

# Studying Childhood in India

KRISHNA KUMAR

A look at the various ideas of childhood that have been dominant in India over the past century or so, and what they mean for parenting, pedagogy and politics in the new century.

Our ability to use childhood as an analytical term depends on the amount and type of knowledge we possess about parenting, teaching, children's literature, and children themselves—both past and present. These are distinct areas of scholarly endeavour, and none of them is particularly well-developed in our academic institutions. So, when we discuss childhood, we must recognise the limitations set upon our aims by the availability of knowledge. A major dimension of the limitations relates to the diversity of circumstances in which childhood unfolds in our country.

Diversity is a deceptive term; it highlights attractive differences arising from geography and culture, while seeking to keep out of view the differences arising from inequality rooted in economic conditions and the caste hierarchy. When applied to childhood, diversity also tends to place under a cover the sharp differentiation induced by culture over gender. It may not be all that untrue to say that when it comes to poverty and the female gender, childhood in India is not all that diverse. We will also have to recognise rural and urban as categories relevant to the study of childhood. Their relevance is, in fact, growing as India's modernity passes through into increasingly impatient phases of economic development.

Indeed, we may have to recognise new categories such as childhood under forced displacement, just as the United Nations has recognised childhood in difficult circumstances arising from war and endemic violence.

## Europe's Child

Our contemplation on childhood in India is likely to be framed by the dominant global discourse on the subject. Its normative character has its uses, but it also enforces an essentialised vision and a compulsively comparative outlook on our attempts to study the childhood that

surrounds us. The problem is linked to the training that our curiosity has received under a colonised system of education. We tend to look either for a replication of the European experience or we yearn for reactive contrast. Colonialism as the mother-ideology of the modern world leaves its academic progeny with limited options. Moreover, our discourse is shaped by the location of our intended audience. Any new project of knowledge must keep these constraints in mind, and this applies rather more to research-starved areas like childhood.

The child, as a discourse of freedom, individuality and equality, was born in mid-18th century in Western Europe. This constellation of terms lies at the heart of pedagogic modernism and the practice of setting childhood sharply apart from adulthood. It was coming already for 150 years when, among others, Montessori, and then Jean Piaget, etched the contours of childhood. Both did it by locating the growth of the young mind in biology.

But already, a major shift had occurred in the study of life in relation to its environment. Behavioural study of childhood sounds simplistic and worthy of criticism today, but it attained a major victory over theories of inherited capacities by highlighting the role of the environment. In a parallel development, Freudian psychoanalysis demonstrated the formative nature of early childhood experience. The somewhat deterministic explanation offered by Freud drove social and political processes to make children's education and health the highest priority.

Scholarship in different academic areas questioned the deterministic element in Freud's theory, leading to advancements in a range of early childhood care practices. Western debates between different schools of theorisation about learning proceeded in early 20th century in a political-dynamic ethos shaped by democratic struggles of different kinds. In the course of its own political development, Europe found many different answers to Rousseau's questioning of the idea of the loyal citizen. Rousseau's engagement was centred in the child on whom nature had endowed freedom. How would such a child

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Krishna Kumar ([anhsirk.kumar@gmail.com](mailto:anhsirk.kumar@gmail.com)) teaches education at the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi.

be educated? This key question underlies the history of educational progress and the contradictions between child-centric pedagogy and education for citizenship.

### Our Colonial Context

More often than not, we fail to recognise and appreciate these matters. Nor do we attempt to interpret their implications for our colonial context. And this is not because we lack guidance. We have had excellent teachers on this matter—teachers of the stature of Gandhi and Tagore. Carrying forward their legacy, Devi Prasad heard the child as a culture in distress, craving for the means to express itself when its life had been squeezed out of its body. As duly colonised citizens of India, we have been too busy in national development to listen to these teachers with attention. We do need to study our political history more imaginatively. If we agree to do so, we will notice a transformative moment when the child became a trope of independent nationhood.

