

Stolen Childhoods?

Observations on Education of Migrant Children

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Dominant discourses on childhood, which assume that it is a static and universally defined phenomenon, have failed to locate the lives of migrant children within them. The need to understand how migrant childhoods are experienced in the historical, political and sociocultural matrix, rather than looking for solace in the universal normativity of childhood, is a critical aspect of policy formulation that concerns the lives and education of migrant children.

Save the Children, an international civil society organisation, released the End of Childhood Report, 2017, titled “Stolen Childhoods.” Of the 172 countries included in the analysis, India ranked 116th in the End of Childhood Index Rankings (Save the Children 2017). The index is calculated based on the performance of countries across various parameters such as child health, education, labour, marriage, childbirth and violence. On the basis of their rank position, countries are classified into the categories: few children missing out on childhood; some children missing out on childhood; many children missing out on childhood; and most children missing out on childhood. According to the report, in India, many children miss out on childhood. All countries that fall into the “most children missing out on childhood” category, are African countries. Furthermore, except for a handful, most countries falling into the “few children missing out on childhood” category are overwhelmingly European. The intriguing question here is what does it mean to say “missing out on childhood?” Why do children from only the so-called developing and underdeveloped countries miss out on childhood, or have their childhoods stolen? And finally, what do stolen childhoods mean to the autonomy and agency of the thousands of children living in difficult circumstances in these countries?

Such observations and questions are hardly new. Discourses on childhoods, based on the assumption that childhood is a static and universally defined phenomenon have been widely criticised. The Eurocentric metanarrative of childhood has played a significant role in defining a single normative childhood discourse, and the associated policy formulations across the world. With the ascent of ideas such as the social construction of

childhood and multiple childhoods, various scholars have questioned the normativity of childhood and its implications for policy, as well as for the everyday lives of children.¹

Particularly in the Indian context, questions have been raised about the singular nature of Western childhood, and its contrast to the plurality of Indian childhoods and their sociocultural locations (Raman 2000); the dominance of middle-class, white, male, urban childhood, and the idea of school as saviour of children from labour (Vasanta 2004); and the common constructions of childhood and their inadequacy to understand Indian childhoods that are located within contexts of caste, gender, emerging globalisation, consumerism and technology (Kumar 2016). Questions have also been raised about how rights-based reforms and the moral discourse of “saving childhoods” have been dominating the policy realm for “poor” and “at-risk third world” children (Balagopalan 2008, 2011); how colonial legacy and the Euro-American dominance within academic research has rendered Indian childhoods as “lacking and lagging behind” and as subjects of non-governmental organisation (NGO) salvation and charity (Nieuwenhuys 2009); and on the agenda behind the state’s protective vigilance and intervention in the lives of children (Mankekar 1997).

The referenced scholars have pointed out the politics which influence the conflicts between different discourses on childhood and their implications for policy, as well as on the everyday lives of children. Yet, at an empirical level, both government and civil society initiatives for children in difficult circumstances are rooted in the normative universalistic assumptions of childhood. In this article, I would like to place the lives of migrant children at the centre, and understand what some discourses on childhood mean to their education. These reflections are based on ongoing doctoral research with migrant children in the city of Bengaluru.

Another Out-of-school Category

The idea of schooling has become so integral to childhood that children are neatly classified into in-school and out-of-school categories. It is these labels that

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define the quality of childhood experienced by the child. Children who fall into the out-of-school category are usually street children, child labourers, orphan children, migrant children and children from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Once labelled “out-of-school,” their past, present and future becomes monolithic. Their historical, socio-economic, cultural, and political locations become invisible.

“Shale Kade Nanna Nade” (Towards School, My Walk) was an awareness campaign initiated by the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights in collaboration with government as well as NGOs, in order to increase enrolment in schools (KSCPCR 2016). The campaign consisted of rallies, where government school children raised slogans and made posters to attract public attention. The posters largely depicted colourful pictures of school buildings, and happy schoolgoing children carrying books and pencils. Many government schools engaged in self-promotion, with posters of their own school premises, as well as captions advertising free admissions, free facilities (uniform, shoes, bag, bus pass, books, and meals), special classes, good teachers, excellent coaching, good results, cash awards, and science laboratory and library facilities.² This was indicative of the desire of government schools to demonstrate that they are providing quality education, and also to target the group of parents admitting their children into low-cost private schools. School and NGO officials gave speeches during rallies, stating that government schools are on par with private schools, and that parents were wasting money by admitting their children to private schools. Although there may be some truth in the latter perusal, the pitiable state of government schools that have to compete with private schools reflects the current state of the Indian education system, and further, its capacity to address out-of-school children. Overall, the campaign not only reflected the idea that schooling is essential for an ideal childhood, it also demeaned the lived realities of out-of-school children, whose education is far from homogeneous.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development survey to assess dropout

rates at the elementary level in 21 states cites migration of families as one of the topmost reasons for dropping out of school (MHRD 2013). The study reveals that around 12% of both boys and girls dropped out because of families migrating from one place to another in search of livelihood. The specific context of migrant children, which is far from uniform, should be taken into consideration while envisioning programmes for them. Residential schooling models, bridging programmes, and tent schooling are some of the major “solutions” formulated by the Karnataka government to address the education of migrant children. The quality and rigour of such “alternative” programmes need to be examined.

Outlier of the Education System

Most development programmes in the country are designed for the sedentary lifestyles and livelihoods of stable populations. Such programmes—along with a notion of childhood that is shaped around settled and stable geographies, and as a result, an educational system that is designed for such childhoods—do not favour the “institutionalised” education of the moving child. In research with pastoralist populations in India and the education of their children, Dyer (2010, 2012) termed the place-based schooling system “hegemonic,” arguing that such a schooling system derecognises pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood option, through systemic exclusion, for instance, through its fixed institutional structure (fixed timings, annual calendars, attendance requirements). Provision of educational access in India has been historically based on concepts of geographical proximity and sedentary habitation, which are unjust for mobile population groups.

