

A Report by
HAQ: Centre for Child Rights

CHILDREN IN LOCKDOWN

A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF
COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN INDIA
ON CHILDREN,
BASED ON MEDIA REPORTAGE

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HAQ: Centre for Child Rights is a human rights organisation that focusses on all rights for all children. Founded in 1998 and formally registered in June 1999, HAQ envisions an inclusive society where all children grow up in an environment that rests on the principles of non-discrimination and equality and where the human rights of all children are recognised, protected and realised. The organisation thus seeks to mainstream child rights and children’s concerns in all development planning and action. In doing so, HAQ works through knowledge creation, evidence- based advocacy and communication, direct support for children in distress, strategic collaboration and partnership. This report is yet another outcome of the vision and mission that guides HAQ in its endeavours.

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Preface

Even as the year has changed, much remains the same as the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. When the first lockdown was announced in India in March 2020, we hoped it would not last long as nobody was prepared. Soon news started coming in about loss of jobs, a crackdown of the public health system, lack of support from the government for those who needed it the most and a crashing economy.

Amongst all categories of population, children have had the worst trajectory of suffering through the pandemic. They are one such category that has suffered across class, irrespective of their socio-economic background, although in varying degrees. Children lost contact with their peers, they lost the spaces that brought a smile to their faces despite all odds, they lost out on education that brought hope and many have had to face heightened neglect, abuse and exploitation of all forms.

As governments were struggling to address the needs of people, attention was drawn to the plight of children through media reports, the only source of information that could be relied upon in absence of any scientific surveys and macro research in such times. Although a few global studies on the impact of COVID-19 on children emerged gradually, providing some valuable insights, at the national level, news reports by and large continue to be the source to follow and draw upon.

Like many NGOs across the country, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights too geared up to reach relief to those affected, particularly children in the most vulnerable situations such as children of migrant labour, children of sex workers, children of parents with disability as also children with disability, refugee children, children of single mothers, children facing domestic violence or threat of child marriage, etc. Some efforts were made to create resources for children who could access online material to deal with their anxieties by engaging in various indoor activities, and reaching out those who could not, through tele-counselling. Addressing policy issues, especially those concerning children in institutional settings or being released and restored as a protection and safeguard measure for COVID-19 became another area for action. Several child rights organisations came together to prepare a policy brief that was subsequently shared with Parliamentarians and the National Human Rights Institutions. In all this, reliance was laid on news reports, though till date no effort has been made to compile such reports.

It is in this backdrop that HAQ: Centre for Child Rights began to assess children's situation through the news, which has resulted in this report.

The report has its limitations as it is confined to the news available in print in English and Hindi languages and is only for the period ensuing the first complete lockdown phase in

March, 2020 until part of the partial lockdown phase in August, 2020. It is just a step towards gathering reported data and information on child rights concerns during the pandemic. We do hope to make it a continuous exercise if it generates an interest in the readers and will appreciate constructive feedback, if any.

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Bharti Ali
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: An Unfolding

Context

“The Mahabharata war was won in 18 days. Today, the war against corona which is being fought by the entire country will take 21 days.” - Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister.¹

At 9:00 pm on 24th March, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the nation would enter a complete lockdown at 12:00 am (within 3 hours of the declaration). Accordingly, the lockdown was to be lifted on 14th April, 2020. However, the ‘war’ against Corona was not won in 21 days and so the lockdown was extended three more times - first to 3rd May, then to 17th May, and then to 31st May. The Mahabharata may have been won in 18 days, but at the end of the 68-day lockdown, the virus was still winning. A lockdown that began with 500+ COVID cases was to be lifted with 1,82,000+ officially announced cases.

What happened in the 68 days of lockdown?

The lockdown was a period of time during which everything had to close- factories, shops, small industries, offices, educational institutions. The impact of such a shutdown on India’s economy and its citizens is wide. While life for only a fortunate few became cordoned to the four walls of a comfortable and well provided home, for the rest those fateful 68 days were, in fact, spent without even the bare minimum food and healthcare needed for survival.

While the havoc wrought by the lockdown is still unfolding, the visible impacts definitely show us that the consequences will be long term. Existing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated and new vulnerabilities have been created - for communities as a whole, for families, and for individuals within them.

Needless to say, children have had to bear the direct brunt of such wide scale deprivation. Children within societies and families are facing both heightened and new challenges. India is a layered society with grades of poverty and privilege, which ride alongside a complex web of caste, religion, class, economic status and (dis) ability. It is critical that all children, across age groups are reached. Children have a right to basic services, rights and entitlements at all times- even emergencies.

While derogations from human rights are permissible during lawfully declared emergencies, the right to life with dignity is an inalienable right under the Constitution of India and

¹ Pandey, Neelam. “Mahabharata War Won in 18 Days But Fight Against Coronavirus Will Take 21 Days Says Modi.” The Print, March 25, 2020. <https://theprint.in/india/mahabharata-war-won-in-18-days-but-fight-against-coronavirus-will-take-21-days-says-modi/388267/>

international conventions (as stated in the Preamble itself of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, September 1990)² that India has ratified.

The impact that this sudden announcement of a lockdown had on children has been seen in media reportage over the last few months. These have shown that there have been multiple impacts – on physical and mental health due to lack of availability of services or access to them, on nutrition due to food deprivation, on education because of the sudden closure of schools. The results can be seen in the reports on increase in violence, increase in numbers of child labour and trafficking, so on and so forth.

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights decided to undertake a systematic analysis of these news reports to understand how or to what extent print and digital media have addressed the concerns of children. The aim was also to collate the nature of impacts being reported to enable a holistic understanding.

Focus and Methodology

The primary sources of information for this study are the digitally available English and Hindi news articles published between 25th March, 2020 to 31st August, 2020. The report surveyed a total of 64 articles of which 45 were published in digital-only mediums and 19 were published in mediums available in print as well as digitally, 61 were in the English language and 3 were in the Hindi language, 38 belonged to national media and 26 to regional publications, 55 focused directly on children while 9 mentioned useful information on children, and 10 were opinion pieces. These have been supplemented with data from census; government records and surveys and reports by international agencies.

In surveying the primary sources for the report, i.e., media coverage, it was observed that there was insufficient exploration of the realities of children during the lockdown in India. This was particularly true with regards to regional/ state-wise distribution of media coverage as there appeared to be a lack of significant data or stories from certain parts of the country versus others. Additionally, the mainstream reportage did not address issues of class, caste, religion, gender, sexuality, language, regional differences sufficiently.

The analysis in this study is based upon news reports and articles that could be accessed online (including those that had appeared in print version) in national level publications in English and Hindi. It does not include audio-visual reportage. This limits the information analysed in this report to mainstream, digitally accessible English and Hindi textual journalism.

The report begins with an overview of the physical and mental health challenges faced by

² United Nations, Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner. Conventions on the Rights of Child. September, 1990. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

children during the lockdown and healthcare services made available to them; the second chapter focuses on the condition of nutrition in children’s diet during the period and state response in provision of the same; the third chapter focuses on the safety and security of children during the lockdown in relation to various forms of violence and crime children are vulnerable to; and finally, the report analyses children’s right to education and the manner in which they have been impacted by a shift to online education. Through the study, an observation is made of the extent to which children’s participation has been solicited – whether in their immediate environment, in governance and policy, or in reportage. The report, thus, positions itself in favour of advocating for children’s right to participation in structural and systemic processes of decision-making that concern and impact their lives.