This semiotic event occurred in the 1930s, after Gandhi established himself as a magician leader who could turn common salt into collective passion. *Idgah*, a short story by Premchand, captures this moment. Its hero, a poor Muslim child, browbeats his richer neighbours by his choice of a pair of tongs over colourful clay toys that break by the time the children return home from a village fair. Hamid flaunts his purchase as a super toy by imagining it in various roles, but his grandmother is deeply touched when he tells her that he bought it for her. Hamid's resourceful and earthy imagination, and his gift of verbal and moral fight resonate in Gandhi's style that stirred India's imagination with unusual symbols like salt and khadi. They connoted a salvage archaeology aimed at reinventing a civilisation that had lost its soul.

It is no coincidence that children's literature in Hindi and several other languages entered a prolonged spring in the 1930s. The range and quality of writing for small children published during the following two decades indicate a remarkable process of creative engagement with childhood. There were different kinds of elements in this surge. Experiment and

debate over child upbringing and education were in the air. Gandhi's critique of schooling and his proposal for a radical version of pedagogic modernism should be seen in this larger context. Tagore and Gandhi made bold attempts to construct childhood with their distinct pedagogic visions and concerns. The bridge between their thoughts that Marjorie Sykes designed with her personal, interpretive effort is of rare significance for anyone interested in the history of a major discursive engagement with childhood.

### Idea of Protection

European history and thought resulted in the idea of an extended and protected childhood. We can distinguish two facets of this idea of protection. One was the physical protection of children from induction into work; the other was the protection of children from the knowledge of sexual good and evil, from the social practice of sexuality. The first resulted in the right of children to be compulsorily looked after, not merely by the family, but by an institutional apparatus managed by the state. The other resulted in a notion of childhood as a period of sexual innocence coinciding with and extending the psychological stage of latency. Many classics of European children's literature are steeped in this idea and portray the innocent adventures of children enjoying a long latency.

For a colonised nation like ours, the first aspect proved to be a difficult dilemma. The child's participation in the family's occupational life is a fact of rural life, both for the agricultural and the craft economy. It cannot be easily reconciled with the modern idea of prohibiting the child's involvement in income generation. The modern state is impelled by the urge to ban all forms of child labour so that every child can be schooled into citizenship. But child labour has persisted and is taking new forms, such as prostitution and domestic servitude in cities. Compulsory education, on the other hand, is struggling to acquire substance and meaning. The state has failed to impart dignity to the child's teacher, let alone the child.

The other modern parameter projects the idea of innocence. It means the

child's isolation from sexuality during the years of latency, and from the practice of sexuality during adolescence. Modernity for Europe meant letting children be free from sexualised imagination, to exercise their freedom to grow into sexual beings at their own pace and with awareness. This second aspect of the European ideal of childhood has contributed to the recognition of latency as a significant period of intellectual growth. Freedom from sexual exploitation during childhood has proved far more elusive than freedom from participation in work.

The global discourse of childhood, which was rooted in European thought and experience, has made us aware that the subject we are dealing with has many layers, and not just many dimensions. As one of the many societies in the world where child marriage was the norm barely three generations ago and is still widely prevalent, we need to recognise the struggle that the state and law have to face while coping with the power of culture. The law practises equity where there is no equality, so it is unable to deal with juvenile crimes in which girls are mostly the victim.

### Gendering Childhood

The study of gendering takes us to a frontier we wrongly assume to be familiar. The feminist movement and scholarship have amply demonstrated how incomplete and unbalanced the general knowledge of childhood is. At the same time, this radical development has given many a sense of confidence that education will soon set the gender balance right. My own attempt to study the childhood of girls has led me to recognise that our optimism is unwarranted. In my recent book *Choori Bazaar Mein Larki*, I have presented a psycho-semiotic analysis of girls' childhood. It demonstrates the difficulties we face when we try to include girls in a general profile of childhood which is grounded in the idea and images of boyhood.

Received knowledge in the area of child development suggests that the child's horizons widen as physical and intellectual capacities grow between the ages of five and 11, that is, the primary school years. In the case of girls, the curtailment

of their physical movement begins precisely during these years, long before puberty sets in with its tougher regime. Body-centric consciousness and active denial of intellect are crucial aspects of the socialisation of girls in the family. Custom and ritual are implicated in the upbringing of girls in ways that have no parallel in the childhood of boys and which clash with the aims of education from the start of schooling.