In this sense, migrant children are an outlier of our education system, which in its fundamental design cannot accommodate their “moving” educational needs. The principal of an NGO school for migrant children in Bengaluru termed this a “roller-coaster kind of education.” The nature of movement of the child differs according to the needs of each family. When migrant families come back to Bengaluru after a harvest or festival in

the village, the same set of children may not return to the settlement. Many children spend alternate periods of time in the village and city. In instances of migration within the state, the change of schools during such movements is neither encouraged by the school system nor favourable to the child’s learning experience. Far worse are the cases of migrant children, who move along with their families across construction sites, or whose families engage in traditional medicine trade and move across make-shift settlements in the city.

The solution of retaining children in residential schools in the village while their parents move to the city can be detrimental to the child’s well-being and development, although there is a dearth of studies that explore the impact of such interventions. Child rights discourses justify such interventions as being in the best interest of the child. However, the question of who decides the “best interest” of the child arises. To what extent should the say of the state, parents, civil society organisations or the children themselves determine the course of action of their life? These are not only practical questions that need to be addressed, but also political ones. Interventions designed to “move along” with the migrant families will have to address issues of language, human resources and sustainability. Bridging and mainstreaming programmes in destination cities also have the challenges of language, quality and follow-up.

Migrant Child and Everyday Life

The arrival of Kaveri river water, three days in a week, results in a flurry of activity within the urban migrant settlements in Bengaluru. Since public water supply does not adequately reach the migrants, they look for generous apartment owners who allow them to collect water from their apartments. Children play a significant role in this water collection. Government schoolgoing children do not attend school during the water-arriving days in order to fill water in their homes. This initial absence from school for two or three days a week gradually leads to the complete dropping out of the child. Not only is this

active role and ownership of children in the everyday activities of migrant families considered invisible child labour, the education system is also unable to respond to these lived realities of migrant children.

Migrant families depend on their children's participation in activities such as sibling care, watching over the tents while adults are away for work, as well as domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning and fetching water. Elder children are sometimes brought to the cities in order to assist in such family needs. Children narrate stories of the adversities they face in the city, and how they actively mitigate them. Such experiences range from strategically hiding and staying away from drug abusers, crossing the road to buy groceries from the shop a few metres away, and saving dogs (sometimes even small children) that fall into the gutters surrounding their settlement. Children are far from passive victims of their circumstances, or robbed of their childhood and waiting to be saved. In fact, it is the normative dimensions attributed to childhood, which rob their lives of dignity and agency, not their experience of childhood itself.

While the mainstream education system cannot accommodate the everyday realities of migrant children, even interventions of civil society organisations end up counteracting their intentions. Children are admitted to NGO schools with the intention of making them stay in school. Ironically, even within the school, the elder child ends up taking care of younger siblings, not only because of the emotional and physical attachment of younger children towards their elder siblings, but also because teachers constantly request them to take care of the younger ones when they cry or need to use the latrine. Children in NGO schools are allowed to go to their settlements when they are required to collect water. However, due to a lack of systematic planning and the absence of an enduring commitment towards children's learning, the bridging school ends up being a place where children avail some nutrition and recreation facilities, but no substantial learning. NGO funding, project management and

impact assessment are based on deliverables, which fail to affect the actual lives of children or create micro-level educational change.

Organic Agency of the Child

Linking the above observations to the politics of childhood, there is not only a need to recognise the agency of children, but also to accept it in its own organic meaning and right. If one agrees that children have agency and that childhood is the journey of that experiential agency, then it cannot be stolen. Does anyone talk about stolen adulthood or stolen womanhood? These "hoods" are experienced—irrespective of their evaluation as good or bad by an external agency—but can never be stolen. Initiatives to "reform" the lives of children in difficult circumstances should begin from their experiences of childhood and its historical and sociopolitical locations, not from the premise that they have been robbed of their childhoods. Childhood cannot be stolen and hence need not be saved.

The political underpinnings of stolen childhoods, both at macro and micro levels leads us to enquire how childhoods are experienced within a historical and sociocultural matrix rather than looking for solace in the universal normativity of childhood. This means that even within the category of migrant children, there are individual migrant childhoods, as opposed to an overarching "migrant childhood" that is experienced and can be studied. A single migrant childhood, which structures the experiences of children in predetermined ways that do not align with essential human nature and the possibilities of its creative wisdom is a philosophical question, as much as it is a sociopolitical question.

Historicity of Indian childhoods and their constant makeover in the current times, along with their sociocultural and political rootedness is important to create nuanced studies on childhoods in India (Kakar 1979). This requires newer understandings of agency, which surpasses the notions of childhood as ingrained in both the universal childhood and the multiple childhood frameworks. A reconciliation between notions of

childhoods within a normative theoretical category, and as a practical experiential category is essential to such an endeavour. As Nieuwenhuys (2008: 6) points out,

both abstract universalism and cultural relativism posit an essentialist approach to social phenomena, the difference being that in one case it is childhood and in the other culture that are perceived as an enduring phenomenon.

The newer path embarked upon from such reconciliation will change the image of the "migrant child" (and in general the "vulnerable child") in both policy and academic research. Unless such a shift occurs, we will continue to provide children only with what we think an ideal childhood and education ought to be.

NOTES

- 1 See for example Goddard, McNamee and James (2004); Hanson (2014); Reynolds, Nieuwenhuys and Hanson (2006).
- 2 The "Shale Kade Nanna Nade" campaign was observed as part of the fieldwork for this study.

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