

## A Personal View of Child Labor and Its Depiction in *That's Why I'm Working*

Directed by Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele

Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films

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1999. 53 minutes, English subtitles

By Nanda Shrestha

**T**hat's *Why I'm Working* is a deeply moving story of young boys and girls in the urban trenches of Dacca (Dhaka), Bangladesh, a country with more than 110 million people. This is a story that is very close to my heart, as it closely reflects my own personal experience as a boy growing up in Nepal. Embedded in this story is the instinct and imperative of survival. It is moving, not so much because it is a familiar Dickensian tale of children trapped in poverty, but because children themselves tell their stories in a fashion that leaves little margin for manipulation.

In one sense the story is quite simple, as its plot revolves around the theme of child labor as a product of poverty. But at the same time, vividly revealed in this simplicity is the complexity of child labor in a country like Bangladesh that many Westerners fail to fully grasp with their dichotomous conception of good and evil. To a common Western eye with a myopic and distorted historical view, there is very little room for an interpretation of child labor as anything other than evil. Anybody who is inclined to see child labor in this light ought to see this documentary before passing his/her preconceived judgment.

Although geographically confined to Dhaka, child labor is a story with a universal bent as it details the drama of the debilitating reality that life bestows upon countless children submerged in poverty. It transcends both time and space, for child labor is a historical reality that defies any geographical boundaries. What we observe in Dhaka with a profound sense of despair and disgust is, in other words, simply one geographical manifestation of this historical scoundrel. The documentary, *That's Why I'm Working*, begins with a scene that shows a young boy, perhaps twelve years of age, rummaging through a small field of scattered garbage in front of a high-rise slum dwelling complex. With this backdrop, the documentary quickly moves on to its central theme in which young boys and girls—most of whom seem to be between the ages of seven and twelve—begin telling their personal stories, each with a little variation but all seeped in poverty, which follows them like their own shadows from rural fringes to urban trenches.

Most of these children moved with their families who came to Dhaka looking for jobs. Some left their homes in the country-



Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

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side because of flooding, and others because they could no longer support their families back in villages, where resources and jobs are scarce. Some moved to Dhaka so their children could have a chance to have a better education. Regardless of individual family reasons for relocating to Dhaka, these children now find themselves doing some kind of menial work to earn precious cash so they can contribute toward the survival of their family life. They are rarely more than one misfortune away from bare subsistence and destitution, which are always lurking around the corner as if it were a pre-charted destiny of the masses.

As the scenes unfold, children are seen making incense, wrapping candies, and producing plumbing parts in a makeshift foundry. In one episode, there is a girl breaking rocks into small pieces with a hammer, perhaps for some road construction work. Her innocent face exudes a mixture of shy smile and intense sadness at the same time. She goes to school for a couple of hours, works as a stone breaker, and in the evenings takes care of her younger siblings as well as household chores. At the end of her story, she says, "I cut stones because I am poor." Then she goes quiet, her face looks blank as if her blood suddenly stopped flowing like her own life frozen in poverty. As the silence envelops the whole scene and the camera rolls, the only thing that moves is her muted sadness.

In another equally powerful episode, a young boy talks about his family. With tears dropping, he details his father's prolonged illness and how it has inflicted tremendous hardship on his family. He is very concerned about his father's health. Both he and his mother have to work hard to pay for his father's treat-

## ESSAYS

ment and to survive. Similar to the girl in the previous cut, the young boy goes to school, works to earn some cash, and looks after his baby brother at home. At one point, the two brothers are shown at home. The baby is crying hard because of hunger, but not much food is there to soothe him, so the boy soaks some rice in water. He pours the rice-soaked water in a bottle feeder and feeds the baby. The baby stops crying. He does not get enough food these days, the boy says. He misses the past when his father used to give him all the food he wanted. But these days his father can't give him food, because he can't work; he does not have food to give. The boy keeps sobbing.

**W**oven around this central story of child labor and survival imperative are several other themes such as the sexual division of roles and rules, the disparity in the amount of food allocation between boys and girls, why boys are loved more than girls, the economic burden that the dowry system imposes on a girl's family, family planning, children as an economic asset, wage differences between children and adults, and of course the role of education. But what resides at the heart of this story is not necessarily child labor itself or some other auxiliary theme. Its moral is deeper—deeper than the crushing reality of child labor. That is, for poor boys and girls, childhood is merely a phase that they pass through in the natural progression of their biological life; they rarely have a carefree social childhood to enjoy. In this bifurcated space of childhood, social

childhood is privy only to the rich kids, while the poor kids are saddled with the task of toiling for their survival.