To think that the girl entering the gates of the school in her uniform leaves behind that other girl who learns to live all aspects of her daily existence in accordance with custom and ritual is to invite a fantasy to guide our analysis. Child marriage has statistically declined, but preparing the girl's mind to hold matrimony and motherhood as her highest goals is common, everyday wisdom. These and numerous other aspects of gendering make a compelling case to say that our common construction of childhood is not compatible with girlhood.

### Caste of Childhood

Caste presents another frame that needs to be fully incorporated into future attempts to study childhood in India. The recognition of its strength and resilience as a social institution is yet to be applied to the study of caste as a powerful agency of socialisation during childhood. Leela Dube's analysis of gendering points towards the role that caste-specific customs and rituals might play in the early and later parts of a girl's childhood. In the case of the boys' acculturation into the caste system, there is some knowledge available in autobiographical literature. Autobiographies written by Dalit writers such as Om Prakash Valmiki are valuable sources of knowledge in the vast territory where the school encounters—or avoids—caste as a system that legitimises discriminatory practices.

There is little doubt that the role of education as an agency of modernisation tends to get exaggerated when we assume that an educated person will be less caste conscious. The same can be said about the role of urbanisation. Both such assumptions need to be questioned

if the role of caste as a major agency of socialisation during childhood is to be fully comprehended. Such appreciation is necessary for childhood to evolve, in the long run, as a social category in India.

### Brave New World?

Before childhood could form and develop as a social category, with political recognition a new unknown world has overtaken our imagination. This is the world of new information and communication technology. It has knocked down the boundaries within which Europe had tried to protect childhood. This episode needs careful examination because it is so new and also because it is so firmly embedded in the political economy of footloose capital. Its impact on how human beings communicate and relate to each other is being felt, but we do not fully know its nature and impact. How this impact is shaping adult-child relations is a similar grey area.

The new technological environment blurs boundaries—between nation states, regions, cultures, and between ages. Children can now be directly accessed and inducted into a global community of consumer-citizens. All aspects of childhood, including play, are covered by this new community which is managed by global conglomerates who design video

games, toys and social media sites for children. The elders living in the immediate vicinity of the child are no more the only, or primary, agents responsible for his or her socialisation.

Parents cannot anymore play the role of protectors, nor can they set the contours of the child's knowledge. Like parents, the teacher too has less of a say in the new order. In the techno-romantic view, this is the moment of the liberation of the child from adult control and supervision. Children are no more citizens in the making; the state intends to equip them for active membership of the global marketplace long before they acquire legal citizenship of the nation. The case of girls, once again, is somewhat different. In the global marketplace, they are of special interest because their powers and patterns of consumption are strongly linked to their own value as objects of consumption.

The new geography of the child's sphere of interaction makes older notions of protection and guidance meaningless. The child is back to being vulnerable in a boundless world. What this implies for the child's physical well-being and for intellectual and emotional development needs to be contemplated. For this contemplation, we have little guidance in the corpus of theory that has been available so far.

### EPW Outreach Programme

In order to reach out to the wider community of readers, contributors and well-wishers of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, we are organising three interactive outreach programmes in Mumbai, New Delhi and Bengaluru, details of which follow. Entry is free and all are invited. We welcome your suggestions on how the EPW should celebrate its Golden Jubilee year which starts in August 2016 and the way forward for the publication and the website.

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<b>Venue:</b> The Press Club	<b>Venue:</b> India International Centre	<b>Venue:</b> Bangalore International Centre
<b>Date:</b> 8th July 2016 (Friday)	<b>Date:</b> 16th July 2016 (Saturday)	<b>Date:</b> 23rd July 2016 (Saturday)
<b>Time:</b> 6 pm to 8 pm	<b>Time:</b> 3 pm to 5 pm	<b>Time:</b> 6 pm to 8 pm
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