The chapter-wise division of primary and secondary sources is as follows:

Chapter-Wise Tabular Representation of Sources					
	Healthcare	Food and Nutrition	Child Protection	Education	Total
Total No. of Articles	13	13	20	18	64
Articles in Hindi Language	0	3	0	0	3
Articles in English Language	13	10	20	18	61
Available in Digital-only mediums	5	8	20	12	45
Available in print as well as digitally	8	5	0	6	19
Belonged to national media	10	12	2	14	38
Belonged to regional/ state publications	3	1	18	4	26
Focused directly on children	11	11	15	18	55
Mentioned Children	2	2	5	0	9
Opinion Pieces	2	2	0	6	10
Data from Government records/ international surveys	5	2	2	5	14

CHAPTER TWO

Healthy Bodies and Minds: Healthcare as the Key to Unlocking Children's Potential

Amidst a public health emergency, are children receiving healthcare?

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has estimated, as reported by India Today on 7th May, 2020, that approximately 20 million babies are expected to be born in India between March-December 2020.³ What medical conditions can we expect these children to be born in? What degree of vaccination and immunisation can we expect for the all the babies for whom 2020 is their year of infancy? How many children below the age of five years will lose their lives this year? And, will Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) mark the mental health of an entire generation?

It is not only that we are confronted with grim estimates and predictions, we are also confronted with an information gap.

Physical Healthcare

The Hindustan Times reports (16th June, 2020) that several women had no choice except to give birth at home as access to maternity care was cut off during the lockdown. According to the article, apart from the obvious risk this poses to the life and health of the mother, birth at home resulted in new born babies missing the dose of vaccination called BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guerin) that is given at medical facilities.⁴

The Integrated Child Care Services (ICDS) also provides six basic healthcare services to lactating mothers and new born babies and infants through the Anganwadi centres viz. supplementary nutrition, pre-school non-formal education, nutrition & health education, immunization, health check-up and referral services. Lockdown meant services at the 1.4 million anganwadis across the country were disrupted.

The Hindustan Times further reports that within the global 5.9 million under-five deaths in a year, one in five takes place in India, "with more than half being from vaccine-preventable and treatable infections, such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and sepsis. If all children are vaccinated after birth, more than half these lives could be saved." The Quint reported on 20th

³ PTI. "20 million babies: India expected to see highest number of births since coronavirus declared pandemic." India Today, May 07, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/20-million-babies-india-highest-births-coronavirus-declared-pandemic-1675274-2020-05-07>

⁴ Sharma, Sanchita. "Covid-19 fuelling mother and child mortality rates." Hindustan Times, June 16, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-fuelling-mother-and-child-mortality-rates/story-ALGIGzVDystpDDrCUwfnbM.html>

July, 2020, that according to UNICEF, under-five (U5) mortality in India dropped from 60 to 37 between 2010-2018 enabling India to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) on under-five mortality. The Quint continues that as per a study published in The Lancet in May 2020, an additional 12,00,000 under-five deaths may occur within six months of lockdown in 118 low-income countries, of which 3,00,000 additional deaths are estimated to be in India. This would nullify the progress that the country had worked so hard to reach.⁵

On 25th April, 2020, Business Standard reported, “India has around 600,000 villages according to the 2011 census. Back-of-the-envelope calculations show that an estimated 5 million children might have missed out on vaccination in March, and those numbers are swelling in April... The UNICEF recently said as Covid-19 continues to spread globally, over 117 million children in 37 countries could miss out on receiving life-saving measles vaccination. Measles immunisation campaigns have already been delayed in 24 countries, and might be postponed in many more countries as well.”⁶ The same report refers to a dipstick survey across 30 villages in Rajasthan that has estimated that about 250 children missed their vaccinations in March alone. It is crucial for India to be cautious and remain prepared in case of any outbreaks. HT writes, “During the monsoons, there is a rise in malaria and vaccine-preventable diarrhoea, pneumonia and measles, which are the biggest cause of under-five deaths in India. If childhood vaccines are missed, IMR, malnutrition and stunting will rise and prevent India from meeting its Sustainable Development Goal of bringing Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) down to 25 or less by 2030.”

New Indian Express reported in June 2020 that, if we look at the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, seventy-seven per cent of under-fives were unable to access immunisation during the lockdown.⁷ As per maximum expert predictions, it appears, that the management of the pandemic has undone decades of effort put into mitigating under-five mortality and achieving basic global standards of early childhood health.

Modern technologies have enabled the doctors to consult patients through telemedication - the practice of caring for patients remotely through digital tools when the doctor and patient are not physically present with each other. However, immunisation against deadly diseases is beyond the scope of telemedicine. It requires mobility and physical contact- that was not possible during lockdown and was restricted thereafter.

⁵ Chopra, Dr. Geeta. “COVID Has Undone Child Rights Progress. Here’s What Govt Must Do”. The Quint, July 20, 2020. <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/covid-pandemic-child-protection-laws-lack-of-nutrition-anganwadi-centres-maternal-health-child-abuse>

⁶ Das, Sohini. “India's infant immunisation drive comes to a halt over Covid-19 fear”, Business Standard, April 25, 2020. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-s-infant-immunisation-drive-comes-to-a-halt-over-covid-19-fear-120042201411_1.html

⁷ PTI. “77 per cent children below 5 years in J&K couldn't access basic healthcare during lockdown: CRY”. The New Indian Express, June 29, 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/jun/29/77-per-cent-children-below-5-years-in-jk-couldnt-access-basic-healthcare-during-lockdown-cry-2163066.html>

In the context of coronavirus specifically, in an article published by Deccan Herald on 20th April, 2020, a Supreme Court judgment was reported wherein the court, after taking suo moto notice on a case regarding the Re-contagion of COVID19 Children in protection homes' directed that all children in conflict with law being kept in observation homes may be released on bail with the aim of maximising health precautions.⁸ Soon after, on 11th June, 2020, NDTV reported that in the case of more than 35 children testing COVID positive in a government shelter home in Royapuram locality, Tamil Nadu, the Supreme Court took suo moto notice. The court asked state governments for a status report on the measures taken to protect the health of children in homes and on the compliance of its earlier directives regarding the same.⁹ And, on 7th July, 2020, the National Herald reported that The Supreme Court had directed the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Tripura to file affidavits regarding the condition of children in protection, juvenile, and foster or kinship homes in relation to the Coronavirus outbreak.¹⁰

“Sahil, whose name was changed for this story, is a 14-year-old from the southern Anantnag district who suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), but his condition has been aggravated since the outbreak of COVID-19, “He had distressing thoughts of getting contaminated with the coronavirus infection which are leading to anxiety, due to the fear of pandemic, he was washing his hands excessively and compulsively checking news on the pandemic.

In addition to hand washing and obsessing over the news, he “started to stay in isolation and the worst was when he started to have panic attacks – he felt like he had the COVID-19 infection,” a family member told Anadolu Agency.”

