkata school, can now neither speak nor move. She wasn't like this even a month ago. She was a good dancer and acted in tele-serials and had even appeared in a Bengali film. Participating in a dance competition on a Bengali TV channel, Shinjini was rebuked by the judges of the show during the shooting on May 19. The teenager never recovered from the shock of being publicly chided. Shinjini slipped into depression and then lost her speech and finally even the use of her limbs.

**For Reality Show Dream, They Allegedly Murdered 13-Year-Old (Delhi, September 25, 2015)**

A boy and a girl, both 17, have been caught by the police for allegedly kidnapping a 13-year-old boy and then strangling him in a plan to raise money to participate in a reality show. All three were part of a dance troupe and often went out of town together for performances. The accused teenagers wanted to go to Mumbai to participate in a popular dance reality show and plotted to kidnap Swapnesh Gupta for ransom, said senior Delhi Police officer MS Randhawa. They allegedly kidnapped the boy on September 16, after telling him they were all going for a show, and took him to Uttarakhand. After staying the night at a friend's house, the couple allegedly took the boy to a hilltop at Ranikhet town and strangled him with a belt. They allegedly called up the boy's father and demanded a ransom of Rs 60,000.

**Reality star,11 commits suicide (YogeshSadhvani, Mumbai, January 4, 2010)**

In a horrifying case, a child of 11 years took her own life by hanging herself in her house. Neha Sawant's family revealed she was an "amazing dancer" who participated in three TV dance reality shows, including Boogie Woogie. She was also a student of a dance academy, where she excelled in western and folk dances. A few months ago, Neha's family

had pulled her out of the academy, as they wanted her to concentrate on her studies. This was revealed by Neha's father Narendra Sawant. "She was very popular in the neighborhood for her performances. People loved her moves. However, a year ago we realised that her studies were getting affected due to the contests and performances. So we pulled her out of the academy and stopped her from taking part in competitions." However, Neha was apparently very keen on continuing with her classes and her shows.

### **The Lost Celebrity Status**

We celebrate celebrities to a fault. Parents place such a high priority on being famous that any other social status for their children is unacceptable. They all want their children to be epic. Hardly do they realize that success isn't fame and vice versa. Life after stardom is not a bed of roses. Once the kids appear on silver screen or small screen their life changes 360 degrees. They reside in ivory towers not realizing that celebrities have small shelf life. As they grow up into adults they realize they are no more popular, their stardom was just an illusion. It becomes difficult for them to come to terms with reality.

Let's take the example of Drew Barrymore who played a child artist in E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial. Barrymore admits to smoking cigarettes at age nine, drinking alcohol by the time she was eleven, smoking marijuana at the age of twelve, and snorting cocaine at the age of thirteen. At the age of fourteen, she attempted suicide. But you've not heard the half of Drew Barrymore's story. Unemployable as an actor at 15, cleaning toilets at 16, she was twice married and twice divorced by her mid-20s.

There are post success troubles that are difficult to tackle for these children. When they grow up their charm fades and it becomes a question of their survival. Some of them aren't educated enough to look out for other sources of income. They even get addicted to drugs to overcome stress. There are lot of child artists who couldn't make it big in Hindi film industry when they grew up. The list includes Junior Mehmood, Daisy Irani, Sachin, Mayur, Jugal Hansraj, Darsheel Safary just to name a few.

Hollywood also has had many child artists who couldn't cope up with the lost stardom. Who can forget Dana Plato who appeared in American sitcom 'Different Strokes'? She couldn't cope up with her lost celebrity status and went on to pose for Playboy magazine. She featured in several softcore pornography films. She was arrested twice for armed robbery and forging prescriptions, and died in May 1999 from an overdose of prescription medication, deemed suicide. See what "success" has done to these child artists.

Their stories are rife with pain and suffering and heartache, abuse and addiction, crime, divorce and failed relationships - all these constitute showbiz.

### **The Solution**

1. Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 the Commission reiterated that child labour should include all forms of labour. It further provides regulations for the abolition of, and penalties for employing, child labour, as well as provisions for rehabilitation of former child labourers.
2. Protection from all forms of physical, physiological or mental trauma, anxiety, violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in the care of parents, legal guardians, or any other person who have the care of them, (as required under Article 19 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 which has been acceded to by India on 11December, 1992) and the Juvenile Justice Acts.
3. Section 17 of the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005 provides for the constitution of a State Commission for Protection of Child Right (SCPCR) in each State: Violation of child's right to health, psyche, safety, education, recreation, leisure, etc.
4. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, attacking child labour.
5. In 2010-11 the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) released detailed guidelines discussing the problems and challenges faced by child actors in reality shows, T.V. Serials etc. It stated that "Participating in an adult-oriented industry, children are often exposed to unsuitable, anxiety inducing, and at times, dangerous operational hazards and situations. Many of these problems may be generic to the industry, but children cannot handle the emotional and physical trauma. It needs to be remembered that children do not join the industry of their own will. There is always an adult involved – a parent, or caretaker – who takes the decision for them. In the absence of any monitoring mechanism, there is every likelihood of child actors being exploited when it comes to the number of hours worked per day, and short-changed in terms of educational and safety provisions."
6. The Government of India has introduced the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Rules, 2017 ("Rules").

### **Conclusion**

Parents want their children to reach the acme of success. They dream of their children becoming epic and availing all sorts of amenities by the sweat of their brow. Poor kids are torn between their schooling and shooting.

## **Human Rights vis-a-vis Justice System in Present Era : A Publication of Jus Dicere**

Let's not forget that children are children and not money spinning machines. Their education and health should be give prime importance. Production houses should be sensitive towards child rights, especially any form of child abuse-be it mental or physical or both. What remains to be seen is how seriously the provisions under The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 are implemented in India so as to put an end to neo-child labour in the glamour world.