



CHILD RIGHTS AND YOU

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Ensuring lasting change
for children

Waiting for a beautiful childhood!

By Puja Marwaha

Sixty-five years after independence, millions of Indian children are yet to be freed from the bondage of malnutrition, lack of education, child labour and child abuse. Their long wait to enjoy their childhood and realize their full potential seems to be getting longer with every passing anniversary of our independence day.

A look at where our children stand in the 66th year of independence leaves much to be desired. We cannot even claim to have provided bare minimum food, education and protection for millions of children during all these years. Unfortunately the issues do not seem to figure as high on the national agenda as they should have.

After six and a half decades, the dreams we had woven for our children lie in tatters with malnutrition of children assuming epidemic proportions in India. Almost every second child in the country is facing some level of malnourishment. Almost 40 per cent of Indian children are underweight, and 45 per cent are stunted due to malnourishment according to the National Family Health Survey – 3. The survey also reported that 6 out of ten children from the poorest households are stunted, and almost as many are underweight. Children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are also more likely to be malnourished, according to this report. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (Govt. of India) states that more than 55 per cent of under-five mortality occurs from complications resulting from malnutrition.

Not enough has been done to make life easier for even those children who somehow manage to survive from the onslaught of malnutrition. They are working in dingy factories, handling hazardous chemicals and are losing their childhood even before having a glimpse of it. Many of them are employed unabatedly for household work in our cities and towns.

According to the NSSO 66th round (2009-10), there are 49.84 lakh child labourers across the country. 13.3 per cent of children in the 10-18 age group are employed or engaged in some income earning activity. Of these, 42 per cent comprised casual wage workers and another 42 per cent were unpaid helpers in household enterprises.

Fortunately, millions of children in our country now manage to go to school to be educated, thanks to the implementation of the Right to Education Act and several other schemes by government agencies as well as initiatives by civil society. But ironically, this in itself has led to more challenges for our children.

Going to school may not be the most pleasant experience for a child in India. In fact, it is a nightmare especially if a child belongs to the marginalised section of the society.

Imagine a child staying for eight hours in a school without even a drop of drinking water in the taps, no facility for toilets and often sitting in a crowded class room where teachers are teaching two different classes of 80 to 100 students each. The growing number of enrolments which brings a smile to our faces doesn't reveal these aspects and we tend to forget these issues conveniently too.

The annual economic survey released this year during the budget session of the parliament dutifully informs us that in our country 16.6 per cent of the schools have no provision for drinking water, 45 per cent of the schools do not have even their own boundary wall and more than half of standard 2 and standard 4 classes sit together with another class.

In addition, 56 per cent of the schools still have no separate toilets for girls, 28.6 per cent of the schools still do not have libraries, 60 per cent of the schools still do not comply with the teachers- pupil ratio of 1:30 as stipulated in the RTE Act and 28 per cent of the schools have no playground.

The plight of an Indian child doesn't end here – it is becoming increasingly unsafe for children in India, with growing incidences of crime against children. According to the National Crime Record Bureau Statistics, a total of 5,484 cases of child rape were reported in the country in 2010 as compared to 5,368 in 2009. Madhya Pradesh has reported the highest number of cases (1,182) followed by Maharashtra (747). These two states taken together accounted for 35.2% of the total child rape cases reported in the country.

A total of 10,670 cases of Kidnapping & Abduction of children were reported during the year as compared to 8,945 cases in the previous year accounting for a significant increase of 19.3%. Delhi (2,982) has accounted for 27.9% of the total cases reported in the country.

Around 100 cases of infanticide were also reported in the same year up from 63 in 2009. The NCRB records and other studies done by non-government bodies show that child trafficking is rampant in the country, and we do not even have a central database of missing children which is updated in real time. Thousands of cases have been registered across the country for trafficking of children and selling and buying of children for prostitution. There are known 'hubs' of child trafficking across the country and we are not able to shut them down effectively.

The conviction rate for such heinous crimes committed against children stands at a meager 34 per cent. This indicates how poorly not only our social but also legal system is equipped which actually is the "last line of defense" for a child.

In light of these facts, it is time to rethink and rethink seriously what is wrong with us. Are our children really reaping the gains of freedom whose anniversary we celebrate annually? Are they actually free to enjoy their childhood? We, as a society, owe an explanation to them as to what we have done or haven't done for them so far and what we are going to do to ensure that they get what is due to them-a beautiful childhood!

The author, Puja Marwaha is CEO of CRY-Child Rights and You.

Note to the Editor:

CRY - Child Rights and You (formerly known as Child Relief and You) is an Indian NGO that believes in every child's right to a childhood - to live, learn, grow and play. For over 30 years, CRY and its 200 partner NGOs have worked with parents and communities to ensure Lasting Change in the lives of more than 2,000,000 underprivileged children, across 23 states in India. For more information please visit us at <http://www.cry.org/>

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