(Anadolu Agency, 14th June, 2020)

⁸ Tripathi, Ashish. “Supreme Court Directs for Releasing Juveniles on Bail in View of Covid-19.” Deccan Herald, April 04, 2020. <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/supreme-court-directs-for-releasing-juveniles-on-bail-in-view-of-covid-19-821315.html>

⁹ Press Trust of India. “Supreme Court Takes Note of Covid-19 Infection Among Children in Tamil Nadu Shelter Home.” NDTV, June 11, 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/supreme-court-takes-note-of-covid-19-infection-among-children-in-tamil-nadu-shelter-home-2244433>

¹⁰ NH Web Desk. “Covid-19 in Childrens’ Homes: SC Seeks Response from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Tripura.” National Herald, July 07, 2020. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/covid-19-in-childrens-homes-sc-seeks-response-from-uttar-pradesh-bihar-uttarakhand-and-tripura>

Mental Healthcare

Children across the country grapple with isolation, deprived of play and team work in schools while undergoing a digital online education unsuited to the dominant technological access in the country, deteriorating nutrition and health, notwithstanding the record spike in domestic violence, child marriage, withdrawal of children from education as the caregivers of the children get increasingly strained economically and socially.¹¹ Such conditions of stress from multiple directions upon families and communities is bound to lead to large scale deterioration of the psychological well-being of children, the impact of which can be long-term and even chronic until and unless a robust mental healthcare infrastructure responds to this crisis on an immediate basis. Soumitra Pathare, Director of Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy told DW (July, 2020), ““We do know that adversity in childhood is known to be a risk factor for having mental health problems when they grow up. The current situation is going to create those risk factors...For instance, cases of child abuse might go up. If adults are more stressed out, they are more likely to be violent to their kids. So clearly this is a huge red flag.”¹²

As per various news reports on the impact of children’s mental health, children of all ages are struggling with anxiety, stress, loneliness, fear of loss of a loved one, and separation anxiety in varying degrees. Dr. Koyeli Sengupta, a developmental paediatrician, shared with The Hindu that “two to three-year olds, separated from their parents, show signs of anxiety through extreme clinginess after their parents return from quarantine... In slightly older children, three to six-year-olds, a common thought is ‘did I do something wrong that my parents went away.’”¹³

In more extreme cases, the feelings of fear, loneliness, stress, and anxiety may even lead children to suicide. Dr Sheena G. Soman, a psychiatrist shared with New Indian Express, “The pandemic and the continuing lockdown is leading to a state of helplessness. In that state when a person feels that they have no control over their situation, they may begin to behave irrationally. Children are especially at risk when there is a lack of response to their actions from their parents. Situations such as the lack of facilities and zero interaction can lead to mental health issues such as stress and anxiety and in severe cases, it might also lead to suicide.”¹⁴

¹¹ See Chapter Four

¹² Sharma, Aditya. “Coronavirus triggers mental health crisis in India”. DW.com, July 01, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-triggers-mental-health-crisis-in-india/a-54011738>

¹³ Shelar, Jyoti. “Coronavirus lockdown | COVID-19 taking an emotional toll on children”. The Hindu, June 14, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/coronavirus-lockdown-covid-19-taking-an-emotional-toll-on-children/article31822539.ece>

¹⁴ Simon, Steni. “Mind matters: Covid and your child’s mental health”. The New Indian Express, June 16, 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/2020/jun/16/mind-matters-covid-and-your-childs-mental-health-2156965.html>

Anadolu Agency, in June, 2020, reported that the mental health of children in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir was deteriorating.¹⁵ The child guidance and well-being centre run by UNICEF at the Shri Maharaja Hari Hospital (SMHS) since the lockdown has received hundreds of mental health child patients. “We have provided psychiatric help and counselling sessions to almost 300 cases since the COVID-19 outbreak – 90% of cases through telephone and 10% face-to-face sessions,” said clinical psychologist, Farhana Yaseen. Yasir Rather, a psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences in the capital Srinagar, told Anadolu Agency, “First of all we need to limit the COVID-19 news for children, especially to those who have underlying mental health problems... In 50%-60% of child mental health cases which we have seen during the current pandemic crisis, high levels of anxiety, distress, panic attacks and suicidal thoughts are prominent.”

Across the various reports on the impact of Lockdown on mental health of children, experts are arguing that news around the topic of COVID19 and its related deaths takes a toll on children and are advising parents to minimise its consumption in the presence of children. Experts advise that it is key at such a time for parents to carefully listen to the expressions of their children to reassure them, allay their fears, and make them feel secure and supported.

¹⁵ Sidiq, Nusrat. “Kashmir children facing COVID-19 mental health issues”. AA.com, June 14, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kashmir-children-facing-covid-19-mental-health-issues/1876498>

CHAPTER THREE

The Bare Minimum: 'Un-Meeting' a Child's Basic Nutrition Needs

Observer Research Foundation, on 20th April, 2020¹⁶, reported that India is caught in inter-generational cycles of malnutrition. It is home to half the wasted children globally and the second highest number of stunted children after Africa. The 2017 UNICEF figures reveal that 39 per cent of under-five children in India were stunted, 16 per cent were wasted, and 33 per cent were underweight, with Bihar and Uttar Pradesh leading in number of stunted children. In total India had 1.04 million under-five deaths in 2017 with UP at the highest followed by Bihar. The Lancet places the figure in the same year at 10.4 lakh out of which, the study concludes that as many as 7,06,000 can be attributed to malnutrition. On an average 1,934 under-fives die of malnutrition every day.¹⁷

What went wrong?

The Newsclick reported, on 21st June, 2020, that "the world's two biggest child nutrition programmes – the ICDS and the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) programme – run by the Indian government suffered a severe jolt in March and April this year as food grain allocated for them was not made available during the sudden, ill-conceived lockdown that began on March 24 midnight."¹⁸

Both ICDS and MDM depend on the functioning of a complex federal infrastructure described by Newsclick. Grain collection over the year by government agencies is allocated by the central government and transported to different states as per requirements via the Public Distribution System (PDS). This is the grain that is then distributed via various channels to fair price shops, as well as to anganwadis and schools to carry out the programmes. Since trains were shut during lockdown, there was no transportation of grain and, additionally, no clear directions were provided on an alternate plan to ensure the continuation of the programmes. On paper, government declared that all meals and dry ration would be provided to the homes of children, but most states were unable to manage this. Additionally, anganwadi workers were diverted to COVID duties making it humanly impossible for them to focus their energies on the nutrition of children. (Newsclick)

¹⁶ Suri, Shobha. "Food Security for Children Amidst COVID-19: A Cause for Concern." Orfonline.org, Observer Research Foundation, April 20, 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/food-security-for-children-amidst-covid19-a-cause-for-concern-64877/>

¹⁷ The Lancet, Child and Adolescent Health. "The Burden of Child and Maternal Malnutrition and Trends in its Indicators in the States of India: the Global Burden of Disease Study 1990 – 2017." The Lancet, September 18, 2019. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(19\)30273-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(19)30273-1/fulltext)

¹⁸ Varma, Subodh. "How the Lockdown Destroyed Children's Nutrition Programmes." Newsclick.in, June 21, 2020. <https://www.newsclick.in/How-the-Lockdown-Destroyed-Children-Nutrition-Programmes>

Various bureaucratic and cultural fissures were formed within the context of children's nutrition deprivation during the lockdown, in particular the migrant crisis, availability of ration cards, and gendered hierarchies. On 6th June, 2020, IndiaSpend reported that most breadwinners were migrants who had returned home due to absence of work and weren't earning.¹⁹ An opinion piece in Healthworld, published on 21st May, 2020, adds the complication of many migrant workers who may have ration cards registered in the state of work but not in the home state.²⁰ IndiaSpend reports, "People whom IndiaSpend spoke to said PDS shops give priority to locals with ration cards. By the time people without ration cards get their turn, some items such as black gram run out." As one explores the migrant crisis, the experience of migrant women and children requires focused attention. Hindustan Times discovered that in many of the cases, even when ration packages did reach home as per government directive, they were handed to male members instead of women and children, making actual impact upon the most vulnerable uncertain.

