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## **Human Rights and Children: A Psychological Perspective**

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When the Vedic sages of ancient India prayed:

Sarve Bhawantu Sukhina Sarve Santu Niramaya

Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu Ma Kashchid Dukhbhrig Bhawet

They recognized the rights of all human beings throughout the nook and corner of the world irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex, country or region to have good quality life free from disease, want, degradation, tensions and worries. Its appeal was universal, but it is unfortunate, that we do not see the fulfillment of their dreams and visions. Today, we find a great part of the world including India in the grip of utter poverty, degradation, illiteracy, backwardness, terrorism, intolerance, fundamentalism, disease and drudgery. Children being weak and vulnerable are worst hit by these problems and are often neglected and prone to exploitation.

The modest objective of this paper is to discuss:-

- The development and scope of human rights of children.
- Human rights violations and maltreatment of children globally.
- Psychological impact of violations on personality, health and well-being of children.
- Interventions and suggestions.

### **Development and scope of Human Right of Children**

The struggle to preserve, protect and promote human rights is as old as human civilization. Human rights are those right which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as

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human beings. Human rights advocate the cause of fundamental freedom to allow us to fully develop and use our human qualities and capabilities, our intelligence, natural talents to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. They are based on needs of humanity's increasing demand for a life in which the inherent dignity and worth of each human being will receive respect and protection.

India is a signatory to various international conventions, covenants and protocol on human rights, and has thus assumed the responsibility to provide various rights. In a democratic way, the constitution has not only guaranteed international recognized human rights but also takes responsibility of meeting opportunities for full exercise of these rights. The right to equality, right to freedom and right against exploitation are our, fundamental rights Part IV of constitution, directive principles of state policy strive to promote welfare of the people.

The UN Human Rights commission has unanimously adopted the resolution on the rights of the child. Expressing deep concern at the persistence of practices of the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and exploitation of child labour and involvement of street children in serious crime, drug abuse and violence.

Articles 14, 17, 24 of Geneva convention IV and 76, 77 and 78 of protocol I, article 50 of Geneva convention IV affords general protection to children.

The UN convention on the Rights of child (CRC) guarantees to a child the rights of survival and development, right to name nationality and identity, right to a family, right of participation and right against exploitation. The right against exploitation includes not only protection against physical and mental harm and neglect, including sexual abuse but also against torture, cruelty and degraded treatment. CRC came into force in 1990 and India signed it in December 1992.

### **Human Rights violations and maltreatment of Children globally**

Children are important component and future of any society, socially and physically they represent the weakest part of human society. India continues to be in the stranglehold of child labour even after five decades of planned development. There are more than seventeen million child laborers in India which include two million working in hazardous industries. There are also lacs of children working as domestic servants in almost bonded labour like conditions where they are exploited by their employers and have to work for ten to twelve hours in an unscheduled manner. In the sector of industries like carpet, matches, fireworks, diamond and glass child labourers are exploited to maximum extent. Street children also fall victims to social evils like

drug addiction and are used by mafia to smuggle drugs from one place to another. Many children become victims of organized mafia are handicapped and forced into begging. A 2016 amendment to Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 hasn't established a blanket ban, instead legalizing a form of child labor by allowing children to work in family enterprises, creating scope for misuse.

Child maltreatment is as old as history of humankind. It happens so often in industrialized nation like United States that recent government committee called it a "national emergency". In 1999 three million cases were reported to juvenile authorities of these, 8,26,000 were substantiated. (U.S. department of health and human services 2001). In 2013, India was among the top 5 countries with the highest rate of child sexual abuse. A 2013 report by the Asian Centre for Human Rights revealed that sexual offences against children in India were at an "epidemic" level – citing, over 48,000 rape cases between 2001 to 2011, and a 337% increase in child rape cases from 2001 (2,113 cases) to 2011 (7,112 cases). Child sex abuse (CSA) occurs across geographies, economic levels, and even across relationships – strangers, friends, family members had all been perpetrators. The true figure is much higher many reported cases are difficult to confirm, and most go unreported.

