

Making the World Safer for our Children: the South Asian Context

*Manjula Rathaur, senior lecturer, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi;
and Anand Kumar, associate professor of sociology, Jawaharla Nehru University*

The basic assumption of our approach toward making the world safer for our children is that the real conditions of any society are reflected in the status of children in that society. Children are the citizens of tomorrow. Neglecting their needs today creates major problems for the world tomorrow. Thus, caring for children becomes the most important duty not only of the family, but of the community, nation-states, and the world. We aim at underlining the current situation of children in South Asia and presenting a future agenda for making South Asian societies safer for children.

South Asia is the home of every fifth human being. The peoples of South Asia share a common civilizational framework in spite of all diversities of nature and culture. It has evolved for the last five thousand years, deeply impacted by all the major world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. After going through a painful period of colonial rule and freedom movement for more than 150 years, this region, for the last five decades, has been engaged in modernization through nation-building activities.

Today, the South Asian region comprises seven nation-states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. They have a common social structure—marriage and family are central in the life scheme of their peoples, in spite of occasional variations in systems of marriage, family, and kinship. Children are considered precious, the most significant element of families. In South Asian societies there is a wide range of cultural practices in terms of child care, socialization according to religion, occupation, level of education, etc. Rural and urban, rich and poor, and male and female are the greatest dividers in these nation-states.

Now, let us look at the socio-cultural, economic, and political situation of South Asia that is creating waves of concern for anyone who wants to make the world safer for children. According to one of the most eminent social scientists of the UN, Professor Mahbub-ul-Haque, "South Asia is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, the least gender sensitive, indeed the most deprived region in the world. Yet it continues to make more investments into army than in the education and health of its people." This is an essentially correct critique of the power elite of South Asia. Because of incorrect policies and priorities in meeting national needs they have created a situation where one-fifth of humanity does not live in satisfactory conditions. Together, bad politics, weak economy, and misdirected mod-

ernization have created a zone of crisis. The process of newly encouraged globalization through liberalization has assigned market forces new prominence in human affairs. The state is rolling back to make space for market forces, even in the social services, but social conditions still have not improved.

The narrow social base of South Asian middle classes, and the continuous neglect of women, in the process of development have created a number of problems for children and family life in South Asia. These problems deserve urgent attention.

There are a number of ways to view the South Asian situation in the context of children and their problems. There is no disagreement that there are at least seven aspects that need immediate intervention for making the world better for the children of South Asia. These are: high infant mortality rate, high malnutrition, child labor, illiteracy, child prostitution, violence against children, and weaker family bonds.

High Infant Mortality Rate

In 1997, the infant mortality rate (death of infants per thousand live births) in the world was found to be fifty-eight. It was only six in the countries of North America and Western Europe while it was seventy-five in South Asia.

High Malnutrition

It is well known that nearly one hundred and sixty million children are malnourished in the whole world. South Asia contributes a large percentage of these children. We may have some idea about this problem by looking at two indicators: infants with low birth weight and women pregnant with anemia. During 1997, 32 percent of infants were of low birth weight in South Asia; the percentage of such infants in Latin America and East Asia was 9 percent and 17 percent for the whole world. Furthermore, nearly 58 percent of women in Bangladesh and 88 percent in India were found with anemia during pregnancy.

Child Labor

There are 250 million children working in today's world. Child labor is an indicator of poverty and the destitution of families and countries. In the history of the modern world, it was a reality of the earlier period of industrialization in Europe. Today, it hardly exists in the industrial world that spreads from North America to Japan. But, there are estimated at least 100 million child workers within age five to fourteen in the South Asia region. Instead of attending school, they are forced to join the labor market for their survival.

Illiteracy

According to official figures, nearly 50 percent of the population of South Asian countries (except Sri Lanka with only 10 percent) are illiterate. Such an environment promotes problems for the literacy of children. While 99.9 percent of the children of the industrial countries are enrolled in schools, the figure for South Asia is only 80 percent. In other words, every fifth child never gets to see a school in the course of his childhood. Then, more than 40 percent of those who enroll in primary schools drop out to join the labor pool rather than going for further education in secondary schools. The problem becomes more accentuated if we examine the perspectives of girls compared to boys, rural compared to urban, castes, and family occupations.

Child Prostitution

The problem of child prostitution is a consequence of the conjunction of family poverty, a decline in the moral standards of society, and the enlargement of market forces. The daughters of poorer families in Bangladesh, Nepal, and India are more acutely affected by this problem. The metropolitan centers of South Asia have emerged as major points of child prostitution, which is encouraged due to the spread of AIDS.