In Maharashtra, of the 553 ICDS Projects running, 364 are in rural areas. However, 16 days into the lockdown when Indian Express reported from the state on 11th April, 2020, apart from a few urban centres, most rural anganwadis (in parts of Aurangabad, Parbhani, Akola and Sangli) and "even in scheduled areas of Palghar district, where malnutrition is a recurring problem, anganwadis such as those in Karajgaon-Vasa, Kurze-Dhodipada and Kurze Kompada" had not received supplies. Indian Express interviewed various anganwadi workers who shared worrying details about how there were logistical breakdowns such as no additional funds for gloves, masks, sanitisers to ensure safety in distribution and, even within the packages delivered, they sometimes found inadequate supplies. In remote areas such as Dharna in Amravati and parts of Gadchiroli, Anganwadi workers were at a loss as to how to distribute the grain without any transportation.²¹

¹⁹ Tiwari, Sadhika and Shrinkhala Pandey. "Malnutrition Could Cost Children's Health and Lives for Years After COVID Crisis, Experts Warn". IndiaSpend, June 06, 2020. <https://www.indiaspend.com/malnutrition-could-cost-childrens-health-lives-for-years-after-covid-crisis-experts-warn/>

²⁰ Mangal, Daya Krishan. "India's Fight Against COVID-19 and Malnutrition", *Health.economictimes.indiatimes.com*. Healthworld, May 21, 2020. <https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/industry/indias-fight-against-covid-19-and-malnutrition/75858953>

²¹ Iyer, Kavitha. "In Maharashtra, Key Meal Scheme for Children, Women Hits Lockdown Hurdle." The Indian Express, April 11, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/in-maharashtra-key-meal-scheme-for-children-women-hits-lockdown-hurdle-6356976/>

In Bihar, approximately every third child under nine years is stunted and underweight. With 48.3 per cent under-fives and 28 per cent between the ages of five to nine stunted, Bihar's condition is worse by 10 per cent of the national average. Reporting on Bihar shows the already high crisis of malnutrition has been pushed to severity with the lockdown. Despite less than 60 per cent coverage of MDM in Bihar, the scheme fed 2 crore children across the state who were deprived

Swati Meshram, an anganwadi sevika at the Talasari-2 unit shares, "In many villages it's not possible to go door-to-door, houses are far apart and I wouldn't be able to carry more than one parcel at a time."

Paraphrasing another Anganwadi worker, Indian Express writes, "In Kurze-Dhodipada where the grocery supplies haven't come and beneficiary families are waiting expectantly, anganwadi worker Archana Bhoje's bigger problem is how to keep the scheme functioning when she hasn't been paid for three months for children's meals and for six months for the Amrut Aahar meal for pregnant and lactating women."

(Indian Express, 11th April, 2020)

through the lockdown. Additionally, schools were closed in Bihar since 17th February when contract teachers began striking for equal work for equal pay, making the deprivation even more extended. The Wire, reporting on 12th June, 2020, was able to locate government orders to provide monetary compensation against MDMs but did not find any information in media or government websites for a similar provision against AWCs. The Anganwadi workers they spoke to were either unaware or made conjectures about possible reimbursement.²²

Mirror Now Digital, Times Now, in an article published on 6th July, 2020, reporting on Musahari Tola in Badbilla village of Bhagalpur District, Bihar found children, whose only source of nutrition was MDMs and Anganwadis, had begun collecting waste with parents, begging and, desperately eating frogs. While the DM of district claims that monetary compensation equivalent to the food was given to students, people insist that they had not received any such help.²³

"We used to go to schools and had mid-day meal. Our favourite day was Friday when we were served eggs." – A Child in Badbilla village
"Sunny Kumar, who couldn't go to school after lockdown, said he eats Bengma, a local word for frog, when he steps out for work." – A Child in Badbilla village paraphrasing their peer.

(Mirror Now Digital, Times Now, 6th July, 2020)

²² Singh, Pratyush and Chandan Kumar. "Lockdown: Bihar is Perilously Ignoring the Consequences of Undernutrition on Children". The Wire, June 12, 2020. <https://thewire.in/rights/lockdown-bihar-is-perilously-ignoring-the-consequences-of-undernutrition-on-children>

²³ Mirror Now Digital. "Lockdown: With Schools Closed and No Mid-day Meal, Children in Bihar Return to Waste Collection, Eating Frogs". Mirror Now Digital, July 06, 2020. <https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in->

In a summarizing statement on the condition of Bihar, The Wire reports, "The state is perilously ignoring the immediate and the long-term impact that undernutrition would have on its children. The monetary compensation provided by the states in lieu of the mid-day meals is paltry and will most likely be of little to no help. After factoring in market prices, it would be difficult to get even rice and dal at these rates. The government should ideally home deliver rations to these children as is being done by the government of Kerala. However, if lack of human resources is an insurmountable impediment, then the least it can do is increase the monetary compensation, based on the market prices of the food items. Otherwise, reduced access to food will end up debilitating and killing more children than the coronavirus would."

The Crisis at Hand

Newclick reports, "But the cut-back in such essential services, such as infant nutrition programme and the MDM programme is an irreversible damage to a whole generation of children."

Experts share that malnutrition impairs the immune system making children more susceptible to infectious diseases and increases their risk of mortality. The Wire states, "Undernutrition can cause serious immunodeficiency in children, making them more vulnerable to infectious diseases and these children are also more likely to suffer from non-communicable diseases in adulthood."

UNICEF warned, on 27th July, 2020, that globally 1.2 million additional under-fives could die in just six months in low- and middle-income countries, going up to as many as 6,000 under-fives per day due to fall in health services and child wasting. Within that, India is expected to take one of the largest tolls of this projected at 3 lakhs. India could recede from meeting WHO target of reducing stunting by 50% from 2012-30.²⁴

Moving Forward, Moving Fast

Observer Research Foundation reports, "If we don't act now, experts point to possibility of increase in number of severe acute malnourished children who are vulnerable to the virus due to lack of immunity. This could have a long-lasting health and socio-economic impact for India."

[focus/article/lockdown-with-schools-closed-and-no-mid-day-meal-children-in-bihar-return-to-waste-collection-eating-frogs/616971](https://www.focus.org/article/lockdown-with-schools-closed-and-no-mid-day-meal-children-in-bihar-return-to-waste-collection-eating-frogs/616971)

²⁴ UNICEF. "An Additional 6.7 Million Children Under 5 Could Suffer from Wasting This Year Due to COVID-19". July 27, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-additional-67-million-children-under-5-could-suffer-wasting-year-due-covid-19>

UNICEF²⁵ has put out a four-pronged pointer for the state to consider:

1. Safeguarding access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets as a cornerstone of the response to COVID-19 by protecting food producers, processors and retailers; discouraging trade bans; and designating food markets as essential services;
2. Investing decisively in support for maternal and child nutrition by protecting breastfeeding, preventing the inappropriate marketing of infant formula, and securing children and women's access to nutritious and diverse foods; Re-activating and scaling up services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting while expanding other life-protecting nutrition services;
3. Maintaining the provision of nutritious and safe school meals by reaching vulnerable children through home delivery, take-home rations, cash or vouchers when schools are closed; and
4. Expanding social protection to safeguard access to nutritious diets and essential services among the poorest and most affected households, including access to fortified foods.

