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NICKELED & DIMED



TRENDING

*PLASTIC
IN THE OCEANS*

UNWRAPPING "A PLASTIC OCEAN"

BY SHREYA RAMCHANDRAN



"A Plastic Ocean" (2016) is a documentary that stars the infamous material plastic, and the woes it brings through its use and improper disposal.

WHERE DOES THE DISPOSED PLASTIC GO?

From our simple action of disposal, plastic finds its way to the ocean and sea. From there it travels a great distance along the ocean, propelled by the movements of the gyres (large system of rotating ocean currents), and slowly breaks down with the strong rays of the sun. What is left floating on open waters are millions of jagged micro-plastics that find their way into the stomachs of animals. This destroys their digestion system as the plastic pieces fill up their stomachs, affecting their ability to take in actual food and thus, they die of starvation. The plastic also contains toxic chemicals such as Bisphenol A (BPA) that flow through their body. Subsequently, it finds its way into our digestive system, since aquatic animals as a good source of protein are consumed by people worldwide. BPA causes Estrogenic Activity (EA) by entering the body and mimicking the hormone estrogen (important for many developmental and psychological processes in the human body) causing numerous health issues including diabetes, obesity, among others.

If the garbage is not disposed of in the sea, it is disposed of on large islands that are laden with manmade mountains of waste. High income countries export between 10 to 25 percent of their waste to poorer countries, adding to the already mounting garbage. As time passes, this pile of garbage starts to accumulate methane, which on reaching a certain temperature, incinerates and causes high amounts of air pollution leading to pulmonary diseases. What makes the situation worse is that many of these islands are home to families, who have to live their life on roads made of garbage, and stench that would make anyone sick to the stomach. This is where the distinction between the standard of living across the world stands out.

POSSIBLE CULPRIT: OUR "OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND" ATTITUDE

These effects that pan out from the moment we dispose of a plastic item is due to our "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" attitude, resulting in a lack of accountability and a culture of disavowal. This attitude is especially prevalent within companies, where once the commodities are manufactured and sold, what happens to it afterwards is not part of the company's priorities. We simultaneously know, but don't really know what happens to the plastic item beyond our use, therefore, we tend to make the broader assumption that it "disappears" to the "middle of nowhere", and it is taken care of by "someone". However, there is nothing that truly disappears, and there is no middle of nowhere. Moreover, who is this "someone"?

WHAT IS THE PATH FORWARD?

One of the solutions proposed in the documentary was that the manufacturing companies should be held accountable for the proper disposal of their products, and the costs that come with it. This solution is slow to come about since companies, being profit maximizers (cost minimizers), would not want to take up such a large expense to their books. The Director of Axion Polymers, a US based engineering-led company operating in the resource recovery sector, Roger Morton, provides an opposition to this viewpoint of high costs behind recycled plastic. He believes that the cost of plastic going to landfills is more, and that recycled plastic is very valuable. This is because once the plastic is recycled, it can be made into nodules, which can be used in products including plastic bottles, headlamps, cars, etc. If everyone can be consolidated to this solution, then people can invest more in recycling technology, thus making it a profitable business. It is a matter of economies of scale, with more people reducing the cost of adopting this method of disposal.

CONCLUSION

With the increase in interconnectedness of our world, it is not surprising that our actions can have consequences that span miles across the planet. "A Plastic Ocean", brings to light this phenomenon, highlighting the importance of accountability for our actions. Through the responsible use and proper disposal of plastic, we can manage to improve our well being and the well being of others.

KASHMIRI FEMINISM: HISTORY OF REFUSAL, REJECTION, AND RESISTANCE



BY SABAHAH ALI WANI



Before understanding or claiming to define 'Kashmiri Feminism', one needs to consider the representation of Kashmiri women in popular media and culture, and more broadly in the Indian imagination. Ather Zia states that there is a 'persistent trope in Indian imagination' where Kashmiri women are perceived and stereotyped as powerless, passive, oppressed and dependent beings. Stereotyping of Kashmiri women is a tool, which is carefully fabricated and exploited by the state to legitimize the military occupation, abusive nationalism, and violence carried out against the people in the valley.

RESISTANCE AGAINST THE MILITARY OCCUPATION

Insha Malik explains that even though several socio-religious women organizations existed and functioned before the armed struggle started in Kashmir (pre - 1980's era); Kashmiri women emerged as powerful figures in the armed resistance against the military occupation in the 1980s specifically. The rise of women and their increasing role in the ongoing freedom movement in Kashmir debunks the arguments which define Kashmiri women as a passive community, who do not possess political opinions and are misguided by Kashmiri Muslim men.

