

## CONFINING CHILDHOOD IN INDIA

By Havovi Wadia

Do child rights activists need to step out of the boxes of 'development', 'survival', 'protection' and 'participation' into which they have confined India's children? Do we need to interrogate child rights programming and the somewhat limiting notions of childhood around which it is built?



By many accounts, childhood in India consists of various conglomerate experiences that get clothed in 'universal' beliefs about the nature of children and the 'essence' of childhood. Many of these 'universals' are echoes of the colonial past of this country, and emerge from the fact that the middle class is routinely brought up on Rousseau-esque notions of the innocence of childhood through our education system. Some of these notions have been reinforced in the last few years with the urban upper-crust moving towards an increasingly 'globalised' lifestyle.

Structures and agencies that engage extensively with children also demonstrate a more or less unitary approach to children and childhood. NGO interventions, for instance, approach children and their worlds largely through the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a document that was ratified in 1992 and which reinforced the duties of the state towards the children citizens who inhabit it. The document, while internationally lauded, is often critiqued for generating a standard of childhood that has come to be seen as the norm and on which all interventions are modelled (1).

The education system plays a crucial role in institutionalisation approaches to childhood. A cursory look at textbooks reveals that they too are by and large written for the normative child -- male, upper-caste, middle class, urban. In many, there continues to be a gender bias with most stories/narratives/pictures excluding girls or reinforcing stereotypes about girlhood. Not only this, tribal children, children from dalit families, children from rural India might find it difficult to identify with the children in these books because they are inevitably modelled on a dominant image of childhood.

In cinema, children continue to be cute voices of conscience, with very few roles written for children as persons rather than instruments in the unification of the male and female heroes. Coverage in newspapers invariably focuses on stories of children being violated in some way -- children dying of malnourishment, children run over by vehicles, children neglected by parents, children committing suicide. Of late, with the focus on the Right to Education Act,

2010, it often seems as though childhood and the rights of children all centre on and are determined by the schooling system.

So what does childhood in India mean? And how do we understand it?

Perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning and ask, instead, why we are asking these questions.

Over the past two decades, children have made a significant contribution to the consumer market, with specific segments of goods being made available to them. In order to ensure the success of these goods, there has been extensive investment in advertising and here the visibility of children has increased manifold in the last 20 years. They are cast in the role of salesperson (in advertisements, convincing people -- not just other children but adults as well -- to buy particular goods) as well as consumer. Given the monumental takeover of public mindspace by the audiovisual media over the last 20 years, this means that even at the most superficial level, children have a much higher presence in public life than they did in the pre-liberalisation years.

Aside from their presence in advertising there is also an increasing visibility of children in television serials, reality shows, cinema, game shows, etc. This has been a particular kind of visibility, associated with many things that are part of the globalised image of India -- intense competition, high drama, bright lights and costumes and, on several occasions, what many see as an uncomfortable masquerading of children as miniature adults. All this has sparked off debates on how children are growing up too fast, and of how much and what kind of exposure to media is desirable for children, at what ages. This discussion is grounded within the discourse of concern and protection that is frequently in use when matters pertaining to children are brought up.

Simultaneously, and in almost diametric opposition to the lifeworlds of children portrayed in the electronic media, there is increasing light being thrown on the great numbers of children who get insufficient food, medical treatment, shelter, water, access to quality education and so on. Currently, funds are being mobilised both by the government and non-government sector in the name of these children of the country. Most funds are generated based on sectoral interventions -- for food, education, vaccination, play space, etc -- and interventions designed accordingly.

When NGOs write about their work, or go into a field area for an assessment of the situation with regard to children, children's lives are bracketed into the compartments of 'development', 'survival', 'protection' and 'participation'. While most people accept that these four categories of child rights often intersect and overlap, few think of childhood outside of these compartments, mostly because the UNCRC remains the framework within which funding strategies are built and proposals structured.

In other words, children who are seen as requiring state intervention in their lives (less privileged or marginalised children) get broken down into their 'needs', which fit within the UNCRC format, and are then addressed by various policies, programmes and schemes.

Olga Nieuwenhuys very rightly asked in a 2009 editorial in *Childhood*, "Is there an Indian childhood?" (2). Her argument is that childhood in India continues to be thought about mainly in terms of issues that children face, and problems that they may create. The focus on issues, according to her, casts "Indian children's lifeworlds in a series of binaries that divide their childhood into what is undesirable and therefore must be addressed and rectified, and what is not and can therefore be ignored" (3). So, for instance, that children go hungry or remain uneducated is something we as a society find 'undesirable' and therefore there are engagements in place from government and non-government bodies, as well as individuals, to address these issues or at least address these problems for one/two children. There is also the belief that children should not be alone or in child-headed families -- so interventions ensure that children are 'sheltered' by putting them in institutions, in foster care, etc. However, play is an aspect of children's lives that often gets ignored. One assumption may be that all children find time to play in some manner or

the other, so this aspect of a child's life is rarely seen as a feature of NGO programming (4). Another possibility is that play is not seen as an essential component of the lives of 'deprived children', and therefore is an issue that can be ignored (5).

