A Few Perspectives on Childhood in India: A Review

[1]Anitha V. Devi and [2]Krishna Praveen

[1]Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, India

vanithadevi@vit.ac.in

[2]Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, India

Krishna.praveen20014@vit.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Childhood is stage in the life of all human beings and it has been viewed as one of the most important stages in the growth of human psyche. Many scholars and researchers have conducted detailed studies and explorations on the idea of 'childhood' and how the society perceived it. The experiences of an individual's childhood become the key factor in moulding the character of that person. Hence childhood is as important a subject for a student of humanities and social science to look upon. This paper conducts a review of the studies conducted by a few scholars on the concept of childhood in India.

Keywords: Childhood, Explorations, India, Review, Society, Social-perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

It is essential to have a look in to the human childhood; how humans evolved from the status of a 'minor' to that of an adult. The experiences that one possesses during childhood are vital in the formation of one's psyche. An enquiry on childhood and a study on the perspectives of childhood remain important especially in the present age since the people started realizing how important it is to take care of children and also to grow them up to make them better human beings. While searching the history of some societies, one could easily observe how they ill-treated the children, seriously affecting their health and emotional strength. Writers like [1] have written down the tales of the sufferings of children of the Western countries, through their books such as 'Centuries of Childhood'.

1

When it comes to India, the concept of children and childhood has got a different perspective.

There are certain peculiar features on the perspectives on childhood in India. This paper is an attempt to elucidate the peculiar perspectives on the concept of childhood in India through review of a few research papers. The paper also focuses mainly on the concepts, theories and movements originated on childhood mainly during 20th century in India.

Concept of Childhood in Indian Context

India is a country with largest number of young population [2]. Under the leadership of the government underscores the relative importance given to the childhood in this country. [3], in their studies have concluded that sociologists and social activists in India are conducting a systematic and scientific inquiry to the uniqueness of Indian childhood. Even though India is a liberal democratic country that provides individual freedom to each and every one of its subjects, the country often fails to provide freedom to their young population [4]. Right from birth, children are under the complete control of their parents especially with the mother. The maternal influence plays a vital role in shaping a social awareness among the children. In the children's perspective, this control over them means nothing but protection. They are given less exposure to the real life situations happening around in their society and are not provided a perspective of their own to those. Rousseau's often quoted line; "throw the child into the bounty of nature" [5] could be remembered at this juncture. The life of girl children is even more predetermined than the male ones. They are groomed in a way as to make a family, confine within the four walls of the house looking after their male partners and their children. Even the distinction and determination could be observed in the selection of toys presented to the kids. If a male child gets a toy gun or a car, it will be little kitchen utensils or dolls for the girl children. [6], explains about the trend of grooming girls for the purpose of handling the future roles through her studies.

Nevertheless the obvious possibility of the influence of the parents' perspective upon the children could not be nullified. There is indeed always an element of 'influence' of the parents over the children. Renowned French psychologist Jacques Lacan's theory of mirror stage comes in to prominence at this context.

2

Initially the child tries to verify the image as its own by turning to the mother, whom in Freudian terms is not only biologically unified with the child, but weeded to its id, or primal self as expressed in its physiological drives. In doing this however, the child recognizes itself as a being separate from its mother. To test this new found autonomy, the child then begins to explore its movements as they are reflected in mirror, thus identifying with the idealized and unified mirror- self. [7].

The concept of 'familism' as discussed by [8] in her article titled *Who is A Child?:The Adults' Perspective within Adult-Child Relationship in India,* also is a significant factor that affects the perception of the world among the children. Even though eventually the Indian society adopted the nuclear form of family, as a break away from the joint family tradition, the attention and care given to the children is no different from its tradition. They are made to sleep with their parents, are fed by them and eventually trained to develop a life style and attitude of their parents. This tradition is entirely different from the European concept where the child is taught the sense of freedom and individuality right from their infantry. The Western perception of childhood was very much influenced by Rousseau's concept that considers child as a distinct era with clear boundaries that sets apart them from the adults [8].

Maternal indulgence is another significant aspect that influences the children. It is widely recognized that mothers posses a greater influence upon their children particularly in their growing stages. Barbara Attebery Scott in her thesis titled *Comparison of Parental Expectations, Goals and Child Rearing Patterns of Mothers Receiving Aid to Dependent Children* (1967) discusses about the influence of mothers over their children.