So what is striking about these stories is the fact that at such a tender age these children are not only burdened with the responsibility of physical labor, but also with the emotional pain of family survival. At such an early age, when children would be expected to act like children, free of any scar of life that comes with adulthood, these young boys and girls have to learn quickly how to manage their deep emotions just like they are forced to learn how to negotiate and navigate their family survival. There is little room for anything else. They cannot afford to take time to grow up slowly. One's age has no meaning whatsoever in the social system surrounded by poverty; whether young or adult, one has to work for survival. Poverty certainly has its own queer way of forcing young boys and girls to mature fast. This is the unmistakable universality of child labor born out of the imperative of survival in the midst of poverty. Child labor is a common theme and common scene from Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta, from Bangladesh to Botswana to Bolivia, and all across the globe.

To me, the story that this documentary narrates is intensely personal as it brings back all those memories of my own childhood when I had to move from one task to another, doing chores on the domestic front as well as working to earn some meager cash. I had few choices, but did whatever I could to contribute to my family's survival, especially after my oldest brother, the primary breadwinner of the family, passed away. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to my family and how my parents would have managed if I had failed to do my part to contribute to the family's survival.

Overall, the fundamental message of *That's Why I'm Working* and of my own child labor experience is that for the poor, child labor is a survival necessity although socially it is most certainly undesirable in its current form, and even detrimental in the long run. While it may help the poor sustain their subsistence, it generally fails to lead to their economic uplift from poverty. The chance I got, thanks to the help of one Peace Corps friend, to break the cycle of poverty is hardly a normal experience for poor families. Contrary to the common perception of the poor being lazy, most poor families work very hard day in and day out, but they are rarely given a chance to break out of poverty. That is why child labor is so common among the poor. It is not a choice; it is a necessity for their survival. It matters little whether it is good or evil.

Let me take this present review one step further in my attempt to reflect on its message in relation to the popular Western stance on child labor. I find Westerners' view of child labor as something evil, seriously flawed and extremely narrow. No, I do not question their motive, nor do I challenge their intention. Nor do I disagree with the basic premise of their view that children are being deprived of educational opportunities, unduly exploited by global corporations, and forced to work in places where safety

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measures are severely lacking. Yes, I do agree with these advocates of children's rights. No child should have to live the life in which poor children across the globe are trapped. But the reality is that if these children don't work, they may not have any life to live, or go to school, or exercise their basic rights at all.

**W**hat concerns me most about many Westerners' position on child labor is not their intention, but their naive slant and limited social and historical understanding. First, they forget that child labor played an important role in fueling the industrial rise of England. Second, it is rampant global capitalism—benignly termed globalization—that is instrumental in the massively exploitative growth of child labor in most underdeveloped societies, yet these advocates are essentially mum on this phenomenon. Third, they argue that child labor should be abolished, but many of them are opposed to any serious state measures to tackle poverty that would neutralize the need for child labor for family survival. They are for promoting self-help, personal responsibility, and self-empowerment, but oppose child labor which fundamentally represents all of these three qualities.

Furthermore, I find it quite amusing that most of these same people are openly supportive of children in America going from door to door to sell cookies or some other merchandise in the name of fund raising for some school activities. While most of the money these children raise goes to the companies supplying the merchandise, the children get paid nothing. That is, these companies openly exploit children with the approval of their own parents and schools. These people also support children working as newspaper deliverers or lawn mowers or babysitters or doing some other jobs for less than minimum pay.

I am fully aware that my endorsement of child labor may locate me close to conservative policymakers. But child labor is not a conservative or liberal issue, it is a survival issue. Regardless, let me conclude by stating my own position on child labor. In light of what the documentary reveals and my own personal experience, I believe that policy emphasis should be placed not on abolishing child labor, but on making sure that: 1) child workers are paid at the same wage scale as their adult counterparts; 2) schools are established near their workplace so they can go to school; 3) they are allowed to work no more than twenty hours a week; 4) their work environment is safe in every respect, including physical and emotional abuses; and 5) they are fully covered in terms of health and social benefits. ■

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