In India, where there continues to be a reluctance to engage with the politics of deprivation, perhaps it can be argued that there is a need to focus on 'important' issues and ensure rights to all children. What Nieuwenhuys' question offers us is an opportunity to reconsider how we engage with this politics of deprivation. It is a chance to see whether we are able, at some point in the process, to put all the sectoral interventions together and to understand if, in their totality, they are able to engage with the nature of, the reasons for, and the existence of deprivations of childhood in the country. What she also compels one to do is think about whether indeed children are at the centre of these interventions, as is regularly claimed, or if children are incidental to the programmes.

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Some writers and activists have engaged with concepts of childhood in India -- with issues of inconsistency in the constitutional engagement with children, hidden inequalities that bias policymaking and implementation and a concern over the continued engagement with polarised understandings of childhood.

In 1996, Asha Bajpai (6) listed the various ways in which the Indian Constitution engages with childhood and showed how there are variations in the age of maturity/boundary of childhood depending on the legislation. Interestingly, a male person aged 18 can vote but is not free to marry. He is not considered capable of managing an inheritance at 18 either; the suitable age for that is 21. The age at which a person can begin to earn money legally is 14. The age until which the government takes responsibility for one's health is 6. The age at which one is held accountable for one's criminal offences is 18. Enveloping all these legal boundaries at which activities are allowed/disallowed is the UNCRC, the international document that stipulates that all individuals aged 18 and under are to be considered 'children'. In the context of legislation, therefore, there are several ambiguities regarding the age at which children are considered vulnerable/capable and with reference to what aspect of their lives. A closer interrogation of this might reveal a few biases regarding sexuality, wealth and citizenship which possibly have their basis in colonial and brahmanical notions of identity. The relationship of the state and the child is also ambiguous -- till what stage in life the state is willing to take responsibility for different aspects of a child's life varies from 6 to 21.

Krishna Kumar is among those who have written about the essentially masculinist bias of the education system in the ways it precludes and excludes girlhood in India. Work done by activists such as Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar in West Bengal shows that children of sex workers conceive of themselves in terms that emphasise the dignity of the lives of their mothers -- a very different vision from the perennially exploited colours the NGO world paints them in (7). Authors from Anveshi (a Hyderabad-based NGO) have recently brought out a series of storybooks that engage with everyday issues in the lives of non-mainstream children. Purnima Mankekar (8) analyses the incident of a very young Muslim girl (Ameena) to show how, in public discourse, the identity of childhood seems to subsume all other identities -- in doing so she unveils some of the politics in which children's identities are deployed as nation-building exercises in the public sphere.

There are a dedicated few in India who are committed to grappling with the paradoxes and nuances of childhood in the country, to develop an understanding that will both allow for and engage with the plurality of experience as well as the many commonalities that cast children as a structural category.

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In Europe, almost all scholars agree that there was a surge of interest in the study of childhood following the publication, in 1967, of Philip Aires' work *Centuries of Childhood*. He argued that the notion of childhood as a distinct and separate stage from adulthood is a modern one, and that in medieval times children were understood more as little adults rather than separate beings altogether. Aires' work has been engaged with at multiple levels, with critiques of his assumptions, methodology and framework. But it does seem to be largely accepted that this work initiated an interest in childhood as a concept that had not been seen before in the study of the social sciences. This interest is often called the Social Studies of Childhood.

Discussions about childhood within the Social Studies of Childhood have been centred along the structure/agency axes, with scholars invariably arguing that childhood is a social structure that determines the way power is shared within society. However, within this structure there is engagement by children at the individual and collective level, which is what allows us to engage with childhood in more than simply deterministic terms. So, for instance, two of the most widely published authors in this field write: "Childhood is imaged as a social space that is continuously located within and shaped by the social structure of a given society, but that is also shaped by the actions of successive generations of children who succeed in creating and re-creating diversity within this common socially constructed category." (James, Allison and Adrian. 2001. p 34)

Leena Alanen sees childhood as a generational structure in which, through a set of processes, some people get characterised as children and others as adults. This then becomes the basis through which one can understand inequalities pertaining to access to resources, children's subordination and the general underestimation of their contribution to society. Her approach allows us to explore ways in which power gets shared in our society using the yardstick of age.

Alan Prout makes a case in *The Future of Childhood* (2005) for moving beyond the structure/agency, child/adult, capability/vulnerability arguments on childhood. He argues for making childhood studies truly interdisciplinary by suggesting the use of understandings of juvenility from biology, the possibility of understanding childhood using the framework of the Actor-Network Theory (taken from Deleuze and Guattari) and Complexity Theory, and enabling a questioning of the polarisations that childhood studies often finds itself swinging between.