Mothers seem to have a definite picture in mind of what qualities a "good" adult in her culture would possess. She has certain goals for her children though these may not be specifically formulated and voiced in clear terms [9].

The effect of this influence over the children is often adverse. The prime among them is the relaxed process of maturation. [10], speaks about the element of over protection for the children from their parents and in the contrary over schedule from the academic and other social activities of the children. Due to the excess care and comfort provided to the children, they hesitate to cope with the realities and are scared to handle things alone.

They expect the support from their parents, especially from their mother who always sympathizes with them in most of their difficult situations. If the parents fail to sympathize, they break down and instead of facing the problems courageously, they look for evasive ways which in the worst case tend to committing suicide. This is all the more unsafe for the child. The maternal indulgence works only to a fixed extend particularly when the child enters to a masculine society. [11], discusses about the 'masculine world' which signifies a society lead and controlled by the males with their own absolute standards. In such a society a child encounters a lot of situations which demand bold and quick reaction from the child.

Child Acquiring Language through Stories and Plays

Children love to play and anything provided to them through the medium of play or activity sustains in their psyche forever. It is a commonly observed practice in Indian families that parents and elders engage the children of their family in different kind of activities. Children love to listen to the stories. Usually in a traditional family children often go to their grandparents to listen to stories. While they listen to the story narrated by the elders they create a visual sequence of the images of the story in their psyche. Even when the story fails to satisfy the logical reasoning of a grown up man the stories with super natural events and elements entertain the children a lot. Not only that they improve their power of imagination but also they expand their skill in grasping the elements of language.

The people of India followed joint family system for a longer period of time. Due to urbanization and other social changes the traditional joint family system eventually gave way to nuclear family system. The effect of these changes is observed more on the children born in these nuclear families. One of the worst side-effect of the nuclear family system is that the children meet their family members and their kiths only when they come together for a family function or any similar occasions which happen once in a while. The end result is that the children fail to develop an emotional bond with their family members as they don't see each other frequently. The parents who are aware of this predicament try to make their children familiar with all the important members of their family through their own ways. They deliberately bring in their family members as the characters of the story told to

4

the child. This will make the children understand each and everyone who is related to them in the family.

A Social Perspective to the Childhood in India

The tradition in India pays much importance to child and childbirth. [12], in her book titled *Children in India and their Rights*, mentions about the traditional view point to the childhood. "Ancient Indian law, especially in the Laws of Manu, the child though located very near the bottom of a social pyramid was bestowed society's protection" [12]. Except from the poor working class community, from the time a woman conceives, she enjoys all the comforts till she gives birth to a child safely. Even after birth the new born child is looked after with at most care. Each and every incidence in the process of the growth of child is viewed with utmost happiness and joy. [13], mentions particularly about the celebration of each and every incident in the growing process of the child in her article.

In India childhood is considered as unique and enjoyable period in an individual's life, so children are pampered by the adults in the family and in the community. Numerous special occasions in the community mark the significance of this developmental period. For example, the whole community celebrates the birth of a child, a child's first intake of solid food, the naming ceremony of a child and the child's first day of formal education [13].

Though the fact remains such the condition of the lower class children in India was worse until recent few decades. Though many organizations lead by the government and many other private agencies put in maximum efforts to minimize the problems of lower class children in India, complete eradication of the problems of children in India are not yet ensured.

Though there remain a better standard for the children belonging to middle and upper class of the Indian community, the privileges are not equal among the male child and the female child. When the male children are sent to schools and sent for higher studies where as female children in these households enjoyed these advantages to the least. There is a mention about this social condition that prevailed in India in M.N.Srinivas'[14] book titled *Marriage and Family Mysore.* "It is the mother's duty to train her daughter up to be an absolute docile daughter-in-law...' [15].

5

Child marriage, where female children are married at a very young age was another social evil committed towards the childhood in Indian society. Marriage at a young age puts an end to the childhood of the children and they are all the way dragged in to a family to assume the role of a house-maker. But this trend in India is in stark contrast with that prevails in Europe. Marriage is viewed not as a social obligation in European tradition and no children are forced to enter marital life without their consent. [15], mentions about the Indian tradition of marriage in her article titled *Marital Discord and Divorce in India—The Changing Profile.*

In India, traditionally and from time immemorial, marriage has been hallowed as sacred; and marriage for most Indians is not merely a sacrament but is sacrosanct. Once the couple enters into the bond of marriage, the relationship is considered perpetual—till death does them apart... [16].

