CHITRA DIVAKARUNI

Born in 1956 in Calcutta, India, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni spent nineteen years in her homeland before immigrating to the United States. She holds a BA from Calcutta University, an MA from Wright State University, and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley. Her books, often addressing the immigrant experience in America, include the novels The Mistress of Spice (1997), Sister of My Heart (1999), The Vine of Desire (2002), Queen of Dreams (2004), and The Palace of Illusions (2008); the story collections Arranged Marriage (1995) and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives (2001); and the poetry collections Leaving Yuba City (1997) and Black Candle (1991, revised 2000). Divakaruni has received a number of awards for her work, including the Before Columbus Foundation's 1996 American Book Award. She teaches creative writing at the University of Houston and serves on the boards of several organizations that help women and children.

Live Free and Starve

Many of the consumer goods sold in the United States—shoes, clothing, toys, rugs—are made in countries whose labor practices do not meet US standards for safety and fairness. Americans have been horrified at tales of children put to work by force or under contracts (called indentures) with the children's parents. Some in the United States government have tried to stop or at least discourage such practices: For instance, the bill Divakaruni cites in her first paragraph, which was signed into law, requires the US Customs Service to issue a detention order on goods that are suspected of having been produced by forced or indentured child labor; and a bill to ban goods made with any kind of child labor has been introduced in Congress every year since 1993. In this essay from Salon magazine in 1997, Divakaruni argues that these efforts, however well intentioned they are, mean dreadful consequences for the very people they are designed to protect.

For a different perspective on the effects of globalization, see the next essay, Marie Javdani's “Plata o Plomo: Silver or Lead.”

Some days back, the House passed a bill that stated that the United States would no longer permit the import of goods from factories where forced or indentured child labor was used. My liberal friends applauded the bill. It was a triumphant advance in the field of human rights. Now children in Third
World countries wouldn’t have to spend their days chained to their posts in factories manufacturing goods for other people to enjoy while their childhoods slipped by them. They could be free and happy, like American children.

I am not so sure.

It is true that child labor is a terrible thing, especially for those children who are sold to employers by their parents at the age of five or six and have no way to protect themselves from abuse. In many cases it will be decades—perhaps a lifetime, due to the fines heaped upon them whenever they make mistakes—before they can buy back their freedom. Meanwhile these children, mostly employed by rug-makers, spend their days in dark, ill-ventilated rooms doing work that damages their eyes and lungs. They aren’t even allowed to stand up and stretch. Each time they go to the bathroom, they suffer a pay cut.

But is this bill, which, if it passes the Senate and is signed by President Clinton, will lead to the unemployment of almost a million children, the answer? If the children themselves were asked whether they would rather work under such harsh conditions or enjoy a leisure that comes without the benefit of food or clothing or shelter, I wonder what their response would be.

It is easy for us in America to make the error of evaluating situations in the rest of the world as though they were happening in this country and propose solutions that make excellent sense—in the context of our society. Even we immigrants, who should know better, have wiped from our minds the memory of what it is to live under the kind of desperate conditions that force a parent to sell his or her child. Looking down from the heights of Maslow’s pyramid,¹ it seems inconceivable to us that someone could actually prefer bread to freedom.

When I was growing up in Calcutta, there was a boy who used to work in our house. His name was Nimai, and when he came to us, he must have been about ten or so, just a little older than my brother and I. He’d been brought to our home by his uncle, who lived in our ancestral village and was a field laborer for my grandfather. The uncle explained to my mother that Nimai’s parents were too poor to feed their several children, and while his older brothers were already working in the fields and earning their keep, Nimai was too frail to do so. My mother was reluctant to take on a sickly child who might prove more of a burden than a help, but finally she agreed, and Nimai lived and worked in our home for six or seven years. My mother was a good employer—Nimai

¹The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–70) proposed a “hierarchy of needs” in the shape of a five-level pyramid with survival needs at the bottom and “self-actualization” and “self-transcendence” at the top. According to Maslow, one must satisfy the needs at each level before moving up to the next.—Ens.
ate the same food that we children did and was given new clothes during Indian New Year, just as we were. In the time between his chores—dusting and sweeping and pumping water from the tube-well and running to the market—my mother encouraged him to learn to read and write. Still, I would not disagree with anyone who says that it was hardly a desirable existence for a child.

But what would life have been like for Nimai if an anti-child-labor law had prohibited my mother from hiring him? Every year, when we went to visit our grandfather in the village, we were struck by the many children we saw by the mud roads, their ribs sticking out through the rags they wore. They trailed after us, begging for a few paise. When the hunger was too much to bear, they stole into the neighbors’ fields and ate whatever they could find—raw potatoes, cauliflower, green sugar cane and corn torn from the stalk—even though they knew they’d be beaten for it. Whenever Nimai passed these children, he always walked a little taller. And when he handed the bulk of his earnings over to his father, there was a certain pride in his eye. Exploitation, you might be thinking. But he thought he was a responsible member of his family.

