

Newsletter

**Back to School:
Recovering the Rhythm**

**Hello classroom,
goodbye housework**

The meal that makes a child's day



Editor's Message

Greetings

With 2021 being observed as the International Year for Elimination of Child Labour, it is time to take stock of the impact the pandemic has had on young lives who have had to face the double whammy of a punishing lockdown and almost two years of school closure.

Now that coronavirus cases are reducing in many states and schools are beginning to open again, WNCB is concerned about how many children who took to working during the pandemic months will return to the classroom. The reality is that for those children from marginalized communities who did not have the means to online education during the closure, it has been a long break from formal pedagogy. Will they be able to pick up the threads? And more importantly, will the families be able to spare them in the backdrop of acute unemployment faced in the country.

It would also be a double challenge for girls to go back to school as many during this pandemic period either got married or took to informal work or household chores. The mega issue of our newsletter explores both the above concerns. Dr Shanta Sinha and senior journalist Usha Rai ask pertinent questions as well as provide key insights to deepen our understanding of reality at the grassroots.

The mega issue also looks at how school closures deprived children of their traditional mid-day meals. Preeti Mehra delves into the impact it has had on their nutrition status. The newsletter also chooses to focus on some of the remote areas of the country and how marginalized communities here survived the devastating impact of Covid 19. Ashutosh Sharma focuses on the hardship faced by the nomadic Bakarwal tribe of Jammu and Kashmir.

To reach out to children during their worst hour of need and impart crucial life skills to them, WNCB used storytelling and conversations in a series of workshops with its partners. It also announced winners of the WNCB Untold Stories Awards and organised a webinar focussing on child labour issues in partnership with Delhi's India International Centre. Read all about it in the pages that follow..

Young work-stained hands

Children as collateral damage

**September workshops:
It's always 'Inwa' versus 'Binwa'**

The WNCB Award Winners

Conversations on Child Labour

Back to School: Recovering the Rhythm

As schools reopen after a prolonged shutdown, the State and the system must prioritise bringing children back to the school orbit

Shanta Sinha



Covid and the lockdown revealed several truths about societal and State concern for education and the overall well-being of children, especially from poor and marginalized communities. Research and studies [1] expose how the lockdown has affected children and their daily lives. How lack of livelihood, hunger and poverty has pushed children into the labour force, caused sexual and physical abuse of girls and forced them into early child

marriage. It has revealed how the uncertainty and unpredictability about the next day has caused children anxiety and trauma; how children were left uncared for, neglected and left to fend for themselves.

Indeed, studies show how the lockdown shattered the aspirations of many a girl child who fought her way to reach up to secondary school and reversed all her plans for going ahead with education and beyond.

The timing of the closure of schools in India at the end of an academic year in March 2020 brought to a complete halt the routine exercise of children taking the annual examination to be promoted to the next class. Since then, we witnessed 18 months of inactivity in the entire education system. The only attempt at reaching out to children was through online classes. Several parents had to borrow money at high interest rates to buy a phone lest their children

missed their classes. In most instances, however, girls would never get to use the mobile phones as parents suspected them of liaisons with male friends. In fact, several girls worked hard to earn enough to buy a mobile phone.

By now, it is well recorded how unworkable the online classes were in

enough space in their homes for a child to sit through lessons. On the whole, online education has been a disaster, serving no purpose. Children yearned for school to be reopened for more than one reason.

The lockdown offered insights into the profound role of schools for all children and especially for the marginalized. It has

routine--the packing of a school bag, a walk to school or a bus ride, attending classes, being supervised by schoolteachers, sharing with friends, and playing and getting back home. These are things that shaped childhood and memories of growing up. Schools offered new values and a web of interaction outside their villages, dreams and aspirations for a better future. Along with this, of course, schools did provide them the knowledge and skills as well as discipline and the joy of learning.

Closure of school, therefore, meant a tremendous loss that could not be compensated for by online education. It is a pity that the valuable contribution schools make has not been examined or analysed at the policy level during the lockdown. While there has been some thought to the aspect of health as an emergency, there has been no thought given to the loss of education as an emergency situation. Weak attempts were made to promote children to the next level without testing them, or to give rations in lieu of mid-day meals by some states in India but these were half hearted at best and neglected the profound roles schools played in the life of children.

One must record how NGOs in the country helped bring some sanity in the lives of children. For example, during the lockdown MV Foundation's programme that is being supported by Work: No Child's Business (WNCB), established over 146 children's centres in which local youth volunteered to engage with children through games, songs, reading sessions and libraries. Some even paired children who had mobile phones with others, so they would not miss out on online classes. About 80,000 children were tracked and children at risk of marriage or abuse were rescued. MV Foundation mobilisers kept direct

the context of education for poor children with many of them having no access to mobile phones. And even if they did, there was weak connectivity. Even those who could get access to some lessons, found it difficult to decipher what was actually happening. It is also well known that the poor did not have

become evident that the school is a sanctuary for children. It kept them away from the hardships of child labour. For girls, schools were a reason not to get married and to demand mobility and freedom.

Schools gave mid-day meals to ward off hunger. It gave children a precious

[1] a. <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>;

b. Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2020 Wave 1 February 1, 2021, http://img.aseercentre.org/docs/ASER%202021/ASER%202020%20wave%201%20-%20v2/aser2020wave1report_feb1.pdf

c. Rapid Online Perception Study About the Effects of Covid-19 On Children, https://www.cry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-CRY_COVID-19-Study.pdf

d. Life in the Time of COVID 19--Mapping the Impact of COVID 19 on the lives of school going children, especially girls in India <https://cbps.in/wp-content/uploads/Report-Final-1.pdf>

contact with children who joined the labour force encouraging them to abandon work. Local groups involved in the protection of children also came forward to resolve issues. Gram panchayats too were of great support. These were islands of hope!

Now that the schools have reopened and the education system is gearing up to start classes, there is a need to realise that it cannot be business as usual. The circumstances are so unusual. Let's begin with the school infrastructure. With lack of maintenance and disuse many schools have become garbage dumps. Walls are crumbling and classrooms are covered with dust and cobwebs, toilets and water facilities are totally dysfunctional.

Yes, in many villages where NGOs have been active there has been a community mobilisation of resources bringing schools back to shape. But investments from the government are still wanting. Indeed, if the system cared for the education of children, these contingencies would never have arisen.

Children have lost the habit of reading and writing. For example, a child in class 4 in March 2019 is now in class 6. There has to be individual plans for a child to catch up with her age-appropriate learning. This is doable if the system and its teachers have trust and confidence in the capacities of children and their thirst for knowledge and learning. Instead of focusing on completion of syllabus and



the curriculum, teachers have to establish a dialogue with children, learn and appreciate the challenges faced by them through Covid and win them over. The success of programs such as accelerated learning and bridge courses enabling children to catch up depends entirely on teachers' autonomy. This must be seen as an occasion for teachers being guided by their own inner strength and professional competence.

Many a child would require rehabilitation plans in terms of health (physical and mental), nutrition, games and play material, and clothes. Children may require additional support through tuitions for enhancement of their learning. It is so important that the State responds to all aspects of child protection. Since much of the decisions are to be taken at the local level, the education system must respect decentralisation and park resources at the gram panchayat level.

Above all, there must be a recognition that there is harm done to children of all age groups during the lockdown with closure of schools. The cost of inaction has been tremendous, causing denial of rights and injustice to children. There is undoubtedly a need to pay special attention to make schools the hub of activities for children and bring back the rhythm of schools. This requires extraordinary effort, imagination, investments and energy of all – local, state, national and global.

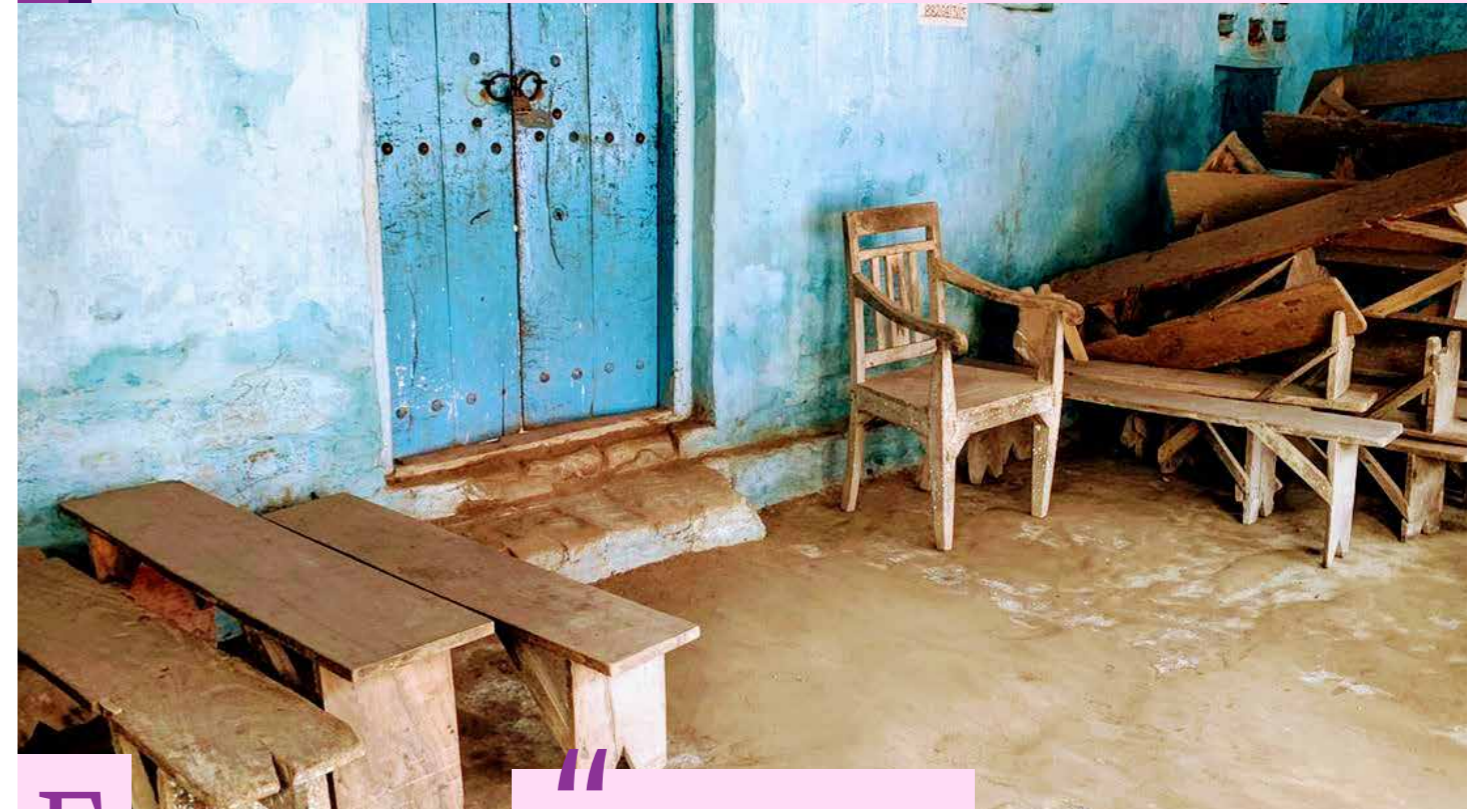


Shanta Sinha is known for her pioneering work on child rights. She is also the founder-secretary of MV Foundation, a rights-based grassroots voluntary organisation. She was the first chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and served two terms from 2007 to 2013.

Hello classroom, goodbye housework

Bringing girls back to school post-pandemic is a challenge which must be met

Usha Rai



Even as countries are recovering from the devastating impact of the 18 months of the coronavirus pandemic, schools in many parts of the world have still not opened. The strides made in girls' education as a result of the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, followed by the Sustainable Development Goals, have been pushed back.

The pandemic has harmed education in all spheres. In its 2020 Covid-19 Education Notes, UNESCO estimated that about 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school following the crisis. It says, "At the height of global lockdowns, there were over 1.5 billion affected learners and 194 country-wide school closures in nearly all of Europe, Africa, Latin America and

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According to 'Halting Lives—the impact of Covid 19 on girls and young women'—a Plan International survey in 14 countries (Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Spain, United States, France, Vietnam, Zambia) school closures due to Covid 19 have interrupted the education of millions of girls who are at risk of dropping out of school permanently. It is imperative that back to school planning addresses the situation of girls and young women in a way that is inclusive and gender-responsive, involving families, communities and individual monitoring of vulnerable adolescent girls, the report says.

Girls and young women in Spain and India reported the highest levels of 'major change' to their lives. This aligns with reports of long lockdowns in both these countries. Spain had the most reported cases in Europe and quickly imposed a nationwide quarantine to stop the spread. India also had one of the world's strictest lockdowns. Lockdowns in the two countries restricted the behaviour of children and girls in a big way. The report says the impact is more in the poorest countries which have less access to distance learning.

The Oxfam Inequality Report and Locked Out: An Emergency Report on School Education by independent researchers point out that in India only 8 percent (rural) and 24 percent (urban) children had access to online studies. It also says that only 11 percent (rural) and 9 percent (urban) children received any kind of learning material at home during school closures. Many young children have forgotten basic learning and are lapsing into illiteracy.

Smart phones are a rarity among the urban poor in India and more so for those living in rural areas. There may be just one smart phone in a family and that is with the male head of the family, who uses it for accessing business. This phone has to be shared with the school going child who is trying to study online. If there are two or three school going children in a family, there is no way they can share that one precious phone.

Newspapers in India have been carrying several stories and photographs of children in remote and rural areas climbing hills and even trees in their desperate attempt to catch the signals that would turn on their smart phones or tablets for the classes being aired/broadcast by teachers.

Bringing girls back to school will remain a challenge. It is they who were kept back at home for domestic chores and childcare. Many who were 14 to 18 years

were pushed into marriage. There have been reports of increased violence against girls staying at home and like their male counterparts, they missed the mid-day meals, the bonding and friendships with other children, sports and even the special skills that many of them were developing as part of holistic learning.

Several NGOs and activists are working with governments to bring back children, and girls



particular. to the safe and happy learning zone of schools. Yes, schools are often the safest zones for adolescent girls! In India, Save the Children has decided to implement in 245 schools of Rajasthan its best practices for girls' education. For holistic development of girls, it has signed an MOU to promote girls' education in 196 elementary schools and 49 Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas across seven districts of the state. It will provide onsite and offsite academic support to girls, capacity building of teachers on gender sensitive classrooms, life skill development, career counselling and theatre and sports support.

Global NGO Room to Read has also determined that no girl will be left behind when schools reopen. It is running a national campaign—*barkadam betikesang: leadership ki tarang 2021*. Working in nine states, it will also podcast *Hausle ki dagar*, stories of girls who have overcome challenges in these tough times and demonstrated leadership qualities.

Subir Shukla of IGNUS, a non-profit, runs a programme called *Pabel* to facilitate quality improvement in the education system and bring back girls to school. Care India's education programme for girls, *Udaan*, is not new. Making education fun with games, it ensures that over 90 percent of girls finish school and go to college.

Sohini Bhattacharya, President and CEO of Breakthrough, a global human rights organisation working to change deep rooted cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence, says targeted messaging is needed for communities to actively support girls going back to school. "The focus," she says must be "on the value of girls and the value of education in their lives".

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They must prioritise girls' safety and must have adequate information and legal awareness about gender-based violence, early marriage and trafficking to facilitate return of girls to schools.

As an example of what empowering can achieve, Ms Bhattacharya tells the story of Rabiya who during the lockdown in 2020 was beaten by her brother, the head of the family. Her mother chose to be silent. So Rabiya went to the village sarpanch and complained. The sarpanch called her brother and spoke to him. Though there was uncomfortable peace at home after



that, Ms Bhattacharya says the first step of saying "no to violence" was taken. Rabiya had also taken charge of her life. Rabiya had learnt of domestic violence through a Breakthrough gender equity programme called *Taroon Ki Toli* at school.

As a result of the tremendous emotional and mental stress children suffered during the pandemic and the lockdown, many NGOs, governments, and educationists, including Breakthrough, are stressing the need for integrating social and emotional learning into the curriculum. Among the interesting new initiatives is the Delhi government's 'Happiness curriculum' to reduce stress and promote good mental health.

US based CorStone has been running a resilience-based Youth First programme in schools in Bihar and other states for the past few years. This too could bolster students' mental well-being during and beyond the pandemic.

The silver lining is that many girls, like Rabiya, across the world are fighting back. Lixiana from Nicaragua says "My dreams

haven't changed. What has changed is the time I have to achieve them. Because of Covid 19 I had to stop going to classes, and as it was my first year of university, I really had many things I wanted to do such as learning English and accounting. They are the things I'm going to have to delay. But I always have in mind that I'm going to do them."

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Girls in India should be provided the opportunity so that they show the same resilience to pursue their dream.

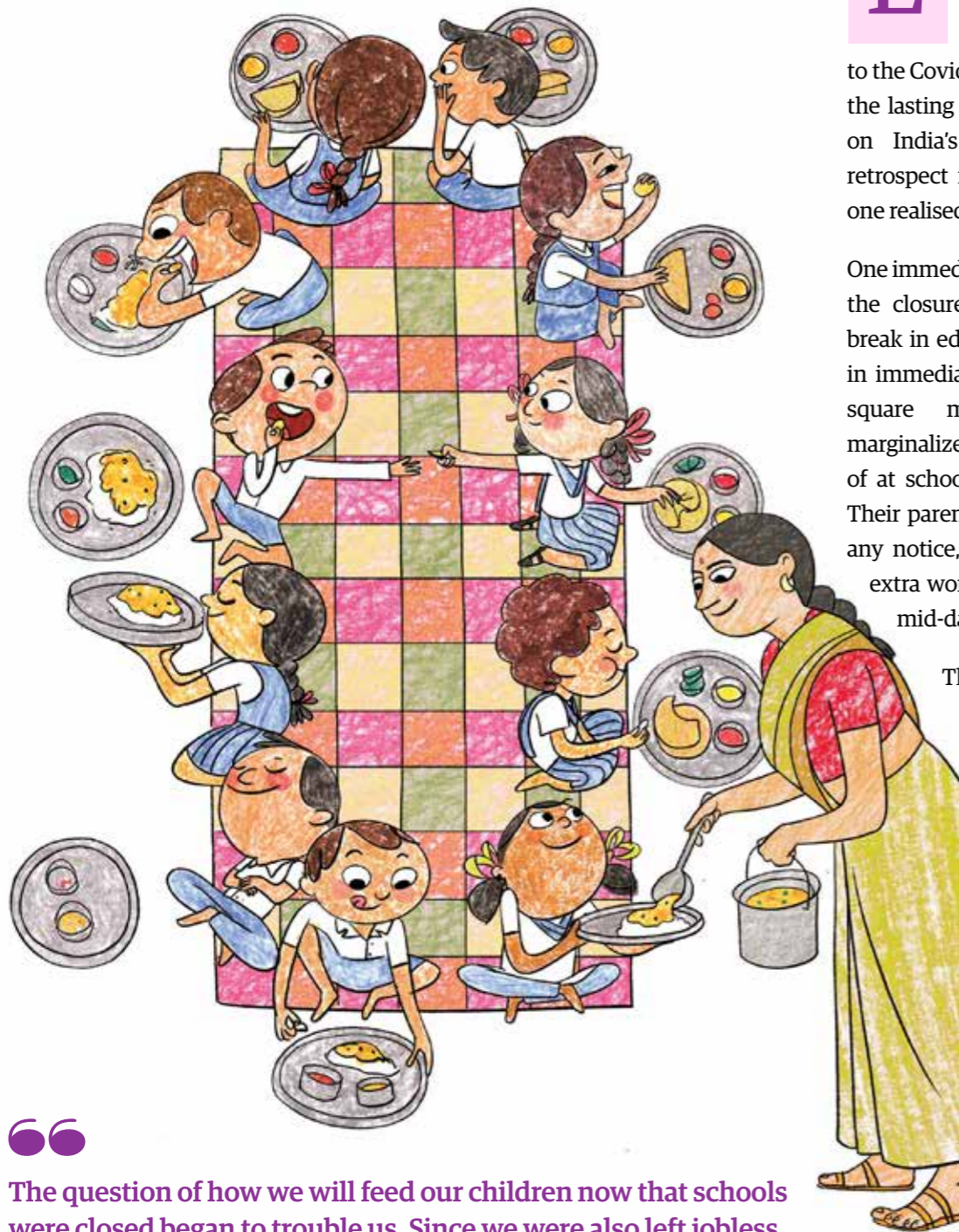


Usha Rai is a senior Delhi-based journalist with over five decades of experience in mainstream newspapers like The Times of India, Indian Express and the Hindustan Times. She writes on development issues and has covered child rights issues extensively.

THE MEAL THAT MAKES A CHILD'S DAY

School closure during the pandemic severely hit the mid-day meal scheme. It needs to be revived to bring children back to school and ensure proper nutrition.

Preeti Mehra



Last year when a nationwide lockdown was announced and came into effect overnight due to the Covid 19 outbreak, very few realised the lasting impact this move would have on India's school going children. In retrospect no one was prepared, and no one realised it would be a long haul.

One immediate effect of the lockdown was the closure of schools. Along with the break in education another fallout kicked in immediately. All of a sudden, the one square meal that children from marginalized communities were assured of at school could not be depended on. Their parents who lost their jobs without any notice, were now burdened with an extra worry - feeding their children the mid-day meal.

This was cause for alarm and triggered a crisis of sorts. Recalls Bulia (name changed), a carpenter whose children studied in a government school in Delhi: "The question of how we will feed our children now that schools were closed began to trouble us. Since we were also left jobless, it made us think of leaving the city and going back to the village where there were more avenues to live within the community and borrow from the local *sahookaar*

(money lender)." Bulia and his desperate family trudged back to his village in Western Uttar Pradesh.

They were not alone. Hunger stalked millions of families and their school-going children whose major source of nutrition was the mid-day meal in school. Now, a year and a half later, the problem still persists with India consequently slipping to the 101st position in the Global Hunger Index of 116 countries. In 2020 it was 94th in the list.

In a recent statement Oxfam India pointed out that only 0.57 per cent of the current budget has been allocated towards funding the actual POSHAN scheme and the amount for child nutrition dropped by whopping 18.5 per cent compared to the allocation in 2020-21 fiscal.

According to a UNICEF working paper, since the outbreak of the pandemic the mid-day meal scheme (MDMS) has resulted in a 30 per cent decrease in the intake of calories among children. And this is not surprising when you consider the findings of a researcher from the University of Washington and economists and nutrition experts at the International Food Policy Research Institute. Their study found that MDMS was associated with 13-32 per cent of India's improvement in height-for-age z-scores (HAZ) between 2006 and 2016.

The paper revealed that linkages between mid-day meals and lower stunting in the next generation were stronger in lower socio-economic strata and were linked to factors like women's education, fertility, and use of health services. The research used nationally representative data on cohorts of mothers and their children across 23 years and showed that by 2016, the prevalence of stunting was significantly lower in areas where the mid-day meal scheme was implemented in 2005.

Coming back to the plight of thousands of working-class parents who scrambled to return to their villages from the cities, there

was limited relief in their homes in rural India. The fact that the Supreme Court asked all states to continue providing mid-day meals during school closures was heartening but did not help many.

Apart from reverse migration, the reality was that with such a severe lockdown and lack of staff, many schools were unable to provide even for those



children who remained in the cities. Some states like Kerala and Karnataka did attempt to deliver meals at home, others like Bihar experimented with cash transfers while still some others tried to provide dry rations to

families. But these solutions for one reason or the other did not have the desired result. Consequently, both nutrition and education have taken a severe and unprecedented beating in the last two years.

There is evidence that with extensions of the lockdown period and schools for younger children still not opened, there are reports of weight-loss, anaemia, calcium deficiency, skin allergies/rashes and dental infections among school children due to the poor supply of calories, vitamins and minerals.

Child centric organisations along with ICDS have tried to make a difference in areas where they work. For instance, Save the Children put in place its Poshan Maah (part of the National Nutrition Mission) initiative in some states. Notes a statement from the organisation, "Malnutrition in India

has scarred the lives of millions of children. It is a problem which has been impacting children since ages and in these times of Covid-19 pandemic, it is only set to aggravate, and more children and mothers face the brunt of this debilitating condition. Helping children, pregnant women and lactating mothers fight malnutrition is a core aspect of our work..."

There is no denying that hunger encourages and triggers all forms of child labour. When a family cannot fend for itself and the risk of hunger looms large, it tends to sacrifice school education for the children and is happy to have more hands in informal work. With the mid-day meal missing many more children were pushed into jobs which would at least bring them a meal and some extra income for the family.

With major disruptions of ICDS and mid-day meal services during the lockdown months, the progress made in child health and nutrition over the last few years has taken a big blow. And to add to the woe, doctors and health experts are voicing concerns that the forthcoming third wave of the pandemic may prove to be more fatal for children, says Puja Marwaha, CEO, CRY - Child Rights and You.

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“It was a hard battle securing our children’s education, health, and protection over the past couple of decades. It had taken huge effort, resources, finances as well as building community habits – and we have reasons to be worried that much of the success can go to waste,” Marwaha adds.

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Meanwhile, on September 29 the Central government rebranded the existing 26-year-old mid-day scheme for schools, rechristening it Poshan Shakti Nirman. It announced that hot cooked meals will be given to 11.8 crore government school students from Class 1 to 8. During the next financial year, the scheme will also cover 24 lakh children studying in Balvatikas, the pre-primary sections of government schools. However, no added budgetary allocation was granted. But the education minister reportedly said that an additional Rs 266 crore is expected to be added next year to cover pre-primary students.

It remains to be seen how the rebranded scheme will pan out once children come back to school. There have been several debates on what the component of

nutrition should be in mid-day meals, whether eggs or fortified food should be included or not. It is hoped that scientific evidence, local food preferences, and cultural norms are kept in mind when decisions are made for India is a country with varied food habits and a plural ethos.



Preeti Mehra is a senior journalist based in New Delhi who writes on development, gender and environmental issues.

YOUNG WORK-STAINED HANDS

Education must not bypass the working children of the migratory Bakarwal community in Jammu and Kashmir

Ashutosh Sharma



It is a mild autumnal September afternoon in Anantnag district in Kashmir. Take any path that leads to the orchards of Dialgam village, and it ultimately winds its way to the camps of the Bakarwals, a pastoral nomadic tribal community of shepherds. The sight that attracts your attention is of Bakarwal children carrying baskets and sacks of freshly picked walnuts. They appear out of nowhere and then vanish into the trees. Some pause to greet you with a broad smile and offer walnuts with their tiny hands stained with dehulling and cleaning of the green fruits. Some of them are tending to sheep and goats. In-between the orchards are fields where children can be seen wielding sickles and

de-weeding the crops grown there.

With schools shut for more than a year now, the coronavirus pandemic has forced these children to work longer hours. Many community members – who reside in tarpaulin tents – have abandoned livestock partially or have lost it to natural calamities, disease or road accidents. Despairing the lack of work – owing to disruption in the local economy after the pandemic and the abrogation of the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir which was declared a Union Territory (UT) on August 5, 2019 – these families lament that they are unable to find work and pull in adequate wages. As a result, children have to work to

augment the family earnings.

Talib Hussain, a noted activist from the Bakarwal community explains the plight of the children: “Even in the pre-pandemic world the children attended to household chores and tended to the livestock. But after the pandemic, they are working outside their households to support their families.

When a family or a community is plunged into financial distress it has a direct bearing on children’s education. Consider 17-year-old Mohammad Aslam’s story. A tenth standard student in Samba, near Jammu, he worked as a farmhand all through the summer in Anantnag district over 200 kms away. “Being the eldest son



in the family, I had to earn. But due to my age my employers wouldn't pay me at par with the adults," he rues.

Meanwhile, his teachers sent him study material regularly, but his small mobile screen did not provide him adequate readability. However, he is a very determined teenager and wants to do something for his family, education or no education. Says Aslam:

"Whatever I can do, I am doing to pull my family out of poverty. Due to financial problems, some friends from my tribe quit school and took to work. I am also thinking on similar lines."

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According to Shahbaz Chaudhary, who has an M.Phil. from Jammu University on the Bakarwals, the plight of the community has to be seen to be believed. "Economically, socially and politically, Bakarwals happen to be the most marginalized of nomadic tribes. In the absence of alternatives, they helplessly continue with their traditional pastoral life," he says adding that a major chunk of community members – called Aajhris – rear the livestock of well-to-do tribal families and in lieu of their services receive food, money or shelter for their families. "One can't even imagine that a Bakarwal migratory family can own a smartphone and their children attend classes online," notes Chaudhary.

Leave the Bakarwals, about 70 per cent school-going children in the UT don't have access to digital devices to attend online education. This was admitted as much in a written reply in Parliament by Union Minister of Education, Dharmendra Pradhan, in August this year. Even for those who own a smartphone the Jammu and Kashmir region is notorious for its poor connectivity with frequent forced internet shutdowns.

Mohammad Irfan, 15, and his younger brother Mudassir Ali, 14, dropped out of school last year to ramp up the family income. They relocated to Uttar Pradesh.

"One can't even imagine that a Bakarwal migratory family can own a smartphone and their children attend classes online."

Currently, Irfan works with a truck driver whereas Ali assists a bus driver in Meerut. "We had to quit studies after Class V" says Irfan. He says at the mobile schools they attended they only learnt the Urdu alphabet and basic maths which wouldn't have got them anywhere.

It was in the late 1970s that then J&K government launched the mobile schools scheme envisaged to educate children from migratory populations. The schools travel with tribal communities like the Bakarwals who move with their sheep from the plains of Jammu to the higher reaches of Kashmir and return to the plains in the winter. The Peoples' Democratic Party - Congress coalition government (2002-2008) also set up seasonal schools – which provide education up to Class VIII– in the hilly districts. These schools start the

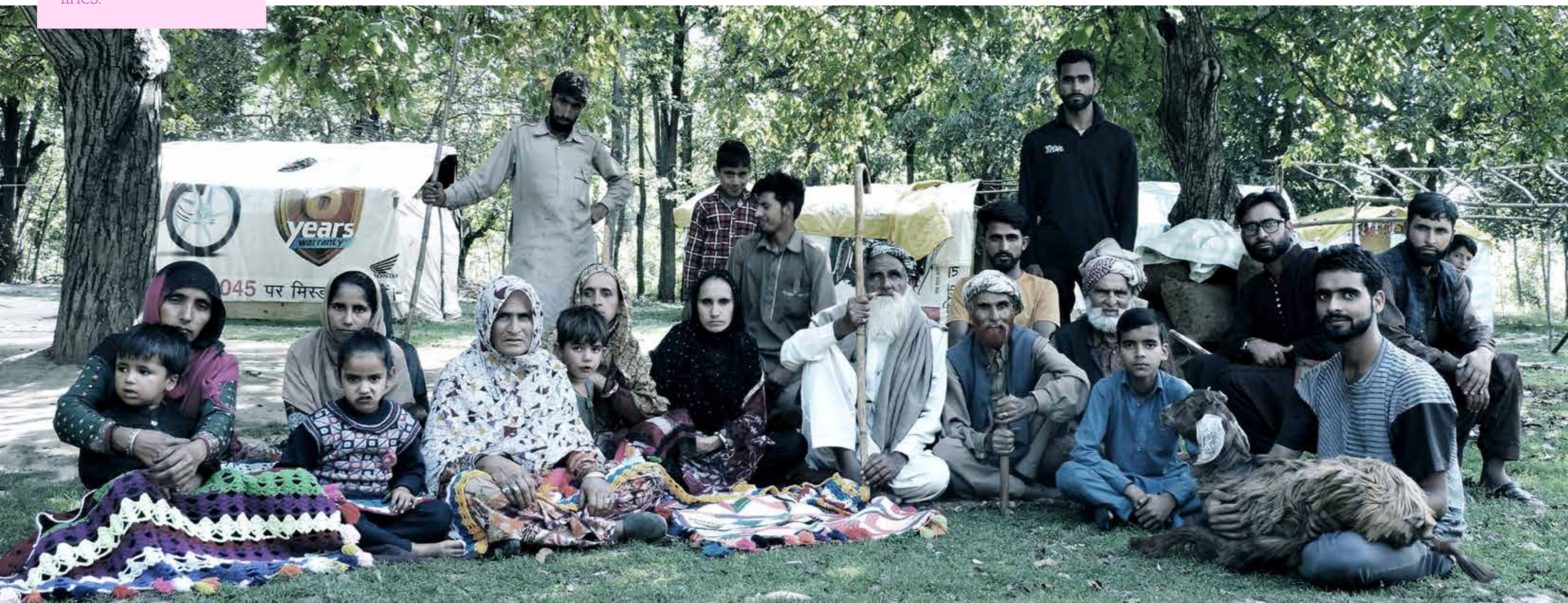
academic session from May and from October onwards, the students attend the regular government schools in their respective home bases in the lower reaches and the plains.

According to the records over 40,000 students are enrolled at present in seasonal schools that have 1100 teachers called Educational Volunteers (EVs). But, according to Raja Muzaffar Bhat, a Srinagar based social and RTI activist "some seasonal schools exist only on paper." In May, Qammar Raveen, a young Bakarwal woman, a postgraduate in political science with a B.Ed degree, objected to the setting up of bogus schools in Poonch district and the appointment of favoured candidates without adequate qualification as teachers. She alleges that her complaint has not been addressed so far.

According to activist Raja Muzaffar Bhat the mobile schools do not function as envisaged. He says: "The majority of the mobile schools deprive students of their mid-day meal. Children attend classes under the open sky and their studies get disrupted during rain and windstorms. These schools don't even have basics like blackboards and stationery."

Secretary Tribal Affairs department, Shahid Choudhary admits there are problems: "We have also received complaints about mobile schools. The matter has been taken up with the authorities in the school education department." He maintains that his department is seized of the problems faced in educating the children of migrating communities and is addressing them. Notes Chaudhary: "For the first time, our department has conducted a

Talib Hussain's family living inside the walnut orchard in Anantnag in summer. In the winter months they shift base close to the Mansar lake in Samba district.



survey of the migratory population. The purpose is to create facilities along the migration routes and dhoks (highland pastures). We have also discussed the need for putting in place a mechanism for the appointment of teachers in consultation with 'dhok committees' comprising representatives from local tribal population."

For the migratory population, Choudhary further said, the UT administration has decided to set up Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) on the pattern of Navodaya Vidyalaya (schools for nurturing excellence among students in rural areas). "At least 11 such schools will be opened in seven districts," he says, adding that priority will also be given to strengthening of supportive infrastructure for schools in catchment

areas of the proposed EMRS. "We are planning 80 new student hostels and modernisation of the existing 26."

So far so good. But far from the bustle of the secretariat in Srinagar, one remembers the children of an obscure Dialgam orchard explaining ways to remove walnut stains from their hands. How many more dark nights will it take for the proposed boarding schools to see the light of day? And when will the stains of child labour be erased from the Bakarwal community?

“ We are planning 80 new student hostels and modernisation of the existing 26. ”

A young Bakarwal boy pitches in to help his family by tending to sheep. Photographs by Ashutosh Sharma.



Ashutosh Sharma

The writer is an independent journalist based in Jammu & Kashmir.

CHILDREN AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The pandemic has forced marginalized families to push their young and adolescents into labour

Preeti Mehra

Last month (May 2021), in the midst of the dreaded second wave, a video went viral showing children seated on the floor packing Corona testing kits. None of them were wearing masks or gloves. While everyone, the media included, reacted to the unhygienic manner in which RT-PCR kits were being packed, very few commented on the out-of-school child labour being exploited to perform the task.

This is just one example of the larger fallout unleashed by Covid-19. The pandemic has rendered thousands of families unemployed and in such dire poverty that pushing kids to any kind of work is considered an option. It has been rightly observed that children, especially those from marginalized communities, are part of the larger collateral damage caused by the pandemic.

The statistics of child labour in the country have always been alarming. Official figures dating back to the 2011 Census puts the number of children and adolescents in the labour force at about 33 million or 330 lakhs. But going merely by this data is unrealistic because the numbers have not only gone up over the last decade but has been further compounded by the pandemic and the relaxation of labour laws.

In fact, on World Day Against Child Labour, which falls on June 12, it is necessary to examine the situation that currently prevails vis-à-vis vulnerable children in this country. With schools closed, no mid-day

meals and no access to online classes due to lack of smart phones, computers, or connectivity, the two waves of the pandemic have handed children a raw deal.

While the boys are nudged to do just about any work to add to the household income, large number of underage girl children are shifted to domestic chores, sibling care or married off in a hurry. Underage marriage brings with it the problem of sexual exploitation, unsafe motherhood, and unpaid labour in the husband's home.

While factoring the children rendered vulnerable by the pandemic, let us not forget those whose parents are out-of-work migrant labourers, marginal

farmers, and daily wagers. They comprise nearly 80 per cent of the work force in the unorganised sector with limited or no access to social security and unemployment benefits. Most have been jobless since the past year and a half. It is their children we saw in TV footage last year trudging back to their villages along with their unemployed parents.

Puja Marwaha, CEO, CRY (Child Rights and You), who has been following the trajectory of child labour during the current pandemic, feels there is serious cause for concern. She points out that due to COVID-19, several states have amended their labour laws providing relaxations in inspections and monitoring by authorities. Not just that

there is restricted grievance redress mechanisms and collective bargaining through labour unions. Such loosening of the law favouring employers, she fears, encourages employment and exploitation of cheap adolescent labour as businesses look to boost production.

"Adolescents do not have the same bargaining power as adults, thus being a cheap source of labour. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy is yet to completely unfold hence it is difficult to estimate the magnitude. However, there might be a sharp rise in numbers across all age groups and occupations unless immediate and sustained efforts are made to protect the rights of children," says Marwaha.





“We are looking at alternative livelihoods for parents/caregivers. We are also engaging with governments and businesses to address child rights and business principles in supply chains of production.”

Unfortunately, online schooling of marginalised rural and urban children has not worked. A Ministry of Rural Development survey reveals that during the pandemic only eight per cent of households with children or adolescents had access to online content. Sandeep Chachra, Executive Director of ActionAid Association talks about a recent household survey of school children in 20 districts of Uttar Pradesh that found as many as 1,28,000 children out of school.

In November 2020, an ActionAid team conducted a study in 250 UP villages and identified 3,225 child labourers. Of these, 2000 were enrolled in government schools. Chachra adds that due to closure of schools during the pandemic, 2000 trained volunteers from his organisation are currently running classes in safe spaces with social distancing to ensure that children don't get completely disconnected from education.

Similarly, child labour-centric organisation,

Work: No Child's Business (WNCB) also conducted a scoping study during the pandemic in three northern States. Its report 'A Situation Analysis of Child Labour in India --- Rajasthan, Delhi and Bihar & Alternate Livelihood Options' revealed that the vulnerability of workers had increased many-fold during the pandemic. Also, the root cause for increased child labour was common to the three states: the households were poor, the landless had low assets and little education, came from vulnerable groups, and were engaged in informal sector occupations.

Dr Monica Banerjee, Country Lead WNCB Alliance says it is these causes that need redressal. “We are looking at alternative livelihoods for parents/caregivers. We are also engaging with governments and businesses to address child rights and business principles in supply chains of production.”

While this may be the way forward, it is crucial to immediately put in place pandemic-related safeguards to protect

children from exploitation. The most important among these would be to ensure that local administrations map vulnerable children in their constituencies and review their status periodically. They should engage out-of-school children in informal educational activity and provide food to them and their families during State shutdowns. This will save children from being trafficked or pushed into labour. Businesses also need to be persuaded to ensure a child-free supply chain.

And once schools open, the effort to get all children back into the classroom must be undertaken on a war footing.

(Reprinted from the June 13 issue of *The Hindu Business Line*)

SEPTEMBER WORKSHOPS: IT'S ALWAYS 'INWA' VERSUS 'BINWA'

Helping children hone their decision-making skills through storytelling

The month of September saw five storytelling workshops conducted in a row with batches of children from MV Foundation and the Fakirana Sister's Society (FSS). Held on September 12, 18, 19, 26 and 28 and christened 'Meri Pehchan (My Identity)', the workshops explored the idea of identity, self-worth and the crucial role it plays in decision making. These workshops were a continuation from July and focussed on equipping children with life skills through the art of storytelling and conversation. WNCB believes that stories can prove to be a driving force to help children in learning to live meaningful lives, and aids in mending behaviour. Stories also help children to expand their imagination and keep afloat in trying times.

Ms Vibha narrated the story she had written about 'Shanno, Inwa and Binwa': Shanno was a bright student and an athlete. She lived with her mother, father, two brothers and a twin sister. She was always accompanied by the two voices in her heart —Inwa and Binwa. Inwa left no stone unturned to make her question her self-worth, while Binwa was a voice of peace, a supporter of her strengths. Inwa never let Shanno take the driving seat and made her act according to the whims and fancies of what others wanted of her. Binwa let Shanno script her own narrative. It made her feel like an individual.

The story goes that once the athletic Shanno had to appear for a running competition and Inwa pulled her down by taking jibes at her inability and filled her with the fear of failing. Binwa, on the

other hand, urged Shanno to participate in the competition and take its outcome in her stride. In symbolic terms Inwa and Binwa are nothing but the inner voices within each individual and how we are always divided between the two, especially when a decision is to be made. Shanno too was not just a protagonist but represented each person at the workshop.

The story worked on multiple levels, but its significance lay in the fact that we are the deciding factors of what we choose to do and become. Our identities are constantly determined by the outcomes we produce. The tussle between our hearts and minds and the perpetual shift in our perspective synthesise to engender an outcome. Effort and hard work that emanate from a place of peace often lends us support when times are tough.

The narration of the story was accompanied by stick puppets and role playing by the characters of Inwa and Binwa, handled by Apala. It was followed by an activity where the students penned down their thoughts about the story on paper.

The way the students reacted to the story was varied and insightful. The resource persons too pitched in with their experiences. Ms. Garima started the process by sharing a nugget from her personal experience where she was filled with self-doubt when she was asked to write an article. Her Inwa constantly tried to take her on the road to vacillation and uncertainty. But she chose not to listen to it and proved her mettle by not only writing the piece but also getting it published.



All aboard the 'Meri Pehchan' Express. An illustration by 12-year-old Malini Nayak representing the storytelling initiative.

Untold stories to see the light of day

Five winners of the WNCB Awards will highlight the different dimensions of child labour in India



| An online storytelling session being conducted on Zoom.

Saba came forth as an empathetic child. She asked Ms. Vibha how she deals with her Inwa and Binwa. Ms. Vibha narrated her personal experience and taught the students how hard it is at times to pin our ears back to Binwa. Mobilizers were asked for some anecdotes from their own lives when they chose to listen to their Inwa or Binwa. Jamal from Rajaparker shared an experience of when he visited his village and found a child marriage taking place. Initially he listened to his Inwa and tried not to meddle with the child marriage but eventually his Binwa took over, enabling him to stop the child marriage from taking place. Shalu Rani from Tariyani recalled how she found door-to-door surveys and field work too cumbersome, but when she listened to her Binwa she got

motivated in pursuing a good cause.

In another activity the students were asked to draw a personal experience where they listened to their Inwa and Binwa. Most students drew their Inwa and Binwa as stick puppets. Ritam drew an event where her mother was ill and she had to take on the household chores. At first feeling tired and lazy, she heeded to her Inwa and stopped her studies. But later her Binwa persuaded her to take time to study along with pursuing her household duties. Laxmi Kumari said that often her Inwa pushes her back into her comfort zone and doesn't allow her to explore her identity, but her Binwa prods her to do better in life by following new paths.

All the five workshops followed the

same pattern, with students sharing anecdotes from their lives. It emerged that each one of them had performed small acts of courage without anyone acknowledging them or pointing them out. And these mostly happened when they chose to listen to the truth in their hearts.

Some students worked on a skit based on the story. They presented a story that featured two politicians and how one of them loses the elections because he gave in to his Inwa and was filled with self-doubt and insecurity. The children communicated that they would love to present the skit in their Peer Group meetings and Ms. Vibha also encouraged them to enact the play in their respective villages.

On October 4 at the India International Centre, Delhi the five winners of the WNCB Awards for Untold Stories met the jury and presented a detailed plan of how they were going to pursue the fellowships they had just received from WNCB. Their entries had been chosen based on proposals submitted for articles/ research / documentaries on issues related to child labour in India. Their work will entail extensive research, gathering evidence-based data and culling out stories from the grassroots.

The five-member jury comprised of veteran journalist Usha Rai; Founder and Director of Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace Dr Meenakshi

Gopinath; film maker Pankaj Butalia; senior journalist Preeti Mehra; labour researcher and trade union activist Rakhi Sehgal; and Tanja Brok, Communications Coordinator for WNCB in The Netherlands.

The winning proposals were submitted by Mamuni Das, Bhagyashri Boywad, Madhav Sharma, Nidhi Tewari and Aiman Siddiqui. They will each be given a grant of Rs one lakh to work on their respective projects which they must complete in six months starting August 1. The WNCB Awards for Untold Stories was constituted to mark the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. Entries were invited from persons preferably in the 21-40 age group.

Focusing on child labour in the backdrop of the pandemic is particularly significant. According to estimates jointly drawn up by the ILO and UNICEF, 160 million children worldwide were part of the work force in 2020. This number includes over 10 million children in India between 5-14 years.

Understanding the varied aspects of child labour in India is an important step in effectively addressing the problem and the challenges thrown up by the pandemic. In fact, a more realistic comprehension of the various dimensions of the problem backed by field reportage is necessary while charting the way forward.

| Awardees with the jury and WNCB team members: (from left to right) Madhav Sharma, Mamuni Das, Bhagyashri Boywad, Rakhi Sehgal, Usha Rai, Nidhi Tewari, Aiman Siddiqui, Sunita Bhaduria, Monica Banerjee, Preeti Mehra and Aditi Datta.



THE WNCB AWARD WINNERS

Mamuni Das, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Mamuni Das has been a business journalist for over fifteen years and worked as a Senior Deputy Editor with The Hindu Business Line till June 2021. She is in the process of transitioning to the development sector. Through the WNCB grant, she intends to work on tracing the lives of missing children who work and operate from railway platforms. Their lives were derailed during the pandemic when train services were disrupted.

These children lived and earned a living at stations and on trains doing odd jobs—an illegal and unrecognized activity. Mamuni will look at what happened to them during the pandemic in a series of long-format articles. The articles will examine the factors that force children to opt for the precarious lives they live on Indian trains.

The series will also probe whether they benefitted from state-support and resources allocated and whether there are any success stories which can be studied and replicated.

Madhav Sharma, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Madhav Sharma has a post graduate diploma in radio and television journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication. He has over seven years of experience as a journalist. He writes on environment, health, agriculture, social issues, and politics.

He will be pursuing a written and video format story on street children, with particular focus on those engaged in sharpening knives and selling them. He will look at their work, their lives, their struggles, and the impact of technology on their work. This will be the first study on children in this unique trade.

Aiman Siddiqui, Delhi

Aiman Siddiqui has proposed to work on five long-form essays in the context of child labour and rights. The themes range from education, labour laws, the anti-trafficking bill and gender issues to child labour in the backdrop of a growing platform economy in India.

She will also probe the link between the Covid-19 pandemic in India and the increase in child labour, with a focus on their deteriorating conditions at work.



The winners: (from left to right) Mamuni Das, Bhagyashri Boywad, Madhav Sharma, Nidhi Tewari and Aiman Siddiqui.

Nidhi Tewari, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

In developing countries like India, children are drawn to child labour because of economic deprivation. While migration may open the door to a plethora of new opportunities, child migrants can also face exploitation which pushes young lives into the clutches of precarity and bars them of their right to a healthy, prosperous future.

Nidhi will be documenting the tales of children forced into precarious forms of child labour post migration. The impact of macro level factors such as political systems, citizenship entanglement, lingual and cultural identity struggles on the lives of children shall also be explored.

Bhagyashri Boywad, Nanded, Maharashtra

Bhagyashri has completed her MA in Women's Studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad. She was the first Dalit woman chairperson of the Students' Council at TISS Hyderabad in 2019-20. Presently she is working as a Legal Advocacy Consultant with Good Samaritans India, Hyderabad.

She will be using her WNCB Award to work on her project which aims at analysing various socio-economic conditions such as class, caste, ethnicity, and conflict as the contributing factors for increasing child labour and exploitation at the Kapada (clothes) market in Nanded. In the backdrop of the pandemic, many families are unable to sustain themselves and their children are forced to work. The study will look at the contributing factors which catalyse child labour and exploitation and how the new form of digital and online education further marginalizes children.

CONVERSATIONS ON CHILD LABOUR

Ambar Zahara Zhces

India International Centre presents a webinar on IIC/WNCB Dialogues on Child Labour

What does India think and do about Child Labour?

A conversation with Shantha Sinha

Leading child rights activist, Founder-Secretary, M.V. Foundation and former Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights from 2007-2013

Sudarshan Suchi
Chief Executive Officer, Save the Children, India

Vicky Roy
Formerly a Delhi street child, now an acclaimed photographer

In conversation with Monica Banerjee
Country lead, WNCB Alliance in India

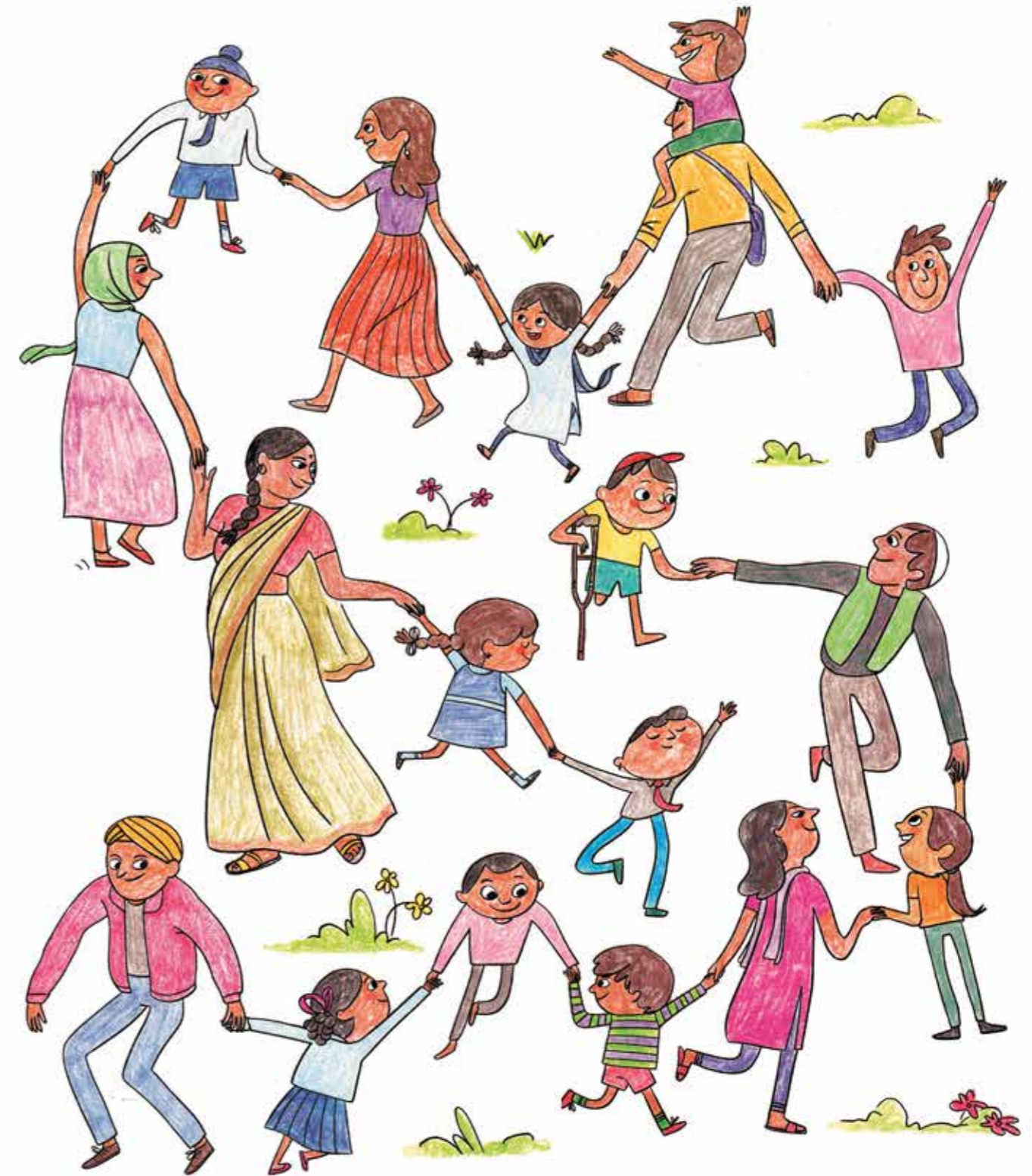
Friday, 11 June 2021 from 4:00 pm to 5:00 pm

Registration link:
<http://webcast.streaminglive.in/iicwebinar4/signup.php>

India International Centre | 40 Max Mueller Marg | New Delhi 110003



03



Month of Reinforcing Rights

Human rights and human dignity are like the two sides of a coin. Every child has the right to respect and love in a just society. The responsibility to provide an inclusive, equitable ecosystem for a child to blossom is ours.

The first in a series of three webinars addressing the root causes of child labour was organised on 11 July 2021 by the India International Centre (IIC), Delhi in collaboration with Work: No Child's Business (WNCB) to mark the International Year for Elimination of Child Labour (IYECL-2021). The participants in the discussion were two experts--Shantha Sinha and Sudarshan Suchi--photographer Vicky Roy and Monica Banerjee, director of WNCB.

Focusing on the causes of child labour, Shantha Sinha emphasised non-economic factors, such as the absence of social norms to abolish child labour, poor attention by the elite, and lack of sensitivity by the state towards the first-generation learner.

Sudarshan Suchi specified 'child as an agency' as a major challenge and argued that child rights need to be holistic. He indicated that the issue of 'power and oppression' needs attention, and that the state should empower the agencies who are the holders of the rights. He further said that it calls for behavioural changes as well as a cultural shift.

In the context of the status of child labour during the pandemic, Sinha reflected upon the effectiveness of the 'Child Labour Free Zone' model. She specified that this model has been successful in dealing with problems like poor

institutional mechanisms, high dropout rates and low industrial productivity. She remarked that the New Education Policy, 2021 does not talk about oppressed children, and criticised the proposed open school mechanism. She believes that open schools need to be replaced with bridge schools.

Suchi said that social safety networks, zero tolerance and alternate livelihoods for the poor are the major areas of concern for the state, civil society, bureaucrats as well as industrialists

Vicky Roy described his journey from a street child to an acclaimed photographer and argued that it is mostly due to lack of proper mechanisms that children in childcare shelters are compelled to join the child labour force once they are released from the homes. The webinar concluded with a thought-provoking Q & A session.

(Reprinted from the India International Diary, June-July 2021)

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About the Alliance:

Work: No Child's Business aims to contribute towards the concentrated global efforts in ending all forms of child labour by 2025. The WNCB alliance, envisions a world where children and youth are free from child labour and enjoy their rights to quality education and (future) decent work, thereby contributing to SDG 8.7 in six countries- Côte d'Ivoire, Jordan, Mali, Uganda, Viet Nam, and India.

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CHILD LABOUR
School is the best place to work



Save the Children



M VENKATARANGAIYA FOUNDATION



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