

Irrelevance of Children's Day

Every year, November 14 is celebrated as Children's Day. Nearly six decades into independence, however, the difference between the haves and have nots is stark. The children of the latter suffer the most, in terms of nutrition, education and overall standard of living. As such, perhaps, we have little to celebrate on Children's Day.

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A scruffy little cherub, and an older boy little more than skin and bones, the pavements of Connaught Place, opposite Scindia House; this is their playground, and they are having a whale of a time. The little child is plump, eminently kissable. Remove the grime of the streets, clothe him in upper class baby wear, he could pass into genteel society. Not so his older companion. About 10 or maybe 12 years old, age has already left its marks on his young physique. A large size t-shirt does little to mask his leanness, his huge eyes with pouches of undernutrition and perhaps drugs underline the hardships he has borne but they are having a great time nevertheless. Waving out to the more familiar vendors, replying to their jibes, running up and down. The older boy kicks and smacks the little one in mock gestures of aggression. The younger one responds with mock threats and cries of anger. Saturday afternoon, a sense of ease and indulgence pervades the air, the well heeled queue-up for exquisite cuisine in cloistered restaurants, some linger outside boutiques or showrooms eyeing elegant fashion wear. "Let's buy them something to eat", my daughter says. The right and wrong of such actions could be debated but well, we look around for some peanut

vendors, which could be a source of some nutrition. Not finding any, we buy them a packet of Good Day biscuits each. The little one seems delighted to see food in his hands, the older one is quite speechless.

We pass on and return some time later. The little one is sitting down with both the packets of biscuits licking the wrapping, to find out if they taste sweet too, holding on to a biscuit with the other hand. Then my daughter exclaims, "Oh what has happened!" I look up, the older child is sitting on the railing opposite with a tear streaked face; beside him, next to a pillar, dark as a shadow, stands an older boy, perhaps 18 years or more. This boy is in no mood for fun. He glares down at his younger companion, his eyes glint a strange rage. Hearing our exclamations he looks at us, the eyes warn, come no closer. And then, in a split second it all changes. He makes a funny remark to the younger boy, who smiles a repartee. "Normalcy" is restored. We move on.

A couple of days later, the TV channels are full of November 14, and the viewers are subjected to different images as decided by the channels. Some portray high school-children talking about how they feel about "Chacha Nehru", others portray street children laughing in front of the camera, leaping and somersaulting to show off, and

the more “responsible” ones portray the acute suffering of Anant’s parents as they search in bewilderment for the kidnapped three-year old.

What about the trio in CP, I wonder, what kind of a Children’s Day would they have had, how many children like them know anything at all about Children’s Day, apart from the TV cameras who turn on them on perhaps an average of less than once a year, and then move on to subjects of more glamour, more sensation; what kinds of lives would these children be leading.

State of Our Children

The nation collectively suffers with Anant and his parents, and a fear psychosis is created amongst the haves, of the unseen world of terror created by a dangerous, and unscrupulous other. We do not or perhaps do not want to realise the real world of terror and danger that our children live in, in the city slums. Everybody knows that it is a world of violence, brute force, drugs, and severe deprivation that children face in the slums. As the country races ahead with its programmes and policies of economic development, the urban population is on the rise. But what percentage of urban population is really increasing? Municipalities and city corporations groan under the burden of an ever-expanding influx into the cities, and throw up their hands at the thought of providing amenities or facilities to the unauthorised settlements. And then of course, there is a drive, quite literal by some overzealous authorities, which drives the settlements away. The problem is gone: out of sight, out of mind.

India has some of the strongest child rights movements, and some of the longest efforts for a ban on child labour. Some of the most outstanding examples of work with children also exist in India. From movements like the “Bachpan Bachao Andolan” to efforts like those of MV Foundation, which insist that children should go to school, there is a whole range of efforts.

But few seem to be looking at the reality that results in the problems that these movements and foundations seek to address. It is a symptomatic approach that quite negates itself, and only further accentuates the underlying problems by diverting attention and resources. What is really happening to our children? In the kaleidoscope of problems that beset this country, it is really difficult to say what

is really happening to this huge section, that is the “children of this country”. But the evidence is there all round to give us a very good indication. Skeleton thin children with ragged clothes, vending or begging on streets, emaciated women, perhaps a child drooping on the arms, men who dare not even ask themselves a question holding out their arms in meek gestures...The stark difference in any city street in India: the haves and the have nothings: the numbers of the in-betweens decreases, while the numbers of the latter are increasing. I mean are all these people really members of organised criminal gangs, out to beg and cheat us out of our hard earned luxuries? Perhaps, but then, do we also ignore the UN report, *On Underdevelopment and Malnutrition in India*. The latest report says:

– Nearly two million children die every year as a result of serious malnutrition and preventable diseases.

– Nearly half suffer from moderate or severe malnutrition.

– 47 per cent of children are underweight, and 46 per cent stunted in their growth.

What does this mean in numbers? We have a population of nearly 110 crores now, 40 per cent of this population is below 15 years, which means that as per the above report, in sheer numbers, we have more than two crore children who are stunted in their growth, and more than 2.2 crore children who suffer from moderate or severe malnutrition. This is the number of deprived children in this country, denied even the right to food. But let us go a little beyond this, and try to see what is it that really deprives so many children? Is it heartless adults, who just breed, and then turn their children out on the streets? Do we harbour a ratty species of human beings, who just produce in huge numbers and then like rats run

amok amongst the “humans” stealing, begging, etc? As the country debates the legitimacy and illegitimacy of child labour, the reality of children’s lives, and of those deprived who are not able to provide for their children’s education, gets quite masked.

Children in this country work under several different, difficult, hazardous and not so hazardous conditions. They work for a fraction of the wages that the adults might earn, and because they are children, are exploited much more than adults. The fact that children work also depresses real wages of adult workers. Children also work alongside their parents on family farms, as agricultural labourers, or as able assistants on sites of brick kilns, etc, which engage migrant workers. Would a ban on child labour, even assuming that it was enforced help address these problems? In the Pratichi Report Amartya Sen points out the persisting inequities in the schooling system, beginning with the dependence created on private tuition at the primary school level. He points out that precisely those children who have the greatest difficulty in making use of general teaching in primary schools (because of the absence of the facility of home support) are able to make least use of the “regrettable necessity” of private tuition. In addition, the report also finds that teachers are absent the most in schools with a majority of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children. The fact remains that nearly six decades into independence, we have not given ourselves a functioning system of primary education.

Can Legislation Help Children?

In his novel *Time Machine*, H G Wells writes about a time when mankind has evolved into two clearly distinct species. One, a subterranean subhuman species,

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