A bill like the one we’ve just passed is of no use unless it goes hand in hand with programs that will offer a new life to these newly released children. But where are the schools in which they are to be educated? Where is the money to buy them food and clothing and medication, so that they don’t return home to become the extra weight that capsizes the already shaky raft of their family’s finances? Their own governments, mired in countless other problems, seem incapable of bringing these services to them. Are we in America who, with one blithe stroke of our congressional pen, rendered these children jobless, willing to shoulder that burden? And when many of these children turn to the streets, to survival through thievery and violence and begging and prostitution—as surely in the absence of other options they must—are we willing to shoulder that responsibility?

For a reading quiz, sources on Chitra Divakaruni, and annotated links to further readings on globalization and its effects on workers, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thedreader.

\(^2\)Paise (pronounced “pie-say”) are the smallest unit of Indian currency, worth a fraction of an American penny.—Eds.
Journal Writing

Write a journal response to Divakaruni's argument against legislation that bans goods produced by forced or indentured child laborers. Do you basically agree or disagree with the author? Why? (To take your journal writing further, see “From Journal to Essay” below.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What do you take to be Divakaruni’s purpose in this essay? At what point did it become clear?
2. What is Divakaruni’s thesis? Where is it stated?
3. What are “Third World countries” (par. 1)?
4. From the further information given in the footnote on page 467, what does it mean to be “[l]ooking down from the heights of Maslow’s pyramid” (par. 5)? What point is Divakaruni making here?
5. In paragraph 8 Divakaruni suggests some of the reasons that children in other countries may be forced or sold into labor. What are they?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. In her last paragraph, Divakaruni asks a series of rhetorical questions. What is the effect of this strategy?
2. How does the structure of paragraph 3 clarify causes and effects?
3. Other methods What does the extended example of Nimai (pars. 6–7) contribute to Divakaruni’s argument? What, if anything, does it add to Divakaruni’s authority? What does it tell us about child labor abroad?

Questions on Language

1. Divakaruni says that laboring children could otherwise be “the extra weight that capsizes the already shaky raft of their family’s finances” (par. 8). How does this metaphor capture the problem of children in poor families? (See Figures of speech in Useful Terms for a definition of metaphor.)
2. What do the words in paragraph 7 tell you about Divakaruni’s attitude toward the village children? Is it disdain? pity? compassion? horror?
3. Consult a dictionary if you need help in defining the following: indentured (par. 1); inconceivable (5); exploitation (7); mired, blithe (8).

Suggestions for Writing

1. From Journal to Essay Starting from your journal entry, write a letter to your congressional representative or one of your senators who takes a position for or against laws such as that opposed by Divakaruni. You can use quotations from
Divakaruni's essay if they serve your purpose, but the letter should center on your own views of the issue. When you've finished your letter, send it. (You can find your representative's and your senators' names and addresses on the Web at house.gov/writerep and senate.gov.)

2. David Parker, a photographer and doctor, has documented child laborers in a series of powerful photographs (hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/intro.html). He asks viewers, "Under what circumstances and conditions should children work?" Look at Parker's photographs, and answer his question in an essay. What kind of paid work, for how many hours a week, is appropriate for, say, a ten- or twelve-year-old child? Consider: What about children working in their family's business? Where do you draw the line between occasional babysitting or lawn mowing and full-time factory work?

3. Research the history of child labor in the United States, including the development of child-labor laws. Then write an essay in which you explain how and why the laws evolved and what the current laws are.

4. CRITICAL WRITING Divakaruni's essay depends significantly on appeals to readers' emotions (see p. 466). Locate one emotional appeal that either helps to convince you of the author's point or, in your mind, weakens the argument. What does the appeal assume about the reader's (your) feelings or values? Why are the assumptions correct or incorrect in your case? How, specifically, does the appeal strengthen or undermine Divakaruni's argument?

5. CONNECTIONS In the next essay, "Plata o Plomo: Silver or Lead" (p. 472), Marie Javdani examines another global relationship that can harm children: the international traffic in cocaine, heroin, and other drugs. To what extent do you think the people in one country are responsible for what happens in other countries as a result of their actions? Write a brief essay that answers this question, explaining clearly the beliefs and values that guide your answer.

Chitra Divakaruni on Writing

Chitra Divakaruni is both a writer and a community worker, reaching out to immigrants and other groups through organizations such as Maitri, a refuge for abused women that Divakaruni helped to found. In a 1998 interview in Atlantic Unbound (the online version of The Atlantic Monthly), Katie Bolick asked Divakaruni how her activism and writing affected each other. Here is Divakaruni's response.

Being helpful where I can has always been an important value for me. I did community work in India, and I continue to do it in America, because being involved in my community is something I feel I need to do. Activism has given me enormous satisfaction—not just as a person, but also as a writer. The lives of people I would have only known from the outside, or had...
stereotyped notions of, have been opened up to me. My hotline work with Maitri has certainly influenced both my life and my writing immensely. Overall, I have a great deal of sensitivity that I did not have before, and a lot of my preconceptions have changed. I hope that translates into my writing and reaches my readers.

For Discussion

1. What evidence does “Live Free and Starve” give to support Divakaruni’s statement about how her activist work has affected her writing?

2. What does Divakaruni mean when she speaks of lives that she “would have only known from the outside”? Of what use is “insider’s” knowledge to an activist? to a writer?

3. Do you have a project or an activity—comparable to Divakaruni’s activism—that you believe positively affects your writing? What is it? How does it help you as you write?