

MUMBAI MIRROR | PRINT VIEW

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Concluding part of a series

Withering cotton kids

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Pentlavally (AP): On a hot September afternoon, the hybrid cottonseed farms in this village buzz with activity. However, from a distance, one can only make out a sea of heads bobbing amidst the green plants, not because the cottonseed plants are very tall but because the workers on the field are really young.

Thousands of children, as young as six, are employed in hybrid cottonseed farms of Mahbubnagar and Kurnool districts of Andhra Pradesh, working for 12 to 16 hours every day for Rs 15 to Rs 20. The farm owners sell the produce of their hard work to seed companies.

It's been over three decades since hybrid cottonseed farms first started employing children but this issue got global attention ever since multinational seed companies entered the Indian market about seven years ago. While farmers employ these children, the companies, both Indian and MNCs, have been in the eye of storm for 'encouraging' child labour practice.

The companies dealing with hybrid cotton earlier maintained that they sub contracted cottonseed production work to farmers and were not directly involved in employing children. But, after many deliberations with child rights activists, these companies have entered into contracts with farmers stating that children should not be employed. "But they are not saying enough. What is the penalty for employing children? Have the companies taken any action against any farmer for employing children yet," questions Shantha Sinha, Magsaysay award winner and secretary of MV Foundation, that has been spearheading the campaign to end child labour in cottonseed farms.

Seed companies, on their part, note that they have made initiatives to spread awareness among farmers.

The Association of Seed Industries (ASI) passed a resolution in 2002 that its members would not use child labour and the clause was also included in ASI's code of conduct. "Companies are not directly involved in the production of seeds but we did this as part of social responsibility," says V R Kaundinya, alternate president, ASI, adding that farmers have been told that they would not get production contracts if they continue to employ children.

While this has resulted in greater awareness levels among farmers, it has not helped in tilting statistics in the favour of child workers and the solution continues to remain elusive. Illegal Bt cotton growers have only compounded the problem as there are no checks on them.

Farm owners are now aware that they are indulging in illegal activity, but it hasn't really stopped them from employing children. "We can't afford adult workers. They charge three times more than child workers," says Anji Reddy, a farm owner in Pentlavally village who grows Bt cotton. He says that while he sells 750 grams of cottonseeds for Rs 210 and makes little money, seed companies sell 450 gm packets for Rs 1,800 to Rs 2,000. "I can employ adults if companies pay me more," he says, which seed companies disagree with.

While ASI seems sincere in its effort and has even constituted a Child Labour Eradication Group, sadly, only 23 per cent of hybrid cottonseed production is done by the ASI members. The AP Seedsmen Association comprises a larger chunk of cottonseed companies and it had also passed a resolution in 2001 to stop using child workers on these farms.

But, the association now claims that there is no child labour on the farms. "Earlier, there were hundreds and thousands of children on these farms but no longer so. Only academicians are thinking that there is child labour on cottonseed farms," says Venkat Reddy, secretary of AP Seedsmen Association, adding that they have "sensitized" people to stop employing kids.

Reddy's optimism is of little help to child workers like Laxmi, 12. With a glance she estimates the number of flowers left for pollination. As the sun sets, her gaze shifts to children in school uniforms heading home.

Child labour facts



While farmers employ their children, the companies, both Indian and MNCs, have been in the eye of storm for 'encouraging' child labour practice

The number of children working on the farms has declined over the last few years not because of awareness drives but due to severe droughts leading to declining production areas. These figures do not include child labour in illegal Bt Cotton farms that have mushroomed in the state

Year 2000-01 Total Area Under Cottonseed Production - 24,783 acres **children employed** - 2,47,830

Year 2003-04 Total Area Under Cottonseed Production - 14,000 acres **children employed** - 82,875

(Source: Study on Child Labour In Hybrid Cottonseed Production In AP: Recent Developments by Davuluri Venkateswarlu)

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