



THE CONCERNED FOR
Working Children

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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A NEW VOICE IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Children's Organisations: Documenting the Future

Who are child labourers? What are the dreams and aspirations of these “seen but not heard” children whose work never ends, picking our streets clean of garbage, stitching our clothes, rolling our *beedis* and making the fireworks that bring joy to our Diwali celebrations? These working children help support our economy and maintain our productivity, especially as we try to compete with a global hierarchy of power. Living on the lowest rungs of this world ladder, they are the children no country wants to acknowledge, the children without a voice.

Yet these children do have a voice, and when these voices come together collectively, a fire is born: a fire that cannot be doused by indifference, apathy, and meaningless laws. The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) believes in nourishing this spirit, enabling children to come together to assert their identity, accessing adult power structures and information as well as demanding their innate rights as citizens. CWC has facilitated the convening of working children into two unique youth organisations located throughout the state of Karnataka in Southern India: *Bhima Sangha* and the *Makkala Panchayat*. The *Bhima Sangha* is an association of working children with a current membership of over 20,000 children and the *Makkala Panchayat* is a children's village council that is linked to the adult Panchayat¹, and therefore involved in determining public policy for entire communities. These two children's organisations work to support the continuous process of child participation, thus enhancing child protagonism and allowing for child-centred development and interventions.

However, the experiences and interventions of children's organisation are most often not documented in written form. As these children fight hard battles and face difficult challenges, most of their resources and energies are focused on their struggle. They do not have the time to document their organisational history, victories and defeats. As a result, most of this work is done by adults, from adult perspectives, and removed from the realities of children.

The history of working children is an oral and visual one. Stories and drawings capture the essence of their movement, however, the details are often not recorded, particularly information regarding children's strategies and enabling structures. Therefore, CWC and members of the *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayats*, through a project supported by the University of Victoria (UVIC) in Canada², addressed this gap in documentation by carrying out a comprehensive environmental scan of the “structures, processes, and agency” of children's organisations, specifically focusing on their own initiatives and achievements over the past decade. Using an innovative approach to documentary research, the children themselves were the primary researchers, gathering data and synthesising their findings to present an accurate and appropriate picture of their own organisational history as well as a potential future for social, political and economic development. The final report is available through CWC.

The Essence of Children's Movements

¹ The Gram Panchayat is the lowest level of administration in the system of local government. The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages and several Panchayats constitute a Taluq.

² *Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats; Chroniclers of Our Own History* (2003). Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats: Bangalore: UVIC.

While reading through these children's reports, one is immediately struck on how children focus on the 'here and now', allowing them to act quickly and efficiently to get things done. In many cases, they were able to complete tasks that adults had failed to accomplish. Whether it is actually getting out there and building schools and foot-bridges, or walking the streets to pick up plastics, children's strategies always involve an element of physical movement and action. As a result, others witness their strength and resolve, and this, in turn, mobilises others to participate. In other words, *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayats* are a visible force, creating concrete positive change and therefore further legitimising children's organisations.

In addition, children often credit other people as 'structures' that enable their participation. In their environmental scans, they almost always mention parents, family, and other community members as prominent 'structures' that supported their advocacy efforts and helped sustain their activities. Of course, owing to their minor status, children, in many cases, are dependent on adults, however, they also seem to possess a more genuine appreciation of people power than adults do. They see people and relationships rather than institutions and bureaucracy, and, perhaps, that is why they are able to get things done! In many cases, these children were able to sway the opinions of their adversaries, employers of working children, bringing them into the discussion rather than antagonising and alienating them. As a result, many of these individuals, even those who were exploiting children, came around and changed their behaviour and practices; changes of which many adults could not conceive. Children possess faith in people!

Children's strategies also take into account the health and well being of entire communities, including the natural environment around them. Although their efforts aim to better their own lives, they always take additional steps to ensure others in their villages benefit, as well, from their work. They've also taken the time to plant saplings and look after natural resources such as rivers and lakes, realising it is ultimately the Environment that supports community livelihoods. Community seems to be an essential ideal to these children, and they often do not separate themselves from the collective in their demands for social justice. By securing change for all, these children, in a major role-reversal, begin to be seen as 'experts' and 'activists' by adults. For example, in one case, teachers asked *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayat* members to assist them with a children's census. Witnessing how well the children completed their own surveys and disseminated their results to the entire Panchayat, the teachers turned to the experts for guidance and action.