Child maltreatment takes following forms:

- Physical abuse: assaults on children such as kicking, biting, shaking, punching or stabbing, that produce pain, into, bruises, burns, broken bones etc.
- Sexual abuse: sexual comments, fondling, intercourse and other forms of sexual exploitation.
- Physical neglect: living conditions in which children do not receive enough food, clothing, medical attention or supervision.
- Emotional neglect: failure of caregivers to meet children's needs for affection and emotional support.
- Psychological abuse: actions such as ridicule, humiliation, scapegoating or terrorizing that damage children's cognitive, emotional and social functioning.

Of these psychological abuse and sexual abuse are most common. More than 2,00,000 cases of child sexual abuse are reported each year (US department of health and Human Sources 2001) yet, many more affected children may feel frightened, confused, guilty and are usually pressurized into silence. Child prostitutes, are also not uncommon in India as per the report

published in Times of India, there are about four lac child prostitutes in India who are mostly destitute and even abducted children who are sold to fresh traders and forced to entertain 2-3 clients per day. They get infected with STD and even AIDS.

As these children are helpless, dependent on adults, non-important as vote banks for the government, have no unions they are often neglected and prone to exploitation globally. According to census 2001, 375 million children constitute 34% of Indian population but hardly anybody in the corridors of power care to know or listen to their grievances. The sad plight of these innocent children remains an untold story and offshoot of unquotable social, economic ambience. Supreme Court has declared right to life in Article 21 as backbone of our constitution, right to life means right to live with dignity and the right to privacy. The Government of India [enacted](#) the (POCSO) in 2012 to safeguard children from crimes such as sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography. This act prescribes strict penalties for the crime. But alas, the street children and child prostitutes of India have neither dignity nor privacy in their lives. They are subjected to life of extreme humiliation, miseries and darkness.

### **Psychological impact of human right violation**

Children are sensitive as well as vulnerable and exposure to miseries, humiliation and harsh punishment may lead to adverse consequences on their health, personality and well-being.

Freud's psychoanalytic perspective on personality development highlighted the importance of early childhood years and family relationships. It emphasized on how parents manage their child's sexual and aggressive drives in the first few years is crucial for healthy personality development.

### **Emotional well being**

We are not used to thinking of love and stimulation as necessary for healthy physical growth but they are just as vital as food. Two serious growth disorders result from lack of affection and attention.

**Non-Organic failure to thrive** - Usually present by 18 months of age children show signs of apathy and with drawl and rarely smile when mother comes near or cuddle (Steward 2001). Family circumstance surrounding failure to thrive help explain this behavior. During feeding, diaper changing and play mother of these infant seem cold and distant, and at other times impatient

and hostile. Often an unhappy marriage and parental psychological disturbance contribute to these problems.

**Psychological Dwarfism** - Usually appears between 2-15 years of age. It is marked by below average status, decreased GH secretion, and serious adjustment problems (Voss, Mulligan & Betts, 1998). These children do not look malnourished, their weight is inappropriate but profound emotional deprivation affects Communication between hypothalamus and pituitary gland resulting in stunted growth. When such children are removed from their emotionally inadequate environment, their GH levels quickly return to normal and they grow rapidly.

### **Home Environment and IQ**

Stimulation provided by parents is linked to mental development. Regardless of SES and ethnicity, an organized, stimulating, physical setting and parental encouragement, involvement and affection repeatedly predict better language and IQ scores in early childhood (Epsy, Molfese, Roberts & Dilalla 2001;) The extent to which parents talk to infants is important and contributes in language development which further predicts intelligence and academic achievement (Hart and Risley 1995)

### **Poverty**

When families slip into poverty, effective parenting and children development are seriously threatened. The constant stresses that accompany poverty gradually weaken the family system. When daily crises arise, parents become depressed, irritable and distracted, hostile interactions increase and children's development suffers (Mcloyd 1998). These outcomes are especially severe in single parent families, living in poor housing and dangerous neighborhoods, and in homeless families' conditions that make everyday existence even more difficult while reducing social support (Brooks, Gunn & Duncan 1997) The earlier poverty begins, the deeper it is and the longer it lasts, the more devastating its effects on children's physical and mental health, intelligence and school achievement. (Duncan et al. 1998)

