

Children on the Margins: In Hindsight of the Pandemic

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From my window, on the other-side of the road, you can see my alma mater standing tall. My younger sibling, who is currently studying in the same school, often stands on the window sighing and longingly looking at the empty classrooms visible from our apartment. The pandemic has deprived us of much, losing what little stability we had in pre-Covid world. While some losses are being measured and evaluated, as a student-educator I could not help but wonder about the loss of childhood experiences of many, which we adults still tend to cherish and look back for solace.

Child, as defined in Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, is a male or female child of upto to fourteen years of age. Though, unlike “Child”, there are no legal definitions of childhood. Dian Gittin (2015), defines Childhood as a general state of being a child, which has changed over time varying between cultures. Gittin states, “Childhood...is arguably a construction, a fiction interwoven with personal memories: cultural representations that serve to disguise differences between children - whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, class or physical ability.” (pp 27, 2015) How has then the nature of a child come to define itself in lockdown and childhood that is crucial to a child’s development as a complete human?

Professor RachanaJohri, posed several questions exploring the nature of children and the effects of curbing their individual rights due to lockdowns during the pandemic. Schools as a space for socialization where children start forming valuable bonds outside their homes, have been reduced to a rectangular screen they have to sit in front of, for four-five hours a day. Forming bonds have been limited to immediate family members, who are often adults, who have their responsibilities besides focusing on the learning or leisure time of the child. Lack of human touch in online classes does not leave much room for friendships to be formed. Digital learning has indeed taken away the personal interaction with their teachers, plays and banter with their classmates and the very space they call classroom.

While I am of the belief that learning space can be in the open, among greens as well as a closed classroom or a laboratory, we need to understand that in lockdown, the children have been deprived of them all. Spaces and the context we built in interaction with them have been

redefined. Classrooms with blackboards, display boards with art and craft, library with books, playgrounds with sports equipment and music room with musical instruments, each provide the child with a space to learn. They encourage them to engage with and explore these spaces and what constitutes these spaces, to grow.

As adults, work-from-home for us has erased the line of public and private space. Where public space is seen as a space for people to socialize, private space remains for self and other members of the household. Even though their relationship is fluctuating and flexible, lockdown has led to restricted socialization, merging of responsibilities one has in public and private space, and limited space for self-recreation. One can only imagine the eraser of the same for a child. Many children lack the luxury of private space altogether at their homes, much less a learning environment to pursue their scholastic knowledge. It has widened the learning gap for marginalized groups among the children. Few of them being children with special needs, children lacking devices and stable connections, children of migrant workers, etc.

Systemic failures have finally taken its toll as it has compromised the education of these children. In a conversation with one of my good friends residing in the tea gardens of West Bengal, I realized the undue disadvantage the adivasi children of their community were facing due to the lockdown. They had identified multiple children who had dropped out due to inaccessible online classes and lack of connectivity. It was distressing to see how many of them were pushed into the labor market to sustain the financial conditions of the family in absence of school which seemed to have forgotten these children, and made limited efforts to contact them. While my friend did believe this will stunt the community's growth in the long run, I wonder if this has not also forced the children to crossover to adult responsibilities while giving up on many childhood experiences?

Children of the migrant workers too have become further vulnerable amidst the pandemic. The latter months of the first lockdown, saw India's largest migration since partition due to inability of the cities to contain migrant workers and meet their basic needs (Misra, 2021). . In the words of Alex Paul Menon (Labour Commissioner, Chhattisgarh) we remained ignorant and indifferent to our labour class and especially our migrant workers. The brunt of which was faced by the children who had been enrolled in the schools of cities their parents had previously worked in.

During my internship period at Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, where I dealt with grievances related to education and children with special needs, I often came across cases where children of workers who were forced to migrate in the last academic year were removed

from the school due to lack of attendance. Parents who were already struggling to meet the financial needs of the family and availing online classes were simply faced with further hurdles. We also received letters of children seeking fee exemption, whose guardians had either passed away or lost source of income.

While this reflected children's agency and their knowledge and struggles to have their basic rights, it also showed the darker side of the system that is supposed to provide children with education that ensures their right to life but instead tangled them in shortcomings of the adults who failed to practice their roles and responsibilities that ensured this.

As systems fail to keep up with rapid change in the pandemic, children with special needs are blind-sided, whether it be their medical needs or education. Long duration of waiting to avail their regular check-up and device assistance has disrupted what little normalcy they can hope for. Online classes have taken away the care and learning they were provided in schools. With limited online resources and technology, they are struggling to keep up.

Pandemic has bared the failures and gaps in policy implementation that protect and ensure children's rights. Therefore, it is about time we recognize the various social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds children come from."...we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities...experience does not occur in a vacuum" (John Dewey, 1986. P.). Childhood encompasses these varied experiences a child goes through, on which this pandemic will leave a big impact on. As educators and policy-makers, we need to make sense of a child's reality during the pandemic and how these experiences will shape them in coming years. So, while we bridge these gaps, it becomes imperative now more than ever to understand the nature of a child, a child's agency, autonomy and politics to have a child-centric outlook.

Reference

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