

G.K. Lieten, Anup K. Karan and Anoop K. Satpathy: Children, School and Work. New Delhi: Institute for Human Development and Amsterdam: Irewoc, 2005, 172 pp (16 €).

Over the last years, children have received more attention than before. The United Nations in 1989 adopted the Child Rights Convention. That document in very clear terms established that children have special rights to protection and special rights to development. The Government of India had taken active part in the preparation of that convention and acted swiftly to ratify it.

One principle is that children should not be exploited as child labourers but should all be going to school.

Another principle is that children should not receive corporal punishment but should be talked to; their opinion should be known to the adults and the adults should guide them and enlighten them, not hurt them.

Also, children should not be considered as servants and as incomplete beings, but as young person in their own rights with a need for respect, for identity for development, without discrimination on the basis of gender, religion or caste.

All this is in the Child Rights Convention, and governments together with civil society organisations have taken great strides in putting these principles into practice.

The CRC talks about rights. Seeing children not only in terms of needs but also in terms of rights therefore means that adults should try to understand the world from the perspective and from the feelings of the children. Children in their own way will react to what adults do to them and to the ways in which society discriminates them.

Adults may not see harm in how they deal with children, but it would be good to find out how children themselves are experiencing it. Beating children, or making them to work long hours in the households, or to make them work as labourers may be seen by adults as good for the children. It may not be seen by children in the same way

This book '*Children, School and Work. Glimpses from India*', which has been written by the IREWOC director and his two Indian counterparts on the basis of intensive fieldwork, shows in detail how the children have ideas about the world and about the adults.

The authors have gone into eight villages and slum areas in different parts of the country and have documented what children are doing. By staying with the children, they have learned to look at the world through the eyes of the children and that is an exiting experience. Altogether they have documented the childhood in around 2100 households and have thereafter closely followed 45 children for a couple of days and made a very detailed description of what they do and how they think.

The description of the daily lives of the poorest children in the poorest families reveals what the outside world usually does not know. Yet the outside world is always commenting and even judging on the behaviour of poor people and sometimes policies are developed without having a prior knowledge of the motives of the poor people and of the circumstances in which they live.

It is often said that poor parents do not understand the importance of education for their children and that that they rather send them to work. It is also often said that working and learning proper skills for poor children may be better than sending them to school and that the mainstream education any way does not suit their needs.

The detailed picture of the daily lives of these children as they are represented in this book belies these views. Education is seen by them as an absolute necessity if the girl or boy wants to grow up as a normal citizen of this society. They learn to read and write and they learn good behaviour as well as new ideas. They learn ideas about gender equality, about secularism about health and environment. The schools in the villages may not be as good as the elite schools, but the children are getting a small opportunity of learning about modern life and development, which they otherwise would never do. These are the reasons why the parents and the children, even in remote and poverty-stricken villages know how important education is.

And children, this study brings out clearly, in school also find a separate space of togetherness, of play and of protected childhood which they

cannot find somewhere else. The worst thing that may happen to a child is not to be able to go to school and meet with all the other children of their age with which they can play and laugh and learn.

That is why we find many children of poor families in school, but also, unfortunately, still too many are not in school. Sometimes child labour is the reason why children do not go to school. This is generally the case in families which had been struck by diseases and deaths of the father or mother. There is one example in the book of thirteen years old girl who runs on entire household after both the parents committed suicide. Child labour, the case studies in the book tell us, is usually not a conscious decision. Children work because they have to. The alternative for these children, that is not working and going to school does not exist. At a young age, they have become responsible for their own survival and of that of their family.

Anti child labour policies should focus on the needs of these children particularly. Material support should be given. It is because of poverty and not because of wrong ideas that there is still a child labour problem.

Still too many children are not in school. In the villages that have been studied in this book, close to 40 per cent of the children had never been in school or had dropped out. Most of these children are not child labourers. They are just hanging around or one doing some odd jobs in and around the household. That actually is what practically all the children are doing they are busy from early morning till late in the evening. They have an unfathomable source of energy and a dedication to help out in the household. Both boys and girls throughout the day and outside school hours are collecting water, cleaning the house, looking after the cattle, cutting grass, looking after siblings assisting in the shops of their parents. They fully cooperate in the social life of the family.

All these children are active, they know their responsibilities and they help the family unit to function and to survive. For them it is part of growing up, of learning skills and of helping out.

This energy of the children could be tapped properly. They like to go to school and to learn. They want to have a better future for themselves but they also have much ideas about development and they have hopes for a better world. The children of which case studies have been made believe in equality and equal rights of all the people and one would only wish that they take these ideas into the future.

When discussing new policies of dealing with universal education and with the eradication of child labour, it is important to know what exactly is happening with the children for whom the policies are intended. *'Children, School and Work. Glimpses from India'* provides valuable insights which help to understand who these children are, what they are doing, how they are thinking, and thus also, how they can participate in a child centered development policies.