

**ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS), BANGALORE-27**  
**BA EJP JOURNALISM – V SEMESTER**

**JN 5213: INDIAN POLITICS & SOCIETY FOR DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM**

**MID SEMESTER TEST: AUGUST 2019**

**Time: 60 minutes**

**Max Marks- 30**

**Instruction:**

1. This paper is meant for V semester students of BA-EJP course
2. You are allowed to use a Dictionary.
3. You will lose marks for exceeding the suggested word-limit.
4. This paper contains THREE pages and TWO sections

**I: Read the article and answer the questions that follow.**

For the last several years, the months of February-March witness peculiar traffic in the undulating Aravalli range of mountains in Rajasthan. Very early in the morning, a number of jeeps make their way from the interior villages of South Rajasthan, travelling all the way down to agricultural farmlands in North Gujarat.

As the evening sets in, the direction of traffic gets reversed and the jeeps head back from Gujarat to the Rajasthan villages, stopping at designated points to let off passengers. Bleary-eyed and with aching limbs, the same passengers wait for jeeps to pick them up at the crack of dawn next morning, only to return back in the evening.

The saga goes on, in a relentless routine. Covering distances of up to a hundred kilometres on each side, these jeeps are customarily ferrying unusual passengers, i.e., children and adolescents – often filling up to 40 or more young people in seats that are meant to hold no more than six adults in one vehicle, including the driver. Literally piled on top of each other inside the jeep, every square inch of space inside the vehicle is filled.

Sitting atop the roof, sitting on the hot bonnet area, cramming themselves near the driver's seat or simply standing on the foot pedals all around the vehicle and holding on to the doors, this small army of child and adolescent workers is headed to work in the potato farms of north Gujarat.

Seeing them in groups, chatting, laughing and enjoying a snack, or feeling energised by the fresh wind in their faces takes attention away from the fact that these young Adivasis are the latest conquest of capitalist labour exploitation in rural India, playing an important role in capitalist reproduction and accumulation.

**Employing a docile workforce**

While extreme poverty and dispossession is almost a tragically generalised condition of Adivasi life in contemporary India, pushing children and young adults, especially females, out of their ecosystems – forested areas and natural habitats – and transforming them into migrant labourers is a relatively new phenomenon.

Putting in about 8 to 10 hours of work in the blazing hot fields and digging up the soil with bare hands, young workers are put to task to pull out potatoes from the earth. The farmers who employ them have no misgivings about using children to get this work done even though the chain of employment works through an indirect route – through contractors, who also happen to be the owners of the jeeps, and, invariably, people with some local power and influence in the villages.

Hence, their ability to muster up a workforce of docile children who copiously and silently dig away and place the harvested potatoes in small baskets and then in bigger bags. In the process, they have

made several runs each time between the basket and bigger bags, and have also sorted and 'graded' each potato according to size.

Periodically, through the day, when the bigger bags become full, adult workers seal them and haul them up to a waiting truck. By the end of the workday, the truck is full, holding about 8,000 kilograms, or 80 quintals of potatoes, neatly sorted, classified and packed. They will be sold soon, thanks to the unwavering labour performed by children.

Just before sundown, the children assemble and regroup. It has been a hard day in the sun, with only an hour's lunch break in between. Time to head home. The jeep driver-owner-contractor gathers his flock and the swaying, shaking, swerving convoy winds its way across the steep climbs and cavernous roadways between the hills and mountains. Dim oil lamps and a frugal plate of food awaits each child's return. The child eats and falls asleep, only to be woken up a few hours later. It is time to go back to work.

### **Systemic exploitation**

The structural aspects of capitalist production that bind child workers in their nexus are simply shocking in their own right. Beginning with the question of why potatoes are grown, why children are employed, what is the wage return, what are the structures of accountability, safety and security for children, one enters deep into the raw and disturbing realities of the ways in which socio-economic life in rural areas in the country are organised.