While the path forward is evident and suggestions from experts and engaged citizens are plenty, it unfortunately does not appear that governance bodies are focussing energies on corrective measures. The media's responsibility to hold the government accountable becomes an increasing concern as one moves from a handful or critical English news coverage towards Hindi journalism. News 18, on 19th July, 2020, reported the status nutrition in the country but held the pandemic as an abstract force, rather than its systemic mismanagement, responsible for the crisis.²⁶ Navbharat Times, on 27th June, 2020, goes so far as to say that DCPCR has accelerated efforts to address malnutrition but provides no specifics about the same "efforts" and, at no point, holds the state machinery responsible.²⁷ However, one Hindi Opinion Piece in Amarujala, on 20th June, 2020,²⁸ highlights the gravity of the crisis with emphasis: "In this crisis, what will happen to the children of India who are our future? Who is taking stock of the condition of the weakest amongst them? And why is this not the primary concern of our discussion."²⁹

²⁵ UNICEF. "An Additional 6.7 Million Children Under 5 Could Suffer from Wasting This Year Due to COVID-19." July 27, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-additional-67-million-children-under-5-could-suffer-wasting-year-due-covid-19>

²⁶ Suri, Shobha. "क्या कोरोना महामारी बनेगी करोड़ों भारतीयों की भूख की वजह?". News18 Hindi, July 19, 2020. <https://hindi.news18.com/news/knowledge/will-coronavirus-pandemic-and-cyclone-leave-many-indians-hungry-and-undernourished-bhvs-3181134.html>

²⁷ Dwivedi, Ravi. "बच्चों के कुपोषण का कारण न बन जाए कोरोना!". Nav Bharat Times, June 27, 2020. <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/metro/delhi/other-news/coronavirus-should-not-become-the-cause-of-malnutrition-of-children/articleshow/76654324.cms>

²⁸ Chatterji, Patralekha. "कोविड ने कमजोर की कुपोषण से जंग!". Amar Ujala, June 20, 2020. <https://www.amarujala.com/columns/opinion/covid-19-battles-with-malnutrition-of-the-weak>

²⁹ Translated from Hindi to English by HAQ: Centre for Child Rights

In not excavating children's stories on how they feel about food, how the absence of MDMs has affected them, and their psychic and bodily experience of malnutrition, children's right to participate in the matters that impact them is denied. Malnutrition directly deteriorates the life of a human – physiologically, neurologically, and psychologically. As NewClick reports, "This obvious error or act of omission joins the long list of such follies and neglect of ground realities that the Narendra Modi government has done while going in for the dramatic "shock and awe" lockdown".



CHAPTER FOUR

Securing Security for Children: Child Protection Within Lockdown

This chapter explores reportage on the impact of the nationwide lockdown on children's right to protection in relation to safety and security violations such as child marriage, child labour, domestic violence, child sexual abuse. It analyses the preparedness and response of the state and the judicial system in safeguarding the interest of child protection in India.

On 9th July, 2020, the Deccan Herald emphasises that the Assam States Commission for Protection of Child Rights (ASCSPCR) expressed concern over the increase of violation of child protection in its state. Though movement was zeroed down due to the lockdown, this period witnessed a substantial increment in child abuse cases. An official of ASCSPCR reported to the Deccan Herald, "It has been found that even during the lockdown and post lockdown, the cases of violence against children have not stopped but have rather increased. A total of 216 cases have been registered since the countrywide lockdown in March, out of which 113 cases were related to sexual abuse of children. As many as 13 cases were related to child labour, three of abduction, 47 cases of child marriage were addressed by the district child protection units while more than 40 other cases of offenses against children."³⁰

Additionally, the socio-economic deprivations encumbering people through the lockdown have escalated the vulnerabilities of children to such an extent that reporting of such issues as well as accessing child protection services became a major challenge. The deputy director of Child Line India suggested declaring the child protection hotline an essential service after receiving about 92,000 calls in 11 days at the inception of the lockdown. The "new normalcy" of the lockdown affected every government agency and its functionaries that are meant to protect children from various offences like child marriage, child labour, domestic violence and child sexual abuse.

Witnessing Increase of Child Labour

The economic impact of the lockdown resulted in a labour market shock that, in effect, directly made children even more vulnerable to child labour. Children are at a greater risk during an economic crisis as they get pushed forward as cost-saving labour and are forced to contribute to family income. Within this process, children frequently drop out of the education system – a situation made even more probable with the added challenges of online education. On 13th July, 2020, The Hindustan Times reported that the International Labour Organization (ILO) report titled "COVID-19 and Child Labour: A Time of Crisis, A Time to Act"

³⁰ Karmakar, Sumir. "Over 200 Child Rights Violation Cases in Assam During Lockdown and Coronavirus Pandemic". Deccan Herald, July 09, 2020. <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/over-200-child-rights-violation-cases-in-assam-during-lockdown-and-coronavirus-pandemic-859040.html>

indicated that a steep rise in child labour during the lockdown would push millions of children to work in hazardous situations for longer hours. The report found that a one percentage point increase in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 per cent point increase in child labour. Anindit Roy Choudhary, Director of Programmes and Policy Impact at Save the Children (India), told the Hindustan Times, "One prevailing perception that will go against children is that children are not being affected by this virus as compared to older people in the family. This will work as a push factor for children to be sent to work, whilst older people will remain at home with the fear of infection."³¹

The Times of India, on 12th July, 2020, reported how, in the National Capital Region, specifically Noida, children as young as 14, 13, 11, and 8 years of age were pushed to sell vegetables, fruits, shoe polish, and work in a photo studio as parents failed to bring food on the table during the lockdown.³² In another instance reported by The Hindu on 11th August, 2020, 11 children were rescued from 3 persons accused of child labour; the children were forced to work from 8 am to 10 pm in unhygienic conditions. Police said that the accused brought the victims from Uttar Pradesh after paying their poverty-stricken parents some money during the pandemic. The accused wanted workers who would work for 14 hours. However, as local labourers refused to do so, they exploited the children.³³

In Tamil Nadu, nearly 10 days after the rescue of 40 minors from a private spinning mill - a team of officers from Tiruppur District Police found that out of the 332 workers in the mill, 133 were minors, reported The Hindu on 7th August, 2020. Amongst the 133 minors rescued, 118 were girls and 15 were boys aged between 14 and 18 years – working in the mill. The Hindu reported, "The Tiruppur district administration arranged for the transport of the 40 minors rescued on July 28. They were sent in buses with Child Welfare Committee officials to their home towns in Tiruvannamalai, Vellore and Tiruppur districts. A case against the spinning mill was pending at the Madras High Court, based on which action would be initiated against the mill."³⁴

³¹ Sharma, Sanchita. "Millions of children may be pushed to work due to Covid-19". Hindustan Times, July 13, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/millions-of-children-may-be-pushed-to-work-due-to-covid/story-8m1Z3Tqe9DxfC4Zq2wQDcJ.html>

³² Salaria, Shikha. "Child labour cases rise during lockdown in Noida". TOI, July 12, 2020. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/noida/child-labour-cases-rise-during-lockdown-in-noida/articleshow/76916365.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

³³ Staff Reporter. "Eleven minors rescued from forced labour". The Hindu, August 11, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/eleven-minors-rescued-from-forced-labour/article32329327.ece>

³⁴ Akhilesh. R. "Police rescue 133 minors from spinning mill in Avinashi". The Hindu, August 07, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Coimbatore/police-rescue-133-minors-from-spinning-mill-in-avinashi/article32299102.ece>

Child Trafficking

The Hindu reported on 3rd August, 2020, that a tribal family of Sugali (Lambada community) allegedly sold a female infant for Rs. 10,000 to an ayah in a private hospital. However, they took the baby back after two days. Ms. Rupa told The Hindu, “We eke out livelihood by doing labour work. Unable to bring up the third girl child, my husband and aunt thought of giving the baby to somebody and sold the baby to an ayah (working in the private hospital) for Rs.10,000.”³⁵

The livelihood crisis ushered with the pandemic lockdown resulted in a large percentage of citizens of this country going for months without bare minimum ration and groceries for basic meals. The food crisis, the shutdown of Public Distribution Systems, and unemployment, have paved the way to trafficking of children as a means of survival.

