

# Flower children

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Child  
10.11.02  
Dawn

THE subject of child labour tends to bring to mind images of young boys and girls slaving away in brick kilns, carpet weaving concerns or, if one really thinks about it seriously, general household helpers who are sometimes even more exploited than their previously mentioned counterparts.

In mountainous regions, mostly lacking in industrial concerns, other than hotel work or restaurant kitchens, child exploitation follows a completely different trend and is not always looked on as child labour at all.

From Murree up to Nathia Gali, for example, young boys spend most of their day, come rain or shine, from late March through to September and even October, selling handwoven wild flower garlands to passing tourists. Their smiling faces, as they ask for Rs5 or Rs10 per garland, do not give the impression of exploitation. One has to ask, is their *modus operandi* exploitation at all? The answer, from one point of view is an unequivocal "Yes", but on the other, it has to be "No".

Something which many visitors do not realize is that school holidays in cold, mountainous regions, such

as this one, fall during the winter not in the summer tourist season at all. Schools tend to close in December and reopen in March as school budgets, if

they have one, do not stretch to classroom heating, not even to classrooms in some cases. Also, if it snows heavily then children may struggle to school but it is unlikely that their teachers will follow the same route. Therefore,

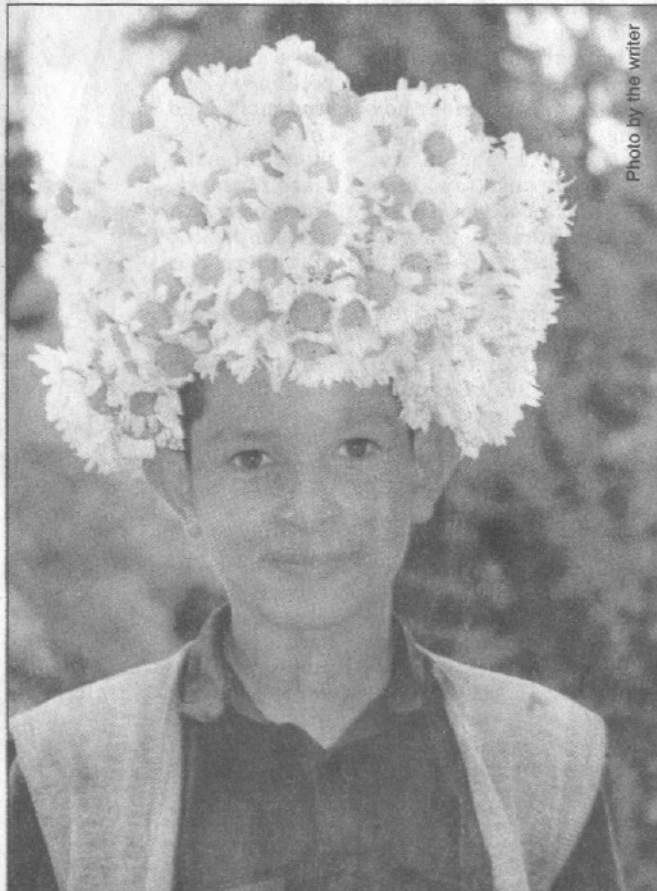


Photo by the writer

INNOVATION: A unique display of flowers

schools open in March, the opening coinciding with the first wild flowers to show their faces and the first visitors to appear.

The trade appears to be restricted to boys but, again, there is more to it than this. The boys, up at dawn, eat a hasty breakfast then head for the forest to pick blossoms for the garlands. Obviously, they must be picked fresh each morning as by late afternoon they wilt into an unsalable mess. The flowers are hurriedly taken home where women and girls deftly weave them into garlands for their sons and brothers to sell. It is often the case, though not in all families, that girls miss lots of school also due to this and other reasons although, it must be said, that girls here probably do get more education than boys!

The first flower garlands of the season are woven from attractive, greenish yellow 'Euphorbia wallichii', a member of the 'Spurge' family which exudes a poisonous, milky white sap. I often wonder how many skin and eye infections are caused by picking, weaving and wearing these flowers as none of the children I have asked seem to be aware that they are dealing with a potentially dangerous plant. I'm sure that most of their customers don't have a clue either.

Early in the season, the boys may make a meagre Rs20 per day or nothing at all. Yes, they would be better off in school but Rs 20 will

buy half a kilo of cheap rice and a quarter kilo of *daal* or, a few vegetables, even enough meat for some kind of meal, and if their father is out of work this may be all the income the family can look forward to. As the season progresses, flower garlands change to the well-known 'ox-eye daisy' (*Lencantheum vulgare*), which carpets the mountains in dazzling white for months on end. As the tourists season hits peaks time, June to the end of August, these daisies are interspersed with pink and red cosmos, blue wild geraniums, then pink and red bistort blooms. Incomes soar and a child can earn up to Rs100, even more on a good day and tourists, often themselves with children in tow as it is school holidays in the plains, do not think twice about supporting a form of child labour which keeps these mountain children out of school and out of the main stream forever. Without education, they have no secure future to look forward to and no work other than selling flower garlands until they are old enough to look for work as labourers or whatever, with a younger generation following in their footsteps.

As the season tapers off and then ragwort, another poisonous plant with attractive yellow flowers, ekes out the diminishing daisies then, as tourists become a rare species, it is back to daisies alone. Finally, sales grind to a halt but school holidays are just around the corner and the circle is completed.