

BOOK REVIEW

Deepak Kumar Behera (ed.), *Children and Childhood in Our Contemporary Societies*. (A Special Publication Project of the *Journal of Social Sciences*) New Delhi: Kamla-Raj Enterprises, 1998, pp. 274, Rs.450/-, US \$ 55.

Modern society, a product of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution of the 18th century, continued for decades and subsequently changed life of a few million people in some parts of the world. The herald of Industrial Revolution brought in optimism though social fabric was still caught between the natural world and simple technology. From that time onwards world society has been moving on albeit unevenly. This is viewed by some social scientists as linear upward movement while some other concerned view it as passing through successive stages on the social graph, always previously conditioned, determined and prefixed. Therefore, we need to construct the "images of future" theoretically that can supply information about the future. For these constructs represent and reflect the human dimensions of the future, our ability to influence and shape it. This is the principle of hope and child is the future hope, historically.

The volume under review comprises seventeen chapters dealing various dimensions of childhood and the associated factors, precisely as the childhood is socio-culturally structured. Various issues on childhood research ranging from children's welfare, children's identity, childhood and social space, children's rights, juvenile delinquency, etc. have been elaborated in the book. By and large all the authors reiterate the necessity for reconstruction of notions on child and childhood at the conceptual level through children's self-identity and perceiving children as social actors in social development. The interesting part is that all the papers from different countries voice the similar concern i.e., children and childhood which strengthens and emphasizes the objective of the book.

Broadly the papers in the book can be divided into theoretical and empirical levels besides papers on Rights of Children and juvenile delinquency. In the introductory chapter Behera highlights the focus of the volume, i.e. the per-

ception of children and childhood across societies and cultures in order to "counter the invisibility of children and childhood in the epistemic space of our contemporary societies" (p.1). As editor he accomplishes the task of weaving the concerned heuristic threads together which shapes the volume.

The papers by Frones and Bühler Niederberger are interesting theoretical expositions on social conditioning of children that set the space in the book. Ben-Arieh, Milne, de Castro, Jenks and others analyze the importance of perceiving the special needs and rights of children, the poor coverage of children in social research, the impact of consumer culture on children's identities and the subjectivization, the allocation of social space for children and so on. In this context Cohen's appraisal of UN convention on the Rights of the Child for indigenous children is no less appropriate to the objective of the book as "the creation, maintenance and betterment of a suitable family background for the correct development of children, in its moral, intellectual and physical aspect" is vital to overall social progress (p. 219). This is appended by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child consisting 54 Articles, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nation in 1989. Here it needs to be mentioned that the convention on Children's Rights has not cognized the cultural and social variegation particularly in the south countries. In other words the convention is unilaterally framed with ethnocentric bias and thus demands a review. Secondly the definition of the term child varies across cultures depending upon the respective political economy, geography, polity and social institutions at large. Subsequently, for policy measures it is necessary to undertake research cross-culturally to evolve a broader theoretical framework while giving due attention to specificities. In this connection it is disappointing to note the conspicuous absence of contribution on child studies for South Asian region in the volume which otherwise would have enriched the postulates. This induced in visible lacuna.

Be that as it may the reviewer also argues

that more often than not children are marginalized category, specially in non-tribal societies. In the process their identities get blurred as often they are appended; their voices are unheard, their labour being the cheapest but precious boon for capitalism, more so in third world countries; while there is no childhood for the underprivileged children in unions for child workers. Capitalism meticulous appropriates their labour while the family system appropriates the products of their labour power.

Thus in the contemporary context the publication is well appreciated, particularly at the beginning of new millennium. On the whole the book is a welcome addition in social sciences on child studies and is useful for researchers, planners and activists in their concerned fields.

Suguna Pathy

*Department of Sociology
South Gujarat University, Surat
Surat-395 007, Gujarat, INDIA*