Child Sexual Abuse

There were a lot of reports that raised the alarm on sexual abuse of children during the lockdown. The Times of India reported, “The lockdown has seen a spike in the instances of domestic violence as women are trapped indoors with their abusers. And many children too are at high risk of facing abuse within their homes, say activists. Considering the severely under reported category of crimes that constitute child sexual abuse (CSA) inside families, they fear the lockdown has made both reporting and intervention next to impossible”.³⁶

According to a report compiled by the Himachal Pradesh Police, the severest phase of lockdown in the country coincided with a drastic fall in reporting of crimes, but, inversely, was followed by an equally sharp rise in reporting as restrictions began to be eased, reports the Indian Express on 6th August, 2020. The month of April, when lockdown restrictions were the most severe, Himachal Pradesh witnessed the least Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act cases reported, but these rose subsequently in May and further in June.³⁷

What has also emerged is that abusers are mostly known to the child. In an instance reported from Ahmedabad by the Indian Express on 23rd July, 2020, a child enrolled in class 8 of a private school was abused by his tutor living in his neighbourhood. The police officer told

³⁵ Krishna, Srivada. "Tribal family sells infant twice, repent". August 03, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/tribal-family-sells-infant-twice-repent/article32262511.ece>

³⁶ Times New Network. "Sexual abuse of children may rise during lockdown, say activists". July 05, 2020. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/sexual-abuse-of-children-may-rise-during-lockdown-say-activists/articleshow/76786107.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

³⁷ Express News Service. "As govt eased curbs, crimes against women shot up in Himachal". The Indian Express, August 06, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/as-govt-eased-curbs-crimes-against-women-shot-up-in-himachal-6543014/>

Indian Express, "For the past two months, due to lockdown, the child was attending online classes. However, the teacher called him to his place a month ago to allegedly complete his remaining lessons in English. He then forced himself on the boy multiple times at his residence... the child complained of pain in his private parts and his parents took him to a doctor after which the ordeal was revealed. The child told his parents that the tutor told him that he would kill himself if he revealed it to his parents".³⁸

The Indian Express reported on 21st April, 2020, that 133 FIRs were registered and 46 people arrested by the Maharashtra Police in connection with cases related to child pornography since the enforcement of the lockdown. In majority of the 133 FIRs registered, the accused were charged under Section 292 (prurient creation of lascivious images), Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and IT act. India Child Protection Fund (ICPF), which was set up in January 2020, released a report that said: "The nationwide lockdown to contain the COVID-19 outbreak has exposed a dark underbelly of our society — millions of paedophiles, child rapists and child pornography addicts have increased their activities online, making the internet extremely unsafe for our children".³⁹

The Hindu reported on 7th August, 2020, that one of the few homes which accepted children during COVID-19 lockdown in Deeptisri Nagar, Telangana, did not permit children to return to their guardians. Within this home was a 14-year-old girl who had been admitted in 2015 post the death of her parents; she revealed that a donor at the home sexually assaulted her repeatedly after giving her soft drinks laced with drugs. Further, she added that the caretaker of the home, too, would assist the donor.⁴⁰ The lockdown not only hindered the victims from reporting incidents but also created a situation in which the victim was constantly locked in with their abusers.

Child Marriage

An increase in the number of children married during the lockdown has been registered in different parts of the country.

The Indian Express on 6th June, 2020, reported that between March 23 and April 23, the West Bengal State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) received 136 complaints —

³⁸ Express News Service. "Ahmedabad: Tutor held for 'raping' 12-year-old boy". The Indian Express, July 23, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/ahmedabad-tutor-held-for-raping-12-year-old-boy-6520543/>

³⁹ Express News Service. "Spike in child pornography cases: 46 held, over 130 FIRs registered during lockdown, says Maharashtra Home Minister". The Indian Express, April 21, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-home-minister-child-pornography-cases-46-held-130-fir-6371554/>

⁴⁰ Vadlamudi, Swathi. "Minor sexually assaulted at protection home by donor". The Hindu, August 07, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/minor-sexually-assaulted-at-protection-home-by-donor/article32298698.ece>

more than four every day on average — about underage girls being forced into marriage. The largest number of these complaints came from the districts of Murshidabad, North and South 24-Parganas, East and West Midnapore, Malda, and Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur. During regular times, only about 50 such complaints are received every month on average.

Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini, an NGO fighting against human trafficking told the Indian Express, “Poor parents want to be rid of the responsibility for a girl child. There are too many mouths to feed, and following the lockdown, poor and marginalised people have no money or food. Touts may be taking advantage of the situation as well.”⁴¹

The Indian Express reported on 21st June, 2020, that eighty cases of child marriage have been stopped and 16 FIRs filed in Maharashtra since the lockdown was enforced. According to data collated by Maharashtra’s Women and Child Development (WCD) department, there is an increase in child marriages due to various factors including the lockdown, closure of schools, impact on rural economy, unemployment, lack of financial security and uncertainty that has all exacerbated poverty.⁴²

Varsha Deshpande, an advocate with National Commission for Women whose team has stopped 173 child marriages in the last few years, told Indian Express (6th July, 2020), “Despite being illegal, there are many child marriages due to the poor economic conditions here in Marathwada region, as against other districts in western Maharashtra.”⁴³

In the same article, Indian Express also cites a recently released UNFPA’s State of the World Population Report 2020 that has warned that a one-year average delay in interventions to end child marriage can lead to an estimated 7.4 million more child marriages worldwide. And, the economic impact of the lockdown is likely to cause an estimated 5.6 million additional child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030.

Domestic Violence

The rise in domestic violence during the pandemic is now recognized globally as the ‘shadow pandemic’ plaguing the world and, most certainly, India as well. Domestic violence has

⁴¹ Mitra, Atri and Ravik Bhattacharya. "In locked down Bengal, fears rise of trafficking of girls". The Indian Express, June 06, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/in-locked-down-bengal-fears-rise-of-trafficking-of-girls-6444861/>

⁴² Modak, Sadaf. "Maharashtra: 80 cases of child marriage stopped, 16 FIRs filed since lockdown enforced". The Indian Express, June 21, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-80-cases-of-child-marriage-stopped-16-firs-filed-since-lockdown-enforced-6468792/>

⁴³ Mascarenhas Anuradha. " Maharashtra: Beed child marriages back in focus during pandemic, activists fear trafficking of girls". The Indian Express, July 06, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/maharashtra-beed-child-marriages-back-in-focus-during-pandemic-activists-fear-trafficking-of-girls-6493204/>

increased significantly during the lockdown not only for women but also children. International human rights agencies, grassroots organization, as well as national and international media has been extensively covering the rising social issue. However, even within this, children have received far less focus as compared to women facing domestic violence. It is crucial to highlight that the home remains a site of physical, psychological as well as verbal abuse faced by children.

