

Book Reviews

Naila Kabeer, Geetha B. Nambissan, and Ramya Subrahmanian. *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia: Needs versus Rights?* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003. 412 pages. Paperback. Indian Rs 365.00.

The volume is based on the proceedings of a workshop, organised on the issue of child labour and the right to education. The studies in the volume reflect on topics related to the problems of universalising education in South Asia. All the studies are based on the experience of either Bangladesh or India, with the exception of one or two studies where a comparison with other South Asian countries is considered.

The problem of child labour is quite widespread in South Asia and that has prevented children in these societies from participating in schooling. At the same time, there are children who are neither at school nor at work. The reason identified for this is not only poverty but also the school system, as well as discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, tribal, or religious reasons. The volume generally examines the patterns of social discrimination and how this problem has been aggravated by the formal educational system. It also reflects on policy interventions addressing the problem—the efforts by the government, on the one hand, and by the non-governmental organisations, on the other.

Two different perspectives are explained: child labour as a consequence of poverty and a poor educational system, resulting in the poor delivery of education. The contributors to the volume establish two alternative strategies. Child labour has been described in a 'realist' and 'idealist' manner. In the 'realist' view, child labour is a cruel and inevitable outcome of poverty. The solution provided by this school of thought is non-formal education along with work, as complete elimination of child labour is not possible. However, a distinction should be made between hazardous and non-hazardous forms of work so far as child labour is concerned. According to the 'idealist' school of thought, child labour is a complete denial of a child's rights and indicates the failure of policy-makers as well as society as a whole. The solution lies in the complete elimination of child labour, whereby education should be made compulsory and acceptable for all.

Of the sixteen chapters in this volume, besides an introduction and a conclusion, fourteen are divided in four parts. The first part is based on three papers reflecting on the various perspectives on children, childhood, and child labour. The first study, by Susan Bissell, is based on her five-year work experience in Bangladesh. An interesting feature of the paper is the concept of childhood as

explained by the author, keeping in mind the views of the children themselves about their lives and lived experiences. The second study, by Neera Burra, reflects on the development debate between children's rights and children's needs. Different views discussed include child labour as children out of school; poverty making child's income critical to the family needs; informal education as an alternative for the poor, as formal education does not necessarily provide them with the tools of livelihood; and children's right to decide whether they want to go to school or work. The third study in the section discusses international labour standards. In the author's view, the policies are dangerous in the sense that they might seem good for the subject population but could have negative implications in the long run.

The second section in the volume, the socio-economic context of work and school, is based on two studies. The first one is a case study of Dalit and Adivasi children in India. The majority of these children, especially in rural India, are living in poor economic conditions and contributing significantly to the family's income. The author argues that poverty should not be made an excuse to deny these children the basic right of education, and suggests economic support to the families whose children are involved in full-time work. The author calls upon the political parties and civil society organisations to help in creating an environment where education becomes the right for everyone without any social or economic discrimination.

The next case study is based on the experiences of working class children in a school located in an urban area on the outskirts of New Delhi. It elaborates on how the labouring children take this educational system, as well as on how this system takes the labouring community in symbolic terms. Three mechanisms are explained to bring out the 'ideological structure' of child labour: children of the labouring class; the teachers at school; and the selected curricular themes in relation to child labour. The analysis shows the dual meaning of child labour—as glorified and oppressed. In the author's opinion, the policy proposals should focus on providing an educational package where skilled work provides the foundation to the learning programme in an atmosphere of democratic choice.

The papers in the third section reflect on the policy perspective on child labour and education. The first paper, by R. Govinda, examines the current status of primary education in South Asia with particular focus on India and Bangladesh. It reviews national policies and programmes operating in these countries to achieve the goal of universal education for all children. The provision of education is analysed not only in terms of the availability of educational infrastructure but also access to educational programmes and children's participation in them. The paper by Dhir Jhingram analyses in detail the task of achieving universal elementary education in India. In that perspective, the author reviews ongoing government policies and programmes, while pointing towards the problems and prospects of these programmes. The third study in this section highlights the role of communities in achieving the goal of universal primary education. In particular, the discussion is on

the opportunities and the constraints faced by the members of the communities or the state-created organisations (for instance, Village Education Committees) in securing universal education. The study is based on policy discussions as well as on the empirical evidence from a few villages in one of the districts in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. The author is of the view that in the background of diverse levels of demand for education and the variable quality of supply, what is needed is a strategy at the local level, with the combined efforts of state, locality, and household. The fourth paper highlights various issues relating to Government-NGO partnerships in the provision of basic education for working children in Bangladesh. The author analyses in particular the Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Children (HTR) Project as well as the NGOs participating in the project.

Five case studies in the fourth section deal with the question of how to operationalise the Right to Education through various interventions at the state level or by the NGOs. The first case study is of the Pratham, public charitable trust in Mumbai, working in partnership with the municipal primary school system. The aim of this initiative is to improve access and to increase attendance in order to achieve universal primary education in Mumbai by 2000-2001.

The next study discusses the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) programme and its relevance as a provider of non-formal education in Bangladesh.

The third study is based on the Lok Jumbish-People's Movement for Education For All project (LJ), being executed in the state of Rajasthan, covering all the formal as well as non-formal learning centres within its scope of intervention. According to the author, decentralised local-level planning and flexibility in decision-making have attracted a large number of children to the education process. The fourth study, by Shantha Sinha, is based on the experience of M. V. Foundation in the Ranga Reddy District of the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. M. V. Foundation is working in 500 villages of Rural Ranga Reddy District on issues relating to child labour. The author argues that none of the children should be allowed to work. Schools should be established as an institution which helps in children's access to and retention in schools. And this could be made possible if every section of the village community works in that direction.

At the end of the section, a report concerning a pilot study done in Calcutta is added. The city is characterised as India's most populated city, with the maximum number of child labour. This study found that the majority of the poor families, once given a chance, send their children to school and keep them there despite having financial problems. No doubt, education is costly for them. They cut down their expenditure and increase their work hours to cope with the cost. The report argues that schools be empowered to adequately provide children with education, without the family having to contribute. Further, the report said that children should be allowed to choose between work and education.

No doubt, the authors have taken up the very sensitive issue of child labour and rightly said on many occasions that our future generation (children) should have the right to make a decision for themselves; they should be enabled and provided an opportunity to do so. Overall, the book is interesting to read and is a worthwhile addition to the literature on child labour. Although it does not reflect the experience of all the countries in South Asia, yet the policy-makers in all developing countries, including South Asia, where the problem of child labour is quite widespread, can learn from the practices and experiences in India and Bangladesh. The lessons learnt there may help make effective policies to achieve universal primary education and eliminate child labour in their own countries, as much as may be possible.

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