

Art of the Possible

Focus on Children Under Six: Abridged Report

*Citizens Initiative for the Rights of
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How do you write about child hunger, disease and poverty without either invoking utter despair or sounding clinical? The *Focus on Children Under Six: Abridged Report* (the FOCUS report) published in December 2006 is how. Campaigning organisations find it hard to resist the temptation of using images of malnourished children to grab our attention, or more to the point, tug at our heart strings. At the other end of the spectrum academic literature on children's welfare must reduce the pain of the innocents to cold analytical categories and statistics. The FOCUS report provokes alarm but not despair. It pulls at the heart strings but also provides high quality analysis and practical ideas for action and change.

The report has been produced by the Citizen's Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six (CIRCUS) – a loose coalition of activists and researchers, many of whom worked together on the 'Public Report on Basic Education in India' (PROBE) in 1999. While PROBE contributed to raising the profile of basic education on the Indian political landscape FOCUS promises to do the same and more for children under six. Political understanding has matured over the years as many of the CIRCUS folk have engaged in rights-based advocacy and mobilisation on a range of social policy issues in the intervening period.

Rights are central to the outlook of the FOCUS report, and there is a sophisticated yet simply articulated approach to the politics of public action in a large, vibrant and uneven democracy like India. The authors clearly believe that politics is the art of the possible. The state is the ultimate

guarantor of societal entitlements, and a political strategy that aims to convert these entitlements into serviceable claims, using all available legal and advocacy tools pushes a democratic system to its rightful limits. Hold the system true to all of its promises – from directive principles to policy details – in all earnestness and without concession to political realism, and you might help create new political realities.

The report is divided into eight main chapters, starting with a statement about the politics of child welfare. It lays out the substantive and strategic arguments for adopting a rights-based approach for children under six. The manner in which a society looks after its youngest and most vulnerable members is a reliable barometer of its level of culture. Yes, there are many political and structural issues in the way in which economies are organised, and social development cannot be achieved without addressing those political and structural issues. But the FOCUS Report insists that the struggle for children's rights need not be made contingent on those bigger changes.

There is a radical point implicit in this argument: a child's welfare is the responsibility of society as a whole, and not only that of her parents. It cannot, moreover, be held hostage to either the economic constraints faced by the parents or their knowledge or level of commitment to their children. Accept this and you have accepted the view that economic outcomes and social structures have to be made contingent to the achievement of some basic minimum standards for all children, rather than the other way round. This is a much deeper sense of belonging together than can be nurtured by any nationalistic jingoism.

The framing of the child welfare issues as rights assigns political responsibility and prescribes a general method for the discharge of that responsibility. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the condition of children under six using the available data from the National Family Health Survey. There are shocking results here. The recent period in India represents perhaps the

only time and place anywhere in the world where rapid economic growth has led to no discernible improvement in the nutritional status of children. The comparison with other countries, notably south Asian neighbours, such as Bangladesh is sobering to say the least. The difference is clearly traceable to public provisioning, and ultimately to the political priority that women and children receive.

The four middle chapters – from chapter 3 to 6 – form the core of the report. They examine in detail the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) commonly known as "anganwadi" – the main national programme designed specifically for the welfare of children under six. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the ICDS, its origins and genesis. You can already see the beginnings of an analysis of India in tables that report differences between states in their ICDS allocations. The phrase or slogan "universalisation with quality" neatly sums up the direction that the ICDS must take if the rights of children under six are to be realised.

The results of a specially-designed survey (the FOCUS Survey) of ICDS facilities in six states – Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh – are reported in chapters 4 to 6. The FOCUS Survey is a valuable original contribution to social science research on young children in India. It takes the anganwadi – local childcare centres that form the backbone of the ICDS – as its primary unit of observation. Anganwadis are run by an anganwadi worker and her helper, and are supposed to provide a range of services to mothers and children including nutritional supplements, health monitoring, and pre-school education.

Politics of Public Action

The FOCUS Survey – although it is limited to three districts each in six states – is one of the first serious attempts at taking stock of what is going on in and around the anganwadi. Based on an unannounced inspection of the facilities and activities, direct observations, and stakeholder interviews, the survey provides valuable insights into what actually happens as opposed to what is supposed to happen. The six FOCUS Survey states

quickly divide up into “active” and “dormant” ones. The former, perhaps predictably Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have well-functioning anganwadis that open regularly, provide substantial nutritional supplements, carry out immunisation and health monitoring, and are generally perceived by the local community as providing a good service. Tamil Nadu stands out and is rewarded with a chapter dedicated to its success. The “dormant” states are, also predictably, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh with much the opposite results in terms of the range and quality of services provided.

The authors are keenly aware of the danger that their analysis might prompt the opposite of what they advocate. If the quality of the anganwadis is so poor, why bother with them at all? A “hard-headed” economist might have more than enough material here to argue that the whole thing should be closed down, especially in the “dormant” states, and replaced by a smartly-worded targeted public-private partnership venture, with the disbursement of

mass-produced biscuits in the place of prepared meals.¹ That would be a gross misreading of this work. What comes across loud and clear is that we need much less of what happens in Uttar Pradesh, but much more of what happens in Tamil Nadu.

The “universalisation with quality” slogan is reinforced by the tenacious search for social inequalities in the operation of the anganwadis. Despite much probing the survey does not find much evidence of discrimination against girls or socially marginalised groups such as dalits and adivasis. In fact, as the report acknowledges, despite lapses, the anganwadi is relatively free of caste and gender-based discrimination compared with the “world at large”. With all of their imperfections the anganwadis do allow us to imagine a new India.

Taking forward the discussion on the politics of public action, the FOCUS Report prompts two questions but does not raise them explicitly. First, there is very little discussion in the report of “citizens as parents”, in promoting child-friendly policy and politics. The discussion of inter-state contrasts does suggest that “active” states

such as Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh also happen to have less unequal gender relations than Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The chapter on Tamil Nadu also provides evidence on the role of women voters in maintaining political interest in the anganwadis. Why do citizens (men and women) in other states such as Uttar Pradesh appear to attach so little significance to their parental roles when going out to vote? Perhaps other intervening factors mentioned in the report – such as the history of caste and class politics – tend to dominate the electoral identity of citizens at the expense of their parental roles. If so, how “endogenous” are the outcomes that we actually observe in the “dormant” states, and thus, how much political agency is there really, while other structural issues such as caste and patriarchy are still being sorted out?

Second, India’s federal system comes out as both a great source of strength and weakness with regard to social policy. Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu hardly look like the same country as Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh. This is good and bad.

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The federal system is flexible enough for a central government scheme to implement in such diverse ways. A less flexible system might have held Tamil Nadu down, but might it have helped Uttar Pradesh up? Can “catching up” happen through imitation and competition or will these gaps persist short of deliberative imposition?

These questions are rooted in political realism, which generally supports status quo over change, and the CIRCUS folk have probably a healthy level of disregard for “structure”. The Abridged FOCUS Report is literally bursting at the seams with stimulating material and insights. A large number of people from diverse

disciplinary and political backgrounds have contributed, and the report makes good use of boxes to provide vignettes, case studies, and thoughtful asides. One looks forward to the CIRCUS coming into town again soon. [EPW](#)

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Note

1 This, incidentally, is the reported fate of an innovative school feeding programme in Pakistan whose pilot was aborted due to the suspected lobbying of a large food processing multinational that is interested in selling “milk and cookie packages” to the provincial education departments.