The emerging data on suicides by children living at home during the lockdown may be highlighted in this regard. The New Indian Express reported on 11th July, 2020 that the state government of Kerala recorded 68 child suicides during the lockdown. Reports of child suicides from Kolkata⁴⁴ and Ludhiana⁴⁵ have also emerged during the period. Children as young as nine years of age have been seen to commit suicide and, though research is still scarce on the matter, domestic violence and stresses at home are considered a central reason behind such tragedies.⁴⁶

Given the reports of increase in domestic violence the world over and in India, and the problems that victims were facing in reporting, it is sad to see the Union Minister of Women and Child Development, Ms. Smriti Irani, debunk claims that the coronavirus-induced lockdown led to an increase in cases of domestic violence against women. The Indian Express on 8th June, 2020 reports that the minister claimed that “scaremongering done especially with some development partners who are in the NGO sector that 80 per cent of women who are now at homes in India or across the world will be getting beaten up.” She said every man is not beating up the woman in his house in India. Replying to a question that the lockdown has increased domestic violence and women are not being able to even lodge complaints, Irani retorted: "It is false. Every state has a police line functioning. We have one stop crisis centres across every district of every state".⁴⁷

Corporal Punishment

Times of India, on 7th June, 2020, shed light on a new research done by UNICEF, not focussed specifically on COVID Lockdown, on the ways in which Indian parents, in particular, discipline

⁴⁴ Das, Madhuparna. “Suicides See a Sharp Rise in Kolkata Amid Lockdown, Over Half are 40 Years or Younger.” The Print, July 04, 2020. <https://theprint.in/india/suicides-see-a-sharp-rise-in-kolkata-amid-lockdown-over-half-are-40-years-or-younger/453853/>

⁴⁵ Express News Service. “Lockdown Blues: Ludhiana Records Suicide A Day.” The Indian Express, August 05, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/lockdown-blues-ludhiana-records-suicide-a-day-6540655/>

⁴⁶ Mohan, Shainu. “Lockdown Blues Driving Kids to Suicides?” The New Indian Express, July 11, 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/2020/jul/11/lockdown-blues-driving-kids-to-suicide-2168038.html>

⁴⁷ PTI. Irani debunks claims of lockdown leading to increase in domestic violence. The Indian Express, June 08, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/irani-debunks-claims-of-lockdown-leading-to-increase-in-domestic-violence-6448394/>

their children. From shouting, pinching, denying food, hitting or practicing physical abuse, the study by UNICEF says that Indian parents still stick to the traditional forms of punishments to discipline their children. Even newborns don't escape the punishment. It has been observed that most of the times, the tactics are used on children in early developmental years, between the ages of 0-6.⁴⁸

Such traditional and corporal forms of punishments by adult members of a family towards children is also within the spectrum of domestic violence. It is often concealed because the victims are unable to articulate their traumas at their young age and due to the sheer force of normalisation of such methods of disciplining and raising children. Unfortunately, such abuse has also been faced by children specially during the lockdown when they were cordoned within the four walls of the home.



⁴⁸ Time of India. "Shouting, slapping to denying food: Indian parents use 30 different ways of abuse, according to a UNICEF report". June 07, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/parenting/toddler-year-and-beyond/shouting-slapping-to-denying-food-indian-parents-use-30-different-ways-of-abuse-according-to-a-unicef-report/photostory/76243993.cms>

CHAPTER FIVE

A Foundation for Progress: Understanding Children’s Education in the Zone of a Pandemic

From the morning of 25th March, 2020, schools and colleges were shut down, and the network of private and public Indian education system – across both rural and urban landscapes - was left to suddenly device systems, methods, strategies, as per their own resources, to shift education to digital mediums. Due to this, the education of many children stands compromised in an unprecedented manner.⁴⁹ In the scramble to ensure that somehow an entire generation did not lose a year of education, co-curricular activities, creative teaching methods, play and sport, friendships and classroom dynamics, etc., quickly fell to the wayside.

Ever since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic forced the nation to go under a complete lockdown, Shanti’s (name changed) six-year-old daughter has been repeatedly posing a rather difficult question. Unable to go to school, in Delhi’s Uttam Nagar, the 2nd grade student has been asking her mother why “she is unable to study online, like other children.” With no laptop or smartphone at home to access online lessons, Shanti – who admitted her daughter to a private school under the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) scheme – has run out of possible explanations.

(The Quint, 11th April, 2020)

The government quickly recommended shifting to “online teaching,” throwing to the winds India’s immense digital divides cutting across the most basic prerequisites of internet access, quality of connectivity, electricity, and availability of devices that form the basics of any online activity. Brookings on 14th May, 2020, referred to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey data that revealed that only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access.⁵⁰ Assuming that amongst those with internet at home have “some” internet access at least and possess a device to support it, the survey roughly estimates that only 12.5 per cent of the households in India is able to actually use internet at home.⁵¹ On 22nd July, 2020, the BBC reported that India had the world’s second largest internet user base at 630 million subscribers. However, access

⁴⁹ Ibrahim, Mohd. “Digital Divide: EWS Students in Delhi Struggle with Online Classes.” The Quint, April 11, 2020. <https://www.thequint.com/news/education/digital-divide-ews-students-in-delhi-struggle-with-online-classes-coronavirus-lockdown>

⁵⁰ Sahni, Urvashi. “COVID-19 in India: Education disrupted and lessons learned”. Brookings, May 14, 2020 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/05/14/covid-19-in-india-education-disrupted-and-lessons-learned/>

⁵¹ Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Key Indicators of Social Consumption in India Education, National Sample Survey Office, June 2015. http://www.mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/nss_71st_ki_education_30june15.pdf

to internet does necessarily mean that a household gets to use it. There may be erratic electricity supply causing devices to frequently lose charge, or general connectivity issues, especially since mobile data is mainly used rather than a fixed line service leading to patchy signal and difficulty in streaming videos smoothly.⁵²

India's digital divide is deeply fissured by the regional, class, and gender hierarchies built into and enabled by its political economy and sociological fabric. The poorest households cannot afford a smartphone or a computer. The Brookings reported that amongst the 66 per cent of India that lives in rural households, only 14.9 per cent had access to internet, and in urban households only 42 per cent had access. States such as Odisha, West Bengal and Karnataka had fewer than 9 per cent rural households with internet access. Brookings also pointed out that that male persons are the primary internet consumers in India users with 36 per cent men using the internet, compared to only 16 per cent of women.

While the government touts online classes as a viable alternative to classroom education, the ground reality demonstrates that unequal and patchy access to the internet, unequal distribution of electricity and resources to acquire devices, rural/ urban and gender divides, has meant that that this experience of "digital India" is hierarchical and centred around privilege, and is bound to have a severe impact on the learning and growth of far too many children in India.⁵³

Manish (name changed), who runs a vegetable stall in Delhi's Dwarka, is not sure if he will be able to recharge his data pack, set to expire in the month of April. But it's not like his ongoing data pack has been allowing his daughter, now in kindergarten, to access all videos on the private school's website.

Similarly, Ritu (name changed), a resident of Paschim Vihar and mother of an EWS student in the 1st grade, says that at a time when her family is finding it difficult to procure food, it is impossible to buy a phone or a laptop.

(The Quint, 11th April, 2020)

⁵² Singh, Sat, Qureshi Imran and Perera Ayeshea. "India Coronavirus: Online classes expose extent of digital divide". BBC, July 22, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53471749>

⁵³ Ibrahim, Mohd. "Digital Divide: EWS Students in Delhi Struggle with Online Classes." The Quint, April 11, 2020. <https://www.thequint.com/news/education/digital-divide-ews-students-in-delhi-struggle-with-online-classes-coronavirus-lockdown>

The UNICEF 'Lives Upended' Report published in June, 2020, points out that the Anganwadi centres, which are meant to provide pre-school education to about 28 million children in India, were completely closed down through the duration of the lockdown. Elementary and secondary school students constitute 247 million children in India – and this is in addition to more than six million children who were already out of school prior to the COVID-19 crisis.⁵⁴

Statistics published by the UNESCO's 'Education' report show that almost 60 per cent of children in India between Class 1 to 8 received their education from government schools in 2016. It has totalled an estimate that more than 143 million primary school children and more than 133 million secondary school children in India are likely to be adversely affected by school closures due to the pandemic.⁵⁵

A study by the Deccan Chronicle published on 13th June, 2020, surveyed 42,831 students at various school levels, and concluded that about 56 per cent of children were found to have no access to smartphones that are the minimum essential equipment requirement for a student to even consider attending an online class. Further, in an attempt to envision the possibility of television-based classes, the study suggested, "Concerning television, it was noted that while 68.99 per cent have access to TV, a major chunk of 31.01 per cent does not. Hence suggesting that using smartphone interventions for enhancing learning outcomes is not the only solution."⁵⁶

On 22nd July, 2020, the New Indian Express reported that the states of Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are home to half of the 12.82 million children who have never enrolled in schools; and eight states—Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal – are home to the 35.62 million children who have dropped out of schools. These states also account for 80 per cent of the children who are enrolled but not attending school. The factor common across these states is migration. A survey across 18 states, reported New Indian Express, revealed that 46.2 per cent of migrant children had discontinued education. Additionally, due to the digital divide of India and rise in unemployment, Covid-19 has caused a spike in child labour, child trafficking, and child marriage that, more or less, puts a long-term and often permanent halt in their educational growth.⁵⁷ Further, Times of India reported on 26th April, 2020, that in India, 75 per

⁵⁴ UNICEF. Lives Upended: How COVID-19 Threatens the Futures of 600 Million South Asian Children. UNICEF, June, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/lives-upended>

⁵⁵ UNESCO. "Education: From disruption to recovery". May 25, 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

⁵⁶ PTI. "What online education when 56 per cent of children have no access?" Deccan Chronicle, June 13, 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/technology/in-other-news/130620/what-online-education-when-56-per-cent-of-children-have-no-access.html>

⁵⁷ Iype, Sarah and Rajamohan Sanjana. "Ensuring education for migrant children". The New Indian Express, July 22, 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/jul/22/ensuring-education-for-migrant-children-2173081.html>

cent of children with disabilities don't attend schools.⁵⁸ When combined with other structural inequalities like religion, poverty, caste, gender, region, children with disabilities are more likely than other vulnerable categories to be excluded from education.

Jammu and Kashmir, in particular, requires specific mention and focus. UNESCO emphasises that, due to the fact that a required modification to a 1954 Presidential Order was never carried out, the fundamental right to elementary education was never extended to Jammu & Kashmir. Instead, a 2002 state legislation governed elementary education in the state, which lacked the binding obligations applicable to the Right to Education (RTE) Act. The provisions of the RTE Act were extended to Jammu & Kashmir after it became a Union Territory, on October 31, 2019. However, restrictions on internet services imposed in the valley on August 5, 2019, remained and thus online education has been inaccessible for all children in the Union Territory.

As a crucial pointer in conclusion, it's worth noting that, while this report has focused on developing an estimate of how many children are likely to have even the basic infrastructure in place for an online education, children are not the only stakeholders involved in making the same possible. The same facts and figures can provide an estimate on how unprepared the teachers' community is as well to provide such an education. In fact, one wonders whether educational institutions, similarly disenfranchised along the lines of rural/ urban and economic divides, have the resources to support their teachers and faculty in this sudden, radical systemic change.

Even in the midst of scarce resources, what is amazing are the reports of innovations by teachers. One such example is that of Dr. Sapan Kumar from Dumka, Jharkhand. India Today describes, "The principal of the school Dr. Sapan Patralekh along with four other para teachers thought after the lockdown started that if the students who hail from the tribal community are not kept connected to education and classes, they will forget all whatever they have learned. Also, they will lose interest in studies. The Internet and online classes were a bit difficult here. Some Brainstorming session that transpired among the principal and his colleagues opened up a new vista to keep the spirit of learning intact. They came up with an inspirational idea to go to the village and turn the mud walls into blackboard. The school had 289 students enrolled."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Pandey, Pooja and Sumyesh Srivastava. "Excluding the excluded: India's response to the education of children with disabilities during Covid-19". The Times of India, April 26, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/excluding-the-excluded-indias-response-to-the-education-of-children-with-disabilities-during-covid-19/>

⁵⁹ Kumar, Satyajeet. "Jharkhand village school turns mud walls to blackboards to continue classes during Covid-19. Jharkhand's school Principal has painted the mud walls to the blackboard to continue classes during the lockdown." India Today, September 28, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/jharkhand-village-school-turns-mud-walls-to-blackboards-to-continue-classes-during-covid-19-1726196-2020-09-28>

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

What has the lockdown achieved?

Children have paid a greater price because of the lockdown that does not weigh sufficiently against any benefits accrued. Amidst a health crisis, it appears that institutional healthcare is precisely what children have lost access to and it is an open speculation as to how many children may have lost lives due to the virus vs. various other health ailments that the country was already plagued with.

Due to sustained nutritional deficiency and an unprecedented hunger crisis, children across the country are facing the threat of life long impairment of physiological-neurological-psychological development that can irrevocably reduce the quality, potential, and possibilities that their lives would have otherwise had. In addition to the vulnerabilities already built into health and nutrition shortage, children's bodies and minds have faced more sexual/ physical/ psychological violation and abuse in the silence of the lockdown that suspended key institutions and processes that were surrounding children with the most basic nets of safety and protection. Finally, across the country an entire generation struggles, without sufficient electricity/ connectivity/ equipment, to cope with an online education system that neither their school infrastructure, public facilities, parents, nor teachers can support.

This report is but a beginning.

Children's Right to Participation in telling their story, in being heard, in suggesting solutions, and being part of the decisions and processes that effect their lives, is the central pillar that holds together an entire network of child rights. Children are a part of absolutely all family-community-nation based activities and plans, and yet when it comes to children, India has consistently failed to uphold this corner stone of a democracy – the right of an aggrieved social group to “participate” in the project of nation building for themselves. It applies to children as much as to any community. And so, that is the point to begin at.

It is our ardent hope that the distressful totality of state of affairs captured in this report may trigger a series of measures – by media, social workers and activities, public and private organisations, and the state – to bring an immediate halt to the ongoing crisis in child protection and child rights across the nation and begin what is going to be a long, already delayed, journey of rectification if we are to prevent an entire generation of Indian children from facing an unusual scale of illiteracy, poverty, hunger, ill-health, violence, trauma, and death.

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