

Rights of child

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The government had to present its first report early in the year to the concerned UN Committee under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The reporting, and the criticism it met at the hands of the experts in Geneva, brought the issue into some limelight at home and caused some serious thinking to be done over various aspects of it. Other than that there was little evidence during the year of the state's or society's learning to 'put the child first'. The rights of the child in respect of its survival, development, protection and participation were still to become a conscious goal.

Survival

The rate of infant mortality remained one of the highest in the world. Every tenth child died within the first year of its birth. The official claim was that the average was brought down to one in 20 during the year.

Survival remained a hazard even up to five years of age. As easily preventable a disease as diarrhoea took away 300,000 of the under-5, and pneumonia another 250,000. There was clearly insufficiency of elementary effort. While even Zambia and Bhutan provided up to 90% of their child population with oral rehydration therapy (ORT) consisting of administration of simple salts, the coverage here was no more than 34%. Undernourishment afflicted as many as 10 million of the children of various age-groups. 20% of child deaths occurred from malnutrition.

Immunisation had fallen by 20% in the first three years of the 90s leading to increased deaths in 1993 from measles (63,000) and neo-natal tetanus (27,000). The casualty rate came down in 1994, but not remarkably. Shoddiness and corruption in the execution of the immunisation programme (such as in repeated use of the same syringe) was one apparent reason.

Liver diseases among children were reported on the rise with 5% to 10% of them affected during the year. A survey conducted in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and Quetta showed that over 70% of urban infants suffered from iodine deficiency disorders, which, among other things, hampered mental development. Vitamin A deficiency caused eyesight impairment to a quarter million children. Pakistan was also one of the worst affectees of polio: every fifth polio victim of the world was a Pakistani.

Some regressive measures were taken in these areas. It was promised that by the end of 1995 all salts would be iodised, oil and ghee began to be fortified with Vitamin A, and the first phase of immunisation against polio carried out during the year covered 97% of the child population.

It was also decided to train a fleet of 33,000 female village health workers. They were meant to familiarise families with pre-

ventive health care measures and help married couples decide on planning the size of their families. Publicity campaign was stepped up to spread the family planning message. Just about 12% of the couples were practising the methods against the regional average of 40%.

Development

Education

Insufficient access of education to children continued to be the main factor against their proper development in terms of awareness, skill and mental growth.

Six million children of school-going age were not going to any school. Half of those who were at school dropped out during the year. The average period of primary schooling of a Pakistani child remained just two years, which was one of the world's lowest.

The expenditure on education was raised in 1994, but it still remained at just 9% of total government expenditure.

The Punjab government was preparing a bill to make primary education compulsory in the province. It was hard to see how it could enforce this in practice. It did not have enough schools even for the half of the child population wanting to be educated. It gave no clue of how it would muster the resources for the other half.

The Eighth Five-Year Plan's objective of universalising primary education in less than a decade, by the year 2002, seemed on last year's showing likely to go the way of similar resolves of each of the earlier plans.

The opportunities available for secondary and higher levels of education and in relations to professional and vocational training shrank even more in relation to demand.

Some concern was shown on behalf of handicapped children. A start was made towards a special centre for handicapped children in Nawabshah. This would provide both model schooling for handicapped children and model training for their teachers. Appropriate recreation, treatment and diagnostic services and parent counselling were also to be set up. Seven such centres were planned. The National Institute of Special Education in Karachi