



Exploited Innocence: Child Abuse and Trafficking in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of child abuse and trafficking within the socio-economic and cultural context of Indian society. It highlights how poverty, gender discrimination, broken family structures, conflict situations, and lack of education make the child vulnerable to exploitation. The study discusses various forms of abuse, including labour exploitation, neglect, physical and emotional violence, trafficking, and discrimination against the girl child and children born out of wedlock. It also addresses the condition of the migrant child and those living in conflict-ridden regions who often suffer psychological and emotional trauma. The paper emphasizes that child abuse is socially constructed and therefore preventable through collective responsibility, policy intervention, educational reform, and economic development. It ultimately stresses the need to safeguard the child's rights and ensure holistic development, recognizing the child as the foundation of the nation's future.

Keywords: Child, Abuse, Trafficking, Discrimination, Poverty

INTRODUCTION:

Children are the future of the nation and a symbol of growth over the ages. They need due attention and care to be able to grow up in a healthy environment. The children are nurtured lovingly by their parents and family members. They are just like a burning lamp to their parents. Children need extreme care and love, and they cannot exist on their own. They need to be taught, guided, looked after, and understood. Their world is very limited, living under the shadow of their parents. They are tender and young. Every child should be given the opportunity to read and write so that they can understand the meaning of education and become a good citizen. Like clay can be molded into any form as we desire, a child can be molded at their very initial stage. As a child's mind is sharp, they can be easily trained, and it is possible to teach them, as they can grasp things easily. They can be made to learn many things and made to do any work. A child simply cognates and forms new ideas of their own.

DISCUSSION:

The issue of child abuse is not a new thing. Since children are vulnerable, they are an easy target for many inhuman things. Poverty is one of the most important things that forced many children to do different types of work that are not up to their capability. The joy and fun of many children are being deprived, and lots of them never got to know and enjoy what is there in 'child rights' as mentioned in the Indian Constitution. In the past children were just not considered as separate beings with any particular needs as a full human being. It is through time that the position of a child and a change in their position as a social being are considered by the adults. There is no denying the fact that the concept of childhood does exist in the society, but at a very different level. They are the source of psychological satisfaction and comfort to their parents in their old age. Parents usually took pride in their children since they could say that they are theirs. With the pace of development in the society, the attitude towards bringing up a child has also changed tremendously. In this context we may quote what Brian Corby wrote:

All children are potentially vulnerable to abuse by those adults who look after them through childhood because they are dependent on them for all aspects of physical and emotional protection and care. (2000: 123)

Nowadays, many unfortunate children are forced to work due to abject poverty. Children are being used by their family members as a source of income. Often they are not given any support and looked after by their family members. They are left to defend themselves in this big world. These children are often malnourished, and education is not given to them. They don't have any legal protection. The multitudes of rag-pickers and children working at hotels and tea stalls that we see around us are all victims of child abuse and trafficking. These children are often sold for very little amount of money. Some of them are runaways from their families or communities for one reason or another, and they have to do any work for the sake of their stomachs and to establish themselves on their own. They have no identity and birth records. They are devoid of enjoying the legal protection against child abuse and are ignorant of what they are missing. Even though they work hard, they hardly get enough to provide two decent meals for themselves. So most of them are unhealthy and undernourished, and often they never get proper medical assistance.

Most children who are abandoned by their parents, for various reasons, are mistreated and manhandled. In India, girls are often victimized; they are even killed at birth, and at times they are killed at their fetus stage because girls are considered a big burden to the parents in their later life. This system is practiced in most of the Indian states, and unfortunately, the culprits go unpunished, though there are various laws against crimes towards girls. In India, many children become the victim because of dowry culture. In a traditional family, boys are given every possibility and advantage that their parents can offer, unlike the girls. The parents even encourage the boys while they discriminate against the girls for no fault of theirs. Boys are given education and are exempted from the household chores. It is often seen that the works of the family, like cooking and looking after the domestic works, become the responsibility of the girls, which deprives them from getting an education and mingling with others, as they never get free from their works.

In most rural parts of India, young girls have to travel for miles, from one village to another, just to fetch water with heavy pitchers on their heads. At times these young girls go without substantial meals while the menfolk enjoy the best foods that are provided in their home only because they are the breadwinners, while the work of the girl children is taken for granted. Though we are now a developed country, this gender bias is being practiced, and the womenfolk cannot even have the heart to speak out and protest.

Again, children who are born deformed or handicapped are neglected by their family members. They are stigmatized as the elders thought that they were a burden to them and their family. So, the unfortunate child leads a very pathetic life, and at times it brings them mental and emotional problems, including nightmares, insomnia, alcohol and drug abuse, and even suicide tendencies, etc.

One of the major issues, apart from the various reasons mentioned above, against children who become victims of abuse and harassment comes to those who are born to unwed mothers or out of wedlock. These unwanted or illegitimate children face much inhuman treatment from society. They are often looked at with contempt and thus, become easily vulnerable to abuse. As most of them are neglected by the so-called father and mother, they end up at orphanages, where they miss all the love, care, and affection that a child is due to get from their biological parents.