The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Kashmir was co-founded by Parveena Ahangar, a Kashmiri woman whose son, Javaid Ahangar, suddenly disappeared on the night of 18th August 1990. The enforced disappearance of her son led her to start a movement against the enforced disappearances of the people in the valley and then, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons came into being. APDP, under the leadership of Parveena Ahangar, has documented about 8000 reported cases of enforced disappearances in the valley.

FAILURE OF INDIAN FEMINISM

The Indian feminist circles and their debates around gendered violence in Kashmir are problematic and contestable. First, they don't acknowledge the existence of occupation in Kashmir and second, even if they do, the Kashmiri women are not considered as an active part of the resistance against the military occupation. Additionally, after being excluded from the Indian feminist dialogue, Kashmiri women are conveniently ignored and loosely thrown around for socially and culturally backed objectification and exploitation across communities and geographies.

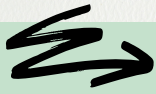
The Indian feminists do not comment on the exact political question that revolves around the life of Kashmiri women and hence, this particular practice of feminism loses value in terms of solidarity and allyship to Kashmiri women and their struggle. Insha Malik argues that Indian feminism disregards the effect of militarization upon the Kashmiri women in the same way as White feminism ignored the aspect of race for black women. Situating the respective case in the category of imperial or colonial feminism, Ather Zia defines Indian Feminism (in this case) as 'imperial brown feminism'.

KASHMIRI WOMEN AND INDIAN NATIONALISM

With regards to the patriarchal conception of the Indian Nation, Nitasha Kaul comments that here, Kashmir is to be protected from the oppressive Muslim and Pakistani gaze and, on the Pakistani side; it is to be protected from the clutches of the Hindu majority state. Further, she writes that the military occupation of Kashmir depicts India as a patriarchal—masculine figure beating, abusing, torturing and killing Kashmiris to have control over the body of Kashmir and occupy it by force. This idea is central to the politics and nationalist beliefs of India itself, where possession of Kashmir is considered vital and symbolic for the existence of the Indian nation.

The protection of Kashmiri women seems to be central to the Indian Nationalist Project but from whom are they to be protected? And if they are to be protected, where does the agency of Kashmiri women lie? The rapes, sexual violence, domestic violence, and abductions are committed against Kashmiri women by armed forces as well as by militants and Kashmiri men. In the Indian Islamophobic Nationalist project, Kashmiri women are to be protected from the violent, barbaric and orthodox Muslim men while the crimes of armed forces against Kashmiri women are not even documented or recognized, let alone given justice.

MIDDLE CLASS ENVIRONMENTALISM: FACT OR FACADE?



BY ASHIKA THOMAS



The relation between the wealth of a person and their attitude towards environmental conservation is evident in various ways—food habits, waste management, transportation means, and the way they directly engage with the environment. But where do the emerging middle class in India lie in this spectrum of environmentalism on the basis of wealth? Any observation of the middle class is faced with one problem: the definition. It is both vague and inconsistent. They are not a fixed group like the Below Poverty Line (BPL) set of households, as it is difficult to define them by an income or a consumption threshold. The size of the middle class also changes with its definition and so does its composition. This calls for us not to make any generalization of the class but instead identify common patterns.

ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR

Ramchandra Guha had divided India's population into categories among which the poor form the ecosystem people, "generally tribals who subsist on the gifts of the land" and ecological refugees "who have been displaced by large development projects". We know that the poor engage directly with the environment often through their political rights. Either they are being evacuated from their residences owing to infrastructure building or are being restricted from using environmental resources. Despite having environmental movements which have grown from a community to nationwide movements gaining a lot of traction, the poor people's environmentalism doesn't start with a wide scope of the problems they face. Their immediate surroundings and their communities are the only stakeholders which concern them.

ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE RICH:

Environmentalism of the rich, on the flip side, fits existing corporate models and avoids much needed institutional and structural changes. While it is not completely ineffective, it hides existing problems like excess consumption and wastage. Consuming certain products consciously while over-consuming others hardly solves the problem, as Peter Dauvergne writes in his book 'Environmentalism of the Rich'.