Hence many evils that prevail in Indian society pertaining to childhood is not seen in Europe. But it is a fact that both the traditions witnessed tremendous changes in perspective and outlook towards childhood especially during the 20th century and hence there arrives the possibility of a comparison between both the oriental and occidental views on childhood.

A Few Movements related to Childhood in India during late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in India: a Review

There happened a few movements and events pertaining to child development and children welfare in India during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The table below will provide a glimpse of it.

6

Table 1- Development of Children's Welfare Movements in India

Year	Name of the Movement	Aims and Objectives
1870	New Educational Movements	To improve the standard of education of children. Rabindranth Tagore itieated its functions in Bengal and Annie Besant in South INdia
1920	Balkan Ji Bari	To provide services to the children belonging to the poor uneducated and helpless families.
1927	The Children's Aid Society	To take the vagrant children off the streets and put them in residential care.
1974	National Policy for children	The first child welfare policy formed by the Government of India. According to it the State has to provide adequate services to children, both before and after birth and through the period of growth, to ensure their full physical, mental and social development.
2013	National Policy for children	It s the second welfare policy for the children introduced by the government of India. For the first time, it defines a child is any person below the age of 18 years and states that childhood is an essential part of life with a value of its own and it requires a long term, sustainable, multi-sectoral, integrated and inclusive approach for their overall and harmonious development and protection.

Apart from these movements there happened a few more welfare programmes for the children in India under the initiative of the government of India. The Eleventh Plan acknowledging the rights of children envisioned an inclusive growth for all children, irrespective of their class, caste, ethnicity, religion and gender besides advocating for ending the exclusion and discrimination faced by women and children. The Twelfth Plan

7

represents a "Child Rights Paradigm". It mandates the fulfillment of children's right to survival, development, protection and participation as foundation of human development.

CONCLUSION

Childhood is a stage which must be looked forth with utmost care. Studies pertaining to rights of children and reservations for the children are plenty but a solemn discussion on childhood in Indian context, its unique features and how it differs from European perspective is a subject with significant importance. Childhood, child's exposure to the world, their perception of the things happening around, all differs from each society depending on the culture that the society adheres to. There is a huge difference from what is perceived as childhood in the Western tradition and the same in the Eastern, particularly in Indian tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

1. Aries, Philippe. "1962Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life." *Translated Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape* (1960).

2. Staff Reporter. "India has world's largest youth population: UN report". *The Hindu* [Chennai]. 19th, November, 2014. Print.

3. Mohanty, A. K., and P. Prakash. "Theoretical despairs and methodological predicaments of developmental psychology in India: Some reflections." *Human Development and Family Studies in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications* (1993).

4. Jandial, Shraddha. "Indian Youth Wishes for Freedom this International Youth Day". *India Today* [New Delhi]. 12th August, 2015. Print.

8

5. Seetharamu, A. S. *Philosophies of education*. APH Publishing, 1978.

6.Saraswathi, Tharakad Subramanium. *Adult-child continuity in India: Is adolescence a myth or an emerging reality?*. Sage Publications, Inc, 1999.

7. Hill, Stephen, and Bevis Fenner. *Media and Cultural Theory*. Bookboon, 2015.

8. Bisht, Rachita. "Who is A Child?: The Adults' Perspective within Adult-Child Relationship in India." *Interpersona* 2.2 (2008): 151.

9. Scott, Barbara Attebery. "Comparison of parental expectations, goals and child rearing patterns of mothers receiving Aid to Dependent Children." (1967).

10. Mintz, Steven. *Huck's raft: A history of American childhood*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

11. Sharma, Dinesh Ed. *Childhood, family, and sociocultural change in India: Reinterpreting The Inner World*. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press, 2003.

12. Bhakhry, Savita. "Children in India and their Rights." *National Human Rights Commissions, New Delhi* (2006).

13. Pattnaik, Jyotsna. "Early childhood education in India: History, trends, issues, and achievements." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 24.1 (1996): 11-16.

14. Srinivas, Mysore Narasimhachar. *Marriage and family in Mysore*. New Book Company, 1942.

15. Jamwal, Namita Singh. "Marital discord and divorce in India." *The Changing Profile Mainstream Weekly* 47.37 (2009).

9

IDOSR JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES 2(3): 1-9, 2017.