### **Psychological consequences of Sexual abuse**

Cases of child sexual abuse are strongly linked to poverty, marital instability and resulting weakening of family ties. The adjustment problems of child sexual abuse victims are often severe. Depression, low self-esteem, mistrust of adults, anger and hostility can persist for year after the abusive episodes. Younger children react with sleep difficulties, loss of appetite and generalized

fearfulness. Reactions of adolescents include severe depression, suicidal impulses, substance abuse, early sexual activity with more partners, running away and delinquency (Lewis 1999, Wolfe 1998). Sexually abused children frequently display sexual knowledge and behavior beyond their years. As mothers they often show poor parenting skills, abusing and neglecting their youngsters. (Erikson 1989). In these ways, the harmful impact of sexual abuse is transmitted to the next generation. Associations have been shown between adolescent sexual assault and a range of adverse outcomes, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide risk, substance use, teenage pregnancy, risky sexual behaviour, poorer educational outcomes, and poorer self-rated health (Holmes K, Sher L. 2013; Martz DM, Jameson JP; Page AD, 2016)

### **Consequences of child maltreatment**

There are different definitions of psychological maltreatment, for example, Vega Castelo (2013) stated that psychological maltreatment refers to affective and cognitive aspects of child maltreatment. Forms of psychological maltreatment may include rejecting, isolating, neglecting, exploiting, and terrorizing (Garbarino J, Guttman E, Seeley JW, 1986). Emotional abuse in childhood refers to continual deliberate mistreatment of a child, which may include deliberately trying to scare, humiliate, ignore, and isolate the child. Emotional abuse is often a part of other forms of abuse; however, it can also happen on its own (Baker A, Festinger, 2011). In contrast to emotional abuse, emotional neglect may be unintentional, and caregivers are sometimes unaware that they are emotionally neglecting their child. Emotional neglect in childhood refers to caregivers' failure to recognize, understand or provide what a child really needs, and may sometimes refer to lack of attention to a child

In a study of Canadian high school students, those reporting high levels of child maltreatment had engaged in more violent crime, carried concealed weapons, and threatened or physically abused others (Wolfe et al. 2001).

Furthermore, demeaning parental messages, in which children are ridiculed, humiliated, rejected or terrorized results in low self-esteem high anxiety, self-blame, opposition, aggression and even suicide (Kaplan, Perkwortz 1999, Wolfe 1999). At school maltreated children are serious discipline problem. Their noncompliance, poor motivation and cognitive immaturity interfere with academic achievement - an outcome that further undermines their chances of life success. (Margolin and Gordis 2000) Finally, the trauma of repeated abuse can lead to psychological changes including abnormal brain wave activity and heightened production of stress hormone.

## **Interventions and Suggestions**

Since child maltreatment is embedded within families, communities and society, efforts to prevent it must be directed at each of these levels.

Interventions include teaching high risk parents' effective child rearing and disciplinary strategies, high school child development courses that include direct experience with children and broad social programs aimed at bettering economic conditions for low SES families. Providing social support to families is very effective in easing parental stress. This approach sharply reduces child maltreatment as well. (Agar and Wolfe 1998).

Other preventive approach includes announcements in the media that educate people about child maltreatment and tell them where to seek help. Political will combined with efficient administrative support is needed to tackle the problem of street children. Multinational companies can be given incentives and tax benefits to start night shelters and slum schools for the destitute and street children.

Aid can be given to NGOs like Child Relief and You (CRY) and Deepalaya (working in Delhi for slum children).

Work can be done in coordination with UNICEF, IPECL (International Program for Elimination of Child Labour) and CLASP (Child Labour action and Support project). Let us remember the child of today will be future of our country, hence denial of rights is not only individual and personal tragedy but also creates situation of social and political unrest sowing seeds of violence and conflict within societies and nations. Thus, affirmation of children's rights, which would ensure the world a prosperous future is must and obligatory.

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