Violence Against Children

It is one of the most condemnable crimes of adults against children and it raises its ugly head everywhere—in families, neighborhoods, schools, and other spheres of life. In spite of the spread of education and awareness about the need to eliminate violence from society, children, particularly girls in urban settings, face more violence.

Weaker Family Bonds

In the traditional worldview of the people of South Asia family was the foundation of society. But, processes of education, urbanization, and social mobility are weakening family bonds. They create crisis for the proper care of children. Poverty and affluence both contribute to problems that lead to the creation of female-headed households, largely created because of male migration to cities or the breakdown of marriages because of urban pressures of status and occupation. According to one estimate, one-third of all households in India are headed by females. The situation grows worse in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Given such a scenario, it is important to recognize the major challenges to making the world safer for children in South Asia. There are six issues that need to be underlined in this regard. They are: adverse sex ratio, limited literacy, unsafe motherhood, extreme poverty, tradition and technology in a negative combination, and the increasingly limited role of community.

Adverse Sex Ratio

In India there is a sharp and alarming decline in the

male/female ratio (sex ratio) among children age zero to six as compared with the increase in the sex ratio of total population between 1991 and 2001. The sex ratio of the general population has increased by six points (from 927 to 933 females per one thousand males) and decreased by eighteen points (from 945 to 927) in the zero to six age group. According to Professor Ashish Bose, the girl is losing out badly in spite of numerous projects and programs on her behalf for over a decade.

Limited Literacy

The issue of illiteracy has serious implications for children due to a gender gap that is perpetuating itself in South Asia. It affects their care, particularly in matters of birth related practices, infant care, and proper nourishment of males and females in the family. Female adult literacy is 59 percent of the male literacy rate in South Asia. There is also a gap of 30 percent between the enrollment of female and male children at post-primary schools. Thus, even in the era of post colonial developments for nation-building, a gender gap is carried over from older to younger generations

Unsafe Motherhood

South Asian societies have incidences of 512 deaths of women per one hundred thousand live births, excluding India. For India, the 1990 figure was 570. It is only 13 in industrial countries, 62 in Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation, 114 in East Asia (excluding China at 95), and 437 in the world.

Extreme Poverty

Nearly 1.3 billion people live on less than one dollar a day, and close to one billion people cannot meet their basic necessities, according to the Human Development Report (1999) of the UN. The South Asian region represents one of the poorest sections of the world; more than 70 percent of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture and/or related activities and at least one-third of the population lives in sub-human conditions because of lack of income and shelter. What will be the fate of children of such households?

Tradition and Technology Conjunction

It was expected that modern technology would further humanize the lives of people by helping them overcome negative traditions. But, tragically, the tradition of preferring the male child and the technology of an ultrasound based pregnancy test to determine the sex of an unborn child have combined in a negative conjunction against the female baby. The modern technology of amniocentesis is being used for female feticide.

Limited Role of Community

All the nation-states of South Asia have been engaged in major programs of child welfare since their independence or

entrance into a modern form of government. Yet everywhere there remains a limited role for communities as most of the projects for children were conceptualized by the elite, monitored by bureaucrats, and oriented towards the masses. They failed the expectations of the people who had already limited trust in the modern structures of state.

The Future Agenda

The South Asian region has been a zone of mass mobilization since the beginning of the twentieth century. Fights for nationhood ultimately culminated into historical mobilizations for the right to freedom, justice and dignity. But national authorities have failed to grant four inalienable rights to the children of South Asia: 1) the right to birth, 2) the right to health, 3) the right to education, and 4) the right to safety. If we relate these rights to the most pressing problems of children in South Asian countries, it is possible to hope for a better tomorrow. They will have a future without the fear of high infant mortality (including female feticide) and maternal death. It will be an environment where children will be born with good health and will not die because of malnourishment. They will find themselves going from the care of home to the shelter of school and will not be pushed to the labor market for the sake of survival. They will grow up without the fear of violence from adults in the family, neighborhood, and larger society.

This all can be brought into practice with the new awareness that we must not leave children at the mercy of circumstances. They need our total attention through the cooperation of parents, community, nation-states, and the human family. We, all the members of society, are the trustees of the world's children. Thus, there is an urgent need for local and the global families to improve the well being of children in South Asia and elsewhere in the world, assuring that the rights to birth, health, education, and safety are enjoyed by all children without distinctions of gender, religion, and nationality.