Potatoes are grown to make chips – the smart snack for an upwardly mobile and consumerist middle class. Potato chips symbolise not only a certain western urbanity and status (compared to Indian snacks like *bhujia*), they are relatively inexpensive since one can buy them in small packs, conveniently packaged, and most importantly, they are ready to be eat anytime, anywhere.

Clearly, they satisfy not only the taste buds for the emerging urban Indian palette, but they are also a profitable crop for growers. Genetic technology has ensured that specially developed varieties of potatoes are used for making chips and similar snacks like potato *sev*, *chewda* and *chakdi*.

These potatoes are even used in the process of manufacturing a certain type of ghee. High in starch content, they ensure a uniformly crisp end product. It matters little that this variety needs to be sprayed with pesticides every single day in order to derive a blemish free and uninfected crop. The harmful effects of severely high pesticide spraying are well known even to the field workers – they do not even consume these potatoes, and advise visitors to do the same!

Once planted, these hybrid tubers can mature and be ready for harvest in a quicker turnaround compared to crops like wheat, rice, lentils etc. Potatoes do not block the farmland for prolonged periods. Once harvested, the land is free to be used again for another crop rotation – thus making it economically viable for the grower, who would ideally want to make as much profit from the land as is possible in one season.

The story of the potato crop does not end at harvest. Once taken out of the soil, the spoilage factor in these tubers is high, and they need to be put in cold storages rapidly. As soon as the child workers have filled up the big bags and the trucks are full, the produce is taken to a cold storage facility – a number of them have sprung up in the area in the last few years.

The potatoes sit there until it is time for them to be converted into fast-moving and magically flavoured snacks that betray no trace of not only the trails of labour exploitation that went into producing them, but also of the devastatingly harmful effects it has on health. Among other things, this ubiquitous snack also offers a fascinating insight into what Marx actually meant by 'commodity fetishism'.

### **Meagre returns for the child workers**

The child workers, on the other hand, slave through the harvest season – with a promise of Rs 200 for a day's work. For someone coming from extreme poverty, this seems like a lot of money, and parents are only too willing to let the local contractor-jeep owner seek their child out for work.

Some parents even suggest that their children be kept on the farm itself for the entire duration of the harvesting – at least it takes the burden of feeding and the hassle and dangers of daily commuting on steeply contoured hilly roads out of the equation. But such arrangements are not possible, because there are no facilities on the farm to feed and house the children. The farmer is certainly not interested in taking up additional responsibility of looking after child workers.

The jeep owner, to whom the wages are handed over, to be given to the parents, takes a Rs 50 'cut' from every child's daily wage of Rs 200 – this is also called transportation fee or commuting charges, in addition to a daily convenience fee of Rs 15. Sometimes, the jeep owner provides free drinking water – a definite perk in the hot weather.

While he is able to make up to Rs 2,500 and more every day from these deductions (given that he ferries up to 40 to 50 children in one vehicle), the child earns anything between Rs 135 to Rs 130 for a day's work. At the end of each harvest month, the total earning may add up to Rs 4,000 or so.

While this money will be handy in the poverty struck household, one is left in wonderment at the sheer position of disadvantage and precarity that frames the lives of child workers, as their labour caters to serve what is largely an urban taste. What is worse is that this labour is not going to help them arrive at any kind of stability or social sanction.

Unless the state and civil society come together to end this exploitative labour, and simultaneously rehabilitate the children into a qualitatively better life, child workers will, unfortunately, be perpetually relegated to an unheard and unaccounted life in the margins.

**I.A. Answer the following questions in about 150-200 words each: (2x10=20)**

1. Write a pitch for a news feature that looks to cover labour and living conditions in your city.
2. Frame ten questions for the Chief Minister of Gujarat based on this article.

**II. Reflect on your experience of talking to family members and then writing a piece about family histories. (150-200 words) (10 marks)**