MIDDLE-CLASS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Researcher Emma Mawdsley points out that the Indian middle class shapes the public opinion on environmentalism. This is because of their wide online presence and participation in "media, politics, scientific establishment, NGOs, bureaucracy, environmental institutions and the legal system". The middle class also helps us understand the relation between poverty and environmentalism better as they act as a neutral group, usually devoid of any political overtones. While the rich buy "green" brands to support the environment, the middle class is very open to the booming fast fashion industry of India. The fashion industry as a whole is the second biggest water consuming industry in the world and releases 8-10% of the carbon emissions. Fast fashion speeds up the production and distribution of clothes to match current "trends". With India's growing middle class with higher disposable income, cheap luxury has become a status symbol.

Borrowing Guha's remark, "empty-belly" environmentalism will always have elements of equitable redistribution of resources. In this matter, middle class environmentalism seems to lean towards "full stomach" environmentalism wherein basic needs are met, which leads to one focussing on the environment and its conservation. But the group has a not-in-my-backyard approach to problems as they are more insulated from environmental issues than the poor. They give importance to environmental issues but not at the cost of their income and time to push for structural changes to environmentalism that could benefit the poor. The fundamental issue is this, the middle class do not see their actions having an impact on the larger population of the world. Hence, they choose to remain indifferent. The current middle class group's goal is to build up from the capital and wealth accumulation of their immediate previous generations, and so the luxuries that now seem attainable to them take up more importance than the state of the environment, leading to a lack of collective action.

In this manner, the environmentalism of the middle class and poor are different. The rich invest in eco-consumption like organic foods and "slow fashion" but since the middle class largely look for cheaper ways, they will look for more cost-effective ways to support the environmental movement. Whether you can "afford" to conserve is what now determines it. The irony of conservation.

4 DAY WORKWEEK: A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO MODERN DAY STRESS?



BY GARIMA AGARWAL &
WYNNONA FERNANDES



Japan has been infamous for its toxic work culture. Karoshi is a Japanese term meaning ‘death due to overwork’. The Japanese employees started putting in additional efforts to profess their undying loyalty to impress their bosses. Japanese workers have been found to work overtime counting for at least 80 hours a month, out of which many of those hours were not even paid for. The Japanese labour environment has moulded in such a way that working 70 hours a week is seen to be “normal” and honourable. This enormous burden of stress soon resulted in death being reported from suicide, heart stroke, and sleep deprivation. The major medical causes of karoshi-deaths are heart attack and stroke, including subarachnoid haemorrhage (18.4%), cerebral haemorrhage (17.2%), cerebral thrombosis or infarction (6.8%), myocardial infarction (9.8%), heart failure (18.7%), and other causes (29.1%). The pressure continues to pervade and due to this, the number of irregular workers has risen from 10% in the 1990s to 40% in 2021. However, even with high working hours, Japan’s productivity rate is stooping low. Longer working hours has led to low spending and low fertility in the economy which has affected Japan’s GDP drastically.

JAPAN'S CURRENT POLICY

The Japanese government has acknowledged the dangers of Karoshi and attempted to enact certain policies to counteract it. The Centre introduced the concept of ‘premium Fridays’ where workers were given a chance to leave the office by 3 p.m. on the last Friday of each month. Studies showed that not even 4% of employees left early. Companies even mandated their employees to take vacations which were also left un-utilised. Unfortunately, when none of the policies seemed to be working, Japan, in June 2021, released annual economic policy guidelines, proposed that companies allow their employees to opt for a four day work week instead of five. This move has been seen to improve the productivity of the employees and their work-life balance

THE IMPACT OF A 4-DAY WORK WEEK ON JAPANESE COMPANIES AND THEIR EMPLOYEES

The 4-day work week may seem like an unrealistic paradigm shift but it has been considered as a potential method during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep up with productivity and maintain employee morale and health.