So what is the essence of children's movements? Children's struggles involve action, people, the environment and community. They also involve developing and relying on their own organisations; a self-reliance that leads to more and more confidence to access the adult structures that dictate and assemble the walls around them. *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayat* members aim to break down these walls, and build a future that includes their needs, ideas, and voices.

Local and Global Children's Initiatives

The UVIC project reinforces the notion that if children are given information, allowed to own it, and allowed to employ it for their own endeavours, they will use it to better their own communities. *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayat* members are also involved in ongoing statistical surveys of their villages, during which they collect demographic data to be used for developing necessary interventions. Through this process, they also discover who needs water, electricity and rations, and they take this information to relevant government

departments to demand services. In addition, these children take time to produce their own media, such as the *Bhima Patrike*. This unique wall-paper provides an instrument for children to share their thoughts, connecting rural and urban children as well as disseminating information regarding health, the environment, economics, politics, global events, science and other issues relevant to working children. *Bhima Patrike* also acts as a vehicle for *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayats* to highlight their own victories in securing social change.

By gaining access to information and sharing it with others, the children of the *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayats* have not only empowered themselves but also disseminated the concepts of child participation and child protagonism to others in their region. Through their powerful voices, they have mobilised both children and adults to implement a variety of community improvements, from establishing appropriate education and health care for working children to developing infrastructure needs (water, electricity, lighting) for the entire village. As agents of change, these children are making their communities healthier, safer, and more accountable to children's needs.

However, this is not enough for these young people. *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayat* members also want to facilitate change in the lives of children world-wide by influencing international policy, championing child rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Specifically, they have prepared *Working Children's Reports*, monitoring the Indian government's observances of these protected civil liberties and reporting their findings to the United Nations in Geneva. They've also provided in-depth analyses of the political, economic, social, cultural, and geographical situations effecting members from different regions in Karnataka. This political commitment to working children everywhere continues to this day, with many *Bhima Sangha* and *Makkala Panchayat* representatives attending international conferences all over the world to speak their minds and address their own needs as citizens of a global community. Above all, these citizens, as CWC says, "are their own first line of defence," creating and documenting their own strategies and opportunities based on their own desires and needs. By coming together to demand knowledge and information, children and young adults possess the capacity to not only fulfil their own dreams and aspirations but also to bring about a greater future for all.

In *Our Story Our Dreams*, Nagaraj Kolkere, current *Namma Sabha*³ president and founding president of *Bhima Sangha*, articulates his own experience as a child worker to an international audience. He adroitly correlates the root causes of child labour to a global economic system that has undermined and ravaged traditional and sustainable ways of life and sent millions of children to the cities for work. In order to rectify this, he argues, a new development scheme needs to be constructed; one that addresses the local needs of communities and includes the participation of children at all levels.

It is only when our participation happens equally from village to city to the global level, that we can build a new society. I dream of building a society where children and adults can together participate, where there is a growing concern about the environment, and which is based on decentralisation, where there is no discrimination between men and women, creed, language and caste, where there is equal distribution of

³An association of youth, composed of artisans, crafts persons and others engaged in various occupations, founded by ex-*Bhima Sangha* members.

*wealth, where everybody's basic facilities are met, a world full of peace and abundance.*⁴

Kolkere's eloquent words demonstrate the crucial need for children and young adults to have access to comprehensive social, political and economic information: information allowing them to enter and negotiate with the global power structures that continue to ignore young voices. Voices that remind us, everyday, that young people are able to envision and carry out social change that is ultimately inclusive, peaceful and just.

⁴ Kolkere, Nagaraj. *Our Story Our Dreams; Micro and Macro Influences on Child Labour*. Presented at the Urban Childhood Conference, Trondheim, Norway, June 1997, pg. 11.