In her recent editorial in *Childhood*, 'Keep Asking, Why childhood? Why children? Why global?' (9), Olga Nieuwenhuys also makes this last argument. Insisting on keeping the field fresh and critical she exhorts researchers to continue to ask the fundamental questions regarding childhood and to keep questioning whether indeed "children are interesting otherwise than as carriers of traits that turn them into the target of global childhood governance..." (p 295)

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With that last statement we come back to the question that was posed by the same author a year ago -- Is there an Indian childhood? To this we must add our own questions -- Is childhood to be studied, understood, and engaged with only insofar as it impacts the future of the nation? Is there an intrinsic instrumentality in our engagement with childhood that comes from our belief that children inevitably become adults and that is when their participation in the socio-political fabric of society becomes real? Is there a need for practitioners in the field of child rights and child welfare to engage with issues pertaining to the dominant understanding of childhood, and does that need interrogation? How does legislation shape childhood in the country and how has legislation and its implementation in India impacted our understandings of equity and justice as they pertain to childhood?

Child rights programming is inevitably driven by a certain understanding of who children are, what they need, and how these needs should be addressed. Only rarely are organisations in touch with the fact that in designing a certain kind of programme they are also endorsing a certain kind of idea of childhood. For example, while many who work with children under the age of 12 focus on the need for safe spaces/shelters, schools, anganwadis and healthcare

services, people who work with adolescents are seen to focus more on 'life skills', 'vocational training', 'anger management', participatory citizenship and other such issues. Few focus on the need for health and education rights for adolescents. Simplifying somewhat, there is an endorsement in this manner of at least two assumptions regarding a phase of life that loosely gets called 'childhood':

- Children below the age of 12 need protection; children above the age of 12 need disciplining and guidance.
- Children below the age of 12 need health and education; children above the age of 12 need to be trained to become 'good citizens' by ensuring a set of behaviours and skills which will make them amenable to civilised society.

It is possible that these are not the beliefs of those who run programmes or work with children in some way. It is also true that both kinds of work are necessary with both age-groups. What one is trying to illustrate here is that an objective look at the manner in which child rights programming happens reveals that there are patterns to the work that reinforce somewhat limiting notions of childhood, and that these need interrogating.

Legislation in India also seems to perpetuate this dichotomous understanding of childhood. Children below the age of 14 are to be protected from child labour and must be in school. These issues are addressed both by the Right to Education Act, 2010 and the Child Labour (Prevention and Regulation) Act, 1986. However, neither of these Acts addresses the rights of children between the ages of 15 and 18. Children in this age-bracket are therefore not protected by these legislations and can indeed be legitimately deprived of their rights to education and against employment.

Until we begin to think about and engage with some of the issues listed above, programmes and legislation that are ostensibly for all children may continue to address only those who fit within the dominant understanding of childhood. It is only when a problematisation of this conception of childhood happens that one can begin to engage with *real* children in *real* spaces, rather than with a generalised notion of what children ought to be.

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#### **Endnotes**

1 F Pilotti argues that the dissemination of the CRC in the 1990s could be "characterised as the circulation of a text without a context." (Quoted in Catarina Tomas. 'Childhood and Rights: Reflections on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child'. 2008. *Childhoods Today*. Vol 2 Issue 2. December 23, 2008.

<http://www.childhoodstoday.org/download.php?id=19>. October 25, 2010

2 Nieuwenhuys, Olga (2009). 'Is there an Indian Childhood?' *Childhood*. Vol 16 (2). pp 147-153

3 Simultaneously here she points out two things: first, that there is a piecemeal approach to childhood in India that needs rethinking. Second, and perhaps more importantly, that children are seen either as objects of concern (and therefore objects for rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration) or as objects of no consequence (and therefore non-objects; non-citizens)

4 There are exceptions to this, with some field agencies working to ensure safe spaces for children to play. However, even in this case, in India, most of them see play as a means to development and therefore focus on what can be learned through play, rather than play itself

5 A glance at routines for children in residential institutions shows how clearly the priority is on education, with them spending at least six hours in school and then usually between two and six hours studying outside of school, and about an hour or two set aside for play

6 Bajpai, Asha (2007). 'Child Rights in India'. *Infochange Agenda*. June 2007. <http://infochangeindia.org/200706186472/>(referred to on October 25, 2010)

7 Dutta, D and Sircar, O. 'Foot Soldiers for our Mothers'. *Infochange Agenda*. November 9, 2010. <http://infochangeindia.org/200706116580/Agenda/C>

8 Mankekar, Purnima (1997). 'To Whom does Ameena Belong? Towards a Feminist Analysis of Childhood and

Nationhood in Contemporary India'. *Feminist Review*. No 56. 'Debating Discourses, Practising Feminisms'. pp 26-60  
9 *Childhood*. 2010. 17: 291

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