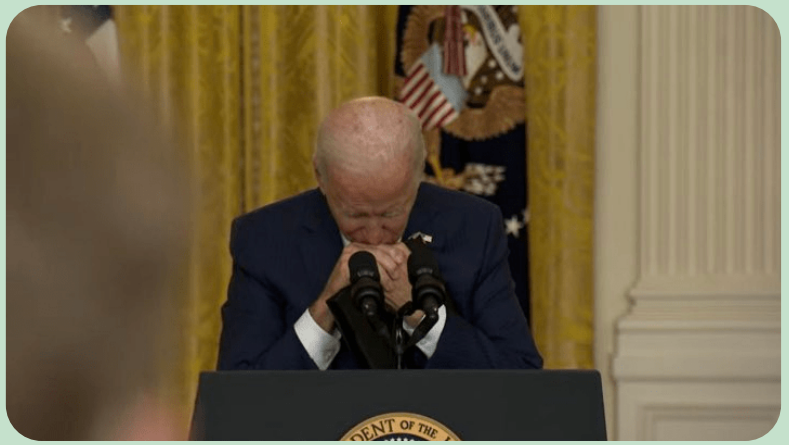
Long working hours deteriorate the concentration of individuals and eventually, they only work half as efficiently as they can. There have been many experiments and studies conducted by companies like Vouchercloud, Microsoft, Henley Business School which proved that reductions in working hours were better for the employees as well as the companies in terms of better work-life balance, increased employee satisfaction, higher productivity, and reduced operating costs. It showed that with shortened weeks, the employees significantly reduced their time-wasting activities which thereby led to an increase in productivity. employees took around 25% less time off, which increased productivity. The company reported a staggering productivity rate at about 40% with more efficient meetings. In terms of employee well-being, the Microsoft experiment found that by the end of the experiment employees were happier and more productive. It was observed that there was an increase in productivity, fall in absenteeism and drop in the operating costs with total savings observed to be 92 billion pounds (\$120 billion).

Despite such studies, companies and employers are apprehensive that an extra day off for the employees would be a hole in their pockets as they might incur huge costs eventually in terms of decreased productivity and increased operating cost. However, as the experiments have proven it, decrease in productivity and increasing in operating cost seems least likely. If this reason also doesn’t satisfy the companies, one thing the companies must also keep in mind is the changing times where over 60% of Millennials and Gen Z are ready to take pay cuts to have a 4-day workweek. Hence, companies adapting to the demand of the new generation will have a better pool of applicants and will be able to retain their best employees.

BIDEN'S ROLE IN THE UNRAVELING OF AFGHANISTAN CRISIS



BY HARSHEEN SAHNI



Bush said on unleashing the War on Terror, "This war will not be quick and this war will not be easy...It [Afghanistan's history] is one of initial success followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure." Then with a grin, "We're not going to repeat that mistake." As irony has it, they did. Twenty years later, the exact words found an echo in the halls of Biden's White House.

This article will discuss the errors in judgement by the Biden administration in relation to their decisions and policy concerning Afghanistan. Then, it will explore alternative points of view. In the end, the article will raise a concern about the lack of empathy for Afghan civilians.

BIDEN'S MORAL BETRAYAL

In January 2021, Democrats set the expectation: "Biden will restore America's moral leadership." Fast forward eight months, and we are confronting quite the opposite. The P.O.T.U.S. loftily defended the fall of Kabul, "American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves." Elliot Ackerman, a former U.S. Marine, intelligence officer, political author, and most importantly, a veteran in both the Iraq and Afghanistan war, calls it "a slap in the face not only to our Afghan allies but to Americans — such as me — who mixed our spilt blood with theirs." Ackerman then recounts war stories of the time Afghan soldiers went above and beyond to save American lives.

Moreover, Biden's justification did not address the root cause behind the fall of Kabul. The U.S. funded corruption hollowed out the foundation of the Afghan military, which collapsed before our sight. 'Ghost soldiers' is a term that frequently comes up in the context of the Afghan military. They refer to Afghan soldiers that exist on paper - payrolls to be specific - but not in reality. The existence of ghost soldiers allows a few elite to bag their salaries. The Afghanistan Papers prove that Biden was personally, elaborately briefed about 'ghost soldiers' filling up 50%-70% of the police posts. But those concerns were silenced. The remaining, real Afghan forces had low morale to defend a corrupt, inefficient system that unfairly benefited a few.

Following their hasty exit, the U.S. troops left several American partners deserted in Afghanistan. In his article, Mr Deepanshu Mohan, associate professor of Economics at J.G.U., elaborates how abandoning and insulting American allies' blemishes Biden's long-term commitment to human rights. These allies always stood by the U.S. All told, the Biden administration's public posture sends the clear message that "Afghan lives just don't matter".

IN DEFENCE OF BIDEN

The consequences of the US forces' exit were always going to be, as Trump put it, 'both predictable and unacceptable'. However - in Biden's defence - it had to be done, eventually. Three previous US administrations passed the baton of ending the war to the next administration. It is plausible to say that no amount of indefinite delays would have made the U.S. withdrawal less tragic. The Biden administration massively botched the execution, but there could not have been a "happy ending" to a futile 20-year conflict with the prevailing geopolitical threats.

