



## Inhabiting 'childhood': children, labour and schooling in postcolonial India

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Inhabiting ‘childhood’: children, labour and schooling in postcolonial India**, by Sarada Balagopalan, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, x+237 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-29642-8

Child rights and formal schooling are frequently taken-for-granted discourses by policy-makers, scholars and the general public alike. Balagopalan, in this book, places under scrutiny the discourse of child rights and schooling in postcolonial India as they claim to emancipate the labouring lives of children. In doing so, she points out that the assumed and anticipated smooth transition from child labour to schooling is neither easy nor politically neutral. The ‘post-colonial welfare apparatus’ (102), under the influence of international organizations such as UNICEF, created ‘an infantile body free of cultural imprinting’ (102) and new conceptual categories such as street children, preschool child, women and children, biological age and so on. The global creation of the victimized child, whose life requires standardization through the framework of child rights, gradually percolated through to localized contexts, resulting in the emergence of new forms of governmentality. By navigating through the labouring lives of children in Calcutta, Balagopalan questions the portrayal of street children in a manner that justifies their protection and disciplining, demonstrating that such portrayals provide an ‘imprecise and incomplete reading of their lives’ (31).

Labouring children in the school located in Sealdah railway station shelter in Calcutta are understood, without reference to their familial relationships, as being prone to bad company, drug use and unprotected sex and thus as waiting to be rescued, saved and reformed. This does not recognize the meanings embedded in the layers of their lives that actually play out on the street. The paradox is that in order to fit themselves into this victimized identity, children often manipulate their life histories when they share it with civil society organization volunteers. The ‘performative space’ (35) occupied by street children and the ‘sentimental attachment’ (36) of volunteers (and in fact of wider society) reinforce simultaneously the legitimacy of the abandoned identity of the street child and the bourgeoisie identity of modern ideal childhood.

Balagopalan contrasts the supposedly ‘transformative present’ (86) with the ‘fixed casteist/cultural past’ (86) to show how differently the colonial past handled the relationship between labour and schooling compared to the modernist undertaking. Schooling now symbolizes equality, achievement and pride for labouring lives. But children also now have to face the evils of ‘individuation, segregation and hierarchization of abilities’ (113) in order to secure their place in a formal school. The children who could not win the race negotiated this stage of their life by valorizing the freedom and dignity of ‘desi chicken’ (117) compared to that of schooled ‘poultry chicken’ (117).

Balagopalan not only locates this ethnography in the thick narratives of everyday lives of street children, but also contextualizes it in the politics of India’s postcolonial development. The manual labour of these street children, in the author’s words, ‘reproduces the informal economy upon which capitalist accumulation in India relies’ (98).

What is unique about this book is that it not only criticizes the universal normative perspective towards the lives of such children, but also recognizes that the ‘multiple childhoods’ framework is equally incapable of addressing the issue. By doing this, Balagopalan seems to take a moral position that neither victimizes the labouring lives of children nor valorizes their culturally embedded life experiences. But what is radical about this position, apart from probing us to understand the issue holistically and politically, remains ambiguous.

By understanding the 2009 Right to Education Act in the context of the class-determined terrain of schooling in India as well as the neoliberal regimes of the global corporate order, Balagopalan enquires into its significance for the lives of labouring children. But what does engaging with the ‘children’s histories of labour and living on the streets’ (23) mean to educational policy-makers? Though the paradigm in which this book is positioned does not aim at standard straightforward solutions, it is important to envision at least skeletons of alternatives. What will be the nature and kind of education in Balagopalan’s framework of children, labour and schooling? Can one find solutions for this in a discourse of schooling that seeks to rebuild the relationship between work and education?

Notwithstanding this inconclusiveness, Balagopalan reminds us of the dangers of adopting polarized world views in comprehending the discourse of childhood. Pointing out these dangers is important, since they make us rethink what ‘Education for All’ means in a democratic and developing country such as India.

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**The Blood telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a forgotten genocide**, by Gary J. Bass, London, Hurst & Company, 2014, xxiv + 499 pp., ISBN 978-1-84904-457-8

Gary Bass’s *The Blood telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a forgotten genocide* is an indictment of the former American president Richard M. Nixon and national security adviser Henry Kissinger for their complicity during the 1971 conflict in East Pakistan that led to the birth of Bangladesh. Based on painstaking research of the White House tapes, declassified American and Indian archival documents, and interviews with American and Indian eyewitnesses, Bass – a Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University – provides a heart-wrenching account of the brutal massacre of Bengalis and casts light into the dark secrets of a flawed American Cold War diplomacy that exacerbated the conflict. Bass argues that the pretence of non-interference of Nixon and Kissinger, who could have used their leverage over Pakistan to stop the disaster had they not been driven by ulterior motives, ‘stands as one of the worst moments of moral blindness in U.S. foreign policy’ (xiii–xiv).

At the heart of the book is a telegram, dispatched by Archer Blood, the then American Consul General to Dhaka, expressing discontent with the White House’s indifference to Yahya’s brutality against Bengalis using American weapons. Referred to as ‘the Blood telegram’, it was, in Bass’s words, ‘probably the most blistering denunciation of U.S. foreign policy ever sent by its own diplomats’ (75). Referring to the massacre as genocide, the