



THE CONCERNED FOR
Working Children

Children and Democracy

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The word 'democracy' is very wide in its scope. How we interpret it determines its nature and implications. In the concept of a welfare state, people's participation and partnership provides the basis for democracy. Democracy embodies the participation of all the citizens. It should enable the equal, fearless and informed participation of all the people, including the most marginalised, without any discrimination. For this to happen, an environment that provided free access to the required knowledge, information, skills and structures should be created.

When we refer to 'people centred development', it is very crucial to note that now; children are a very important component of society even though they are also members of the community and citizens of the nation. When we recognise children as citizens, we also recognise their right to participate. They should be in a position to take part in designing programmes and decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives.

Once we accept that children have a right to participate, the most important questions we encounter are "How can children participate? Are they able to take decisions? Even though we concur with this theoretically, how does this translate in reality? In my opinion, this is a very big and important challenge for us.

It may be useful to look at some examples of children's participation to see how they have been able to impact on their communities.

In a few Panchayats of Karnataka State in India, children and adults decided to create, 'Makkala Panchayats'. These are Children's Councils, for, by and of children. These were created to facilitate children's participation. The adult Panchayats helped children to set up the Makkala Panchayats. The Makkala Panchayats list all problems faced by the community and develops plans to address them. Children first meet at the ward [sub village] level and later at the village level to discuss their issues. After compiling all their issues and problems, children present them to their Panchayats. Following this, they work closely with the Panchayats to develop the plans to address the issues raised by them. Some of their problems have been solved and plans are under way to address the others.

One of the significant things here is that children have acquired many skills and knowledge from adults. They have learnt to conduct surveys, analyse data, prioritise issues, disseminate information etc. Children now stand as role models in the community. In their Panchayats all information related to the Panchayats is easily accessible and comprehensible to children. Children not only use their information, they also regularly update it. In fact the adults of the Panchayats have also benefited immensely from the information generated by children.

India is a huge country. In many of our states, there are no local governments. In some places where they do exist, they have become the implementing agencies for the programmes and policies of the State or the National Government. They are only the instruments to identify beneficiaries for the different State and Central Schemes and to distribute what the higher governments hand down to them. They occasionally collect village level information as sought by the higher governments.

In our villages today, who are taking all the decisions? Who is deciding what kind of food should be distributed in our child care centres; what kind of education should be given in our schools; what materials should be used to construct our houses; what crop should be grown; and what form of water management do we need to put in place? Whoever they are, why are they making these decisions? On what basis? Through what processes?

Despite the fact that these decisions are most inappropriate to the people of the village or the community, the Local Governments are not in a position to challenge these decisions or to take their own decisions despite ours being a democratic country.

We see a similar situation at the National and International levels too. A careful observation about who are making the plans about working children, differently abled children, girls, or indigenous children, shows that they are people who are very far removed from the children they are talking about – and most certainly the concerned children themselves are no where in the picture. Those adults who are taking all the decisions about children are very often not directly involved with the children concerned. So they collect information from the adults who are. These adults in turn collect information from children and begin to represent the children and are sometimes involved in the decisions taken about children. This is not just true of children and child related issues, but of all issues related to marginalized groups, be it the farmers, the indigenous people or women.

In an International Conference on Working Children, when the adults, who are concerned about working children used terms like 'eradication of child labour' the child representatives who were present there protested against it. They said "we are not pests who need to be eradicated".

As people who work with the various affected groups, it is not sufficient if we sympathise with them. At times such sympathy can actually become dangerous. But if we facilitate the affected group to participate and are able to respect them and their realities, then our democratic base becomes meaningful.

The children we work with have proved time and time again that it is indeed possible for children to give a new dimension to democracy. Once In Mattihalli, a Panchayat in North Karnataka, during a meeting two children introduced themselves as the representatives of a particular ward at a meeting of the Makkala Panchayat. When asked for an explanation, they said that both of them had contested for the same post. One of them had been elected and the other had lost in the election. But the child who was elected as the representative of children decided to share her responsibilities with other and they are now working together. They support each other without the victory or the defeat coming in the way of their collaboration. They did compete with each other during the election, but now they work together for the welfare of the children of their community. Their contribution to develop a democratic base in their community is so unique.

Children often make many significant contributions, many of which cannot even be visualised by us adults. Experiments such as these are urgently needed to bring about the required changes in our systems today.

If globalisation and liberalisation do succeed in giving a new dimension to democracy, then it is a boom for the whole humanity. This challenge can be met only if every child, from all marginalised communities is able to represent him or herself on an equal footing. If the World Social Forum is able to facilitate marginalised groups and children to come together as representatives of their own organisations and movements, this will indeed be a milestone in our path towards strengthening democracy.

In order to achieve this, what is our role in ensuring that the power of information which is now vested in the top is seized by children and other marginalised groups? How can we ensure that the children and their communities acquire the tools and the skills to access and use information? What would be our role in order to make this transformation a reality?