A CALL FOR EMPATHY

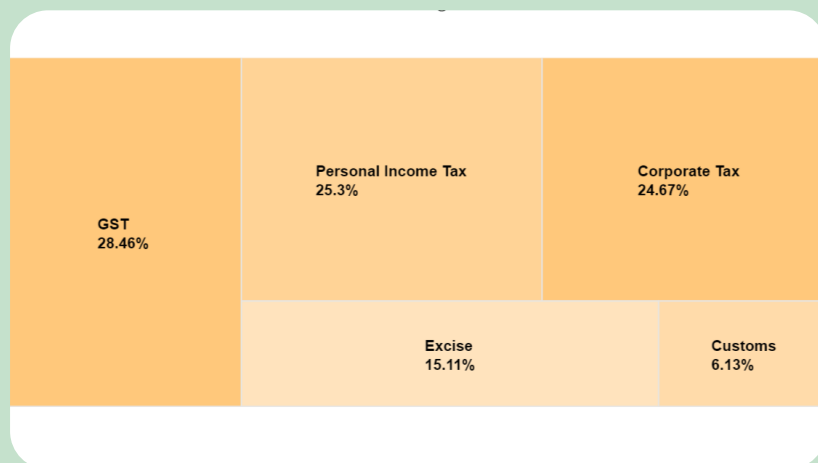
U.S.A.'s partisan culture has festered in the face of this crisis. Even before the U.S. troops' chaotic exit concluded, Washington reporters ran amok in frantic pursuit of finger-pointing. Republicans criticised Biden's decision making. Liberals traced the failure back to Bush and Trump actions. However, the fact of the matter remains: Afghanistan is the culmination of 20 years of bipartisan mistakes. The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (2014-16) Mckinley rightly stated that the responsibility of the Afghanistan crisis should be "widely shared".

The issue with the American public discourse is that the 'boxing match' steers focus from the real tragedy. This tragedy eludes to Afghan civilians - victims of power-lust - reduced to a mere pawn in Realpolitik. Turning the sacrifice of martyrs and civilians into political leverage is not unknown to politics but is a disgrace nonetheless.

SHOULD INCOME TAX BE ABOLISHED



SUSHAMEENDRA BALAJI



Income tax abolition is a highly debated and controversial proposal in the country today. About one fourth of the central government's revenue comes from personal income tax collection. While some economists argue that the loss of revenue for the government would be detrimental, others opine that more money in the hands of people would result in expansion of the economy.

REVENUE SOURCES FOR THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The government mainly collects two types of taxes—direct and indirect. More than half of the revenue collected comes from direct taxes and the rest come from indirect taxes like GST and excise duties. An approximate breakup of how much each type of tax constitutes in the total government's income is given in the diagram in the top right of the page.

THE POSITIVES OF INCOME TAX ABOLITION

Suppose income tax gets abolished in the union budget. What would be the advantages of having zero income tax? First, more money in the hands of people. When people have some excess cash in hand, there is a natural tendency to spend a little more apart from saving. When a significant percent of the population does this extra spending, it results in some additional income to some percent of the rest of the population. Second, there is a possibility of bringing black money back into the economy. According to the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), illicit wealth accumulated in India amounts to anywhere between 384 billion dollars to 490 billion dollars. This is approximately equals 14% of India's GDP. Many argue that a significant percent of this wealth got stashed because of high tax rates, and evading Income tax alone made more financial sense. Abolition of Income tax could make this money legitimate, increasing the circulation of money in the economy.

THE NEGATIVES OF INCOME TAX ABOLITION

If personal income tax is abolished, then the central government loses about one fourth of its income immediately. India recorded a fiscal deficit of 9.3% of the GDP in the year 2020-21 according to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. This figure would skyrocket as a consequence. One primary reason governments tax is to fund building of public infrastructure and spend on welfare programs. Direct taxes are the easiest way of revenue collection for establishments across the world. In developing countries like India, there still remain a large number of people who lie below the poverty line. There is a natural obligation for the state to support them through various welfare programs. To make up for a huge revenue shortage caused by IT abolition would not be easy, and a lot of welfare programs could be put temporarily on hold. To manage the revenue shortfall, the government may increase GST rates on commonly consumed goods, making them costlier for the common person. The central government recently hiked excise duty on petroleum products to make up for the revenue shortage caused due the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This is an indicator of potential government responses to manage a fall in government income.

IS IT PRACTICALLY POSSIBLE TO ABOLISH INCOME TAX?

No government would want to lose a fourth of its revenue overnight. Especially in India's case, direct taxpayers are so few in number that they are not a significant vote bank for any party. Rather, it would only hurt them if welfare programs are put on temporary hold because beneficiaries of these programs are significant in number and can influence an election. Income tax cannot be abolished until the government finds alternative sources of revenue. There is a caveat here—it should not directly impact the common man. One suggestion given by noted economists is introduction of inheritance tax. Simply put, this is a tax levied on people who inherit their ancestral properties/savings. Many western countries like the UK levy inheritance tax of anywhere up to 40% on their citizens. As any other policy, a zero-income tax regime has both advantages and disadvantages. In the short run, the fiscal deficit would shoot up. Several welfare programs and infrastructure projects could be stalled due to dip in revenue. On the other hand, increased circulation of money could result in rapid expansion of the economy. Surely, the idea of doing away with income tax is not a preposterous one!

LOSING INNOCENCE OF CHILDHOOD

BY BEHIND THE SCENES NGO



In recent years, owing to the pandemic, a lot of attention has been given to migrant workers and their families who suffered great losses while trying to arrange a way to reach home. However, it is important to shift our attention to the children of the workers as well, who not only suffered mentally and physically but were also denied their childhood.

The term “child labour” is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. Child labour is a problem that has persisted since before the pandemic as well and has been a major block to the increase in the number educated children and adults for decades now. According to a 2017 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the number of child labourers around the world fell from 246 million in 2000 to around 152 million in 2016. However, millions of children continue to be exploited for cheap labour, especially in developing countries like India.

One of the main reasons for child labour in India has been poverty and the inability of the parents to afford basic education for their children. The endless cycle of poverty forces the children to enter the labour force at a very early stage of life, sacrificing their childhood in the process. They are made to work in hazardous conditions and industries such as working for extremely low wages in textile factories, back breaking work in brick making factories, selling bidis on the street, working in steel extraction, gem polishing and carpet manufacturing factories. A direct consequence of it is hampering the education of the children and pushing them even further into the poverty cycle. Many times in society, a child with a bleak future is condoned for his own situation and left with no hope. Such social norms hinder their ability to think, resulting in them undermining their own worth and potential. In India, an estimate of 10.1 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 years-old are engaged in work. Another consequence of child labour can be child abuse wherein the children that are employed through unfair means are exploited either for extremely low wages or are sold for human trafficking. The commercial sexual exploitation of children is among the worst forms of child labour and in India there are around 1.2 million children involved in prostitution. There can be many other reasons such as migration, emergencies in families that call for extra money, bonded labour or even lack of decent work for adults and adolescents.

In a country where the situation of children and exploitation is already rampant, the pandemic further intensified this situation by bringing the economy to an absolute standstill. This increased the pressure that children faced from their families to enter the workforce at an earlier stage, denying them any chance of education they might have had. Additionally, due to the shift in the education sector to an online platform, many children with financial difficulties would not have been able to keep up with this shift and in extreme cases would have had to drop out of school. Thus, as a means for money, the children would have to take up small jobs to sustain themselves and their families.

Dignity of not just adults but children is also vital, since children are the ones who grow up to become the future of the country. However, by denying them such development and growth, we are abandoning any dreams they might have for themselves. There are multiple initiatives that international organizations such as the UN, UNICEF, ILO (International Labour Organization) and many others have taken to reduce the problem of child labour in their capacity. As an extension of such an initiative, the UN declared 12th June as International Day Against Child Labour to help more children come out of their precadiment and lead more stable lives. Committed towards ensuring dignity of labour among blue-collar workers, Behind The Scenes is an NGO working to guarantee such vulnerable children the rights they deserve. This commitment extends to promoting the wellbeing, access to resources and financial stability of the children who might be left to fend for themselves in testing times.





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SWABHIMAAN: The premise of Swabhimaan is based on the themes of Gender and Entrepreneurship but not limited to the conventional meanings they are commonly perceived as.

VISUAL STORY BOARD : Visual Storyboards are an experimental method for visually archiving our research team's fieldwork, with a more exclusive focus on studying the lives and livelihoods of unsecured workers and communities across India.