It is necessary for all of us to focus our discussions on children and their welfare. We have to go deep into the matter. Certain institutions and organizations are taking up many steps to improve and safeguard the condition of the abused children and to protect children from inhuman and brutal treatments from the hands of the oppressor. The United Nations declared the year 1979 as the International Year of the Child. Following the declaration, many international and national organizations, voluntary organizations, and NGOs are coming up with many activities, basically aimed at improving the lot of the child. In India we are observing the 14th of November, the birthday of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, as Children's Day. So much importance is given to the children, but in spite of all these efforts, our children are still facing many problems and are often victimized in one way or another. In spite of all these steps, many children in India are malnourished, and they often get sick as they are exposed to a number of communicable diseases due to the fault of untimely actions by the government and the ignorance of the people regarding personal hygiene and care. The overall solutions to these problems are economic development, promoting a clear-cut program in the education system, and social change, for which each and every citizen must join hands and work out any problems that arise.

In our society so many children became migrants, and they are often termed child migrants working in different places far away from their birthplace. They migrate to other places due to poverty and for better opportunities. These children are often forced to work to maintain their family. They are denied education and deprived of every possible opportunity a child is supposed to get. Child labor is a serious issue. It is a kind of social evil that needs to be eradicated. Children are being taken as laborers because they could be given low wages. Their labor is attractive to employers because they can be made to work for low wages, as they do not have any statutory rights and privileges.

Children are our resources, and they are our future. It is high time that we understand these problems and prevent child abuse and child trafficking in every sphere. We have to preserve their innocence and nurture them. About the importance of children, Mukta Gupta writes:

Children are the human resources of a country—investing in them is among the most prudent investments any nation can make in its future. In India today, children below 15 years constitute almost half of the country's population. A large proportion of these children belong to disadvantaged sections of society and therefore, lack access to several vital services such as education, health care, and nutrition. (2000:168)

Children are prone to suffer from mental and emotional setbacks in conflict-ridden states like Manipur and other Northeastern states. Children whose parents are killed by militants are emotionally challenged. Their childhood becomes a nightmare, and they are often left with terrible memories. They become the victims of these social conflicts.

Prevention of child abuse is not an easy task that lies before us. To give our children a happy childhood, we have to be socially and economically developed. We should conduct an evaluative study on child rights and child abuse. It is clear that there is a need for a change at a broad societal level to the way in which we treat and control our children. Child abuse is a socially defined construct. It is a product of a particular culture and context and not an absolute, unchangeable phenomenon. Child abuse can be checked, and it could be prevented if only the people who are responsible or are into it realized the graveness of the crime or action they are committing. The term 'child abuse' was first used in Britain in a 1980 government circular. Since then, four categories of abuse have been specified:

- 1) Physical abuse
- 2) Physical neglect
- 3) Failure to thrive and emotional abuse, and
- 4) Children living in a household with, or which is regularly visited by, a parent or another person who has abused a child and are considered at 'risk.'

In our society we have child abuse due to many factors. As ours is a conflict-ridden state, we have many cases of child abuse besides those of physical and mental assault. We have child abuse mainly because of the following reasons:

- 1) Economic problems
- 2) Broken family
- 3) Children living under the shadow of violence.
- 4) AIDS victims
- 5) Mentally and physically challenged, etc.

Our children are faced with these kinds of realities, and without our support and help, we cannot prevent these child abuses. We have to find the right approach to tackle these situations that are becoming rampant in our country. The harsh reality of child abuse in our society needs to be tackled pragmatically and logically. Today social workers are taking a lot of effort and a firmer stance on child abuse despite lots of obstacles and objections from certain quarters. Child abuse can be noticed and detected in an easy way. An abused child is normally different from a normal child. Effects of abuse are manifested in themselves, in the child's relation with peers, the performance at school, mental and physical outlook, physical effects, emotional state, and overall change in their behavior and nature.

To detect and understand the problem in a child, the involvement of society is required. The problems could be checked and solved through the help of social organizations as well as individual efforts in the society. In this context, we may quote the words of Brian Corby:

The strengths of the sociocultural perspective are that they broaden the focus in comparison with psychological and social psychological theories and help in the understanding of how societal influences can contribute to the incidence and form of child mistreatment despite the fact that society officially sets out to reduce and prevent such occurrences.

The implications for social policy are that there is a need to tackle the issue on a broader front and that intervention into individual cases alone is not sufficient for dealing with the problem. (2000:148)

CONCLUSION:

In this way, the social structural approach has a lot of contribution in this matter. A child has to be protected. They should be given love and importance. Only then will they be developed in a very free and tensionless state. Child abuse is a crime, and it should be avoided and checked at every possible level. We need to protect our future. As children are the pillars of the nation, we need to check out how firm is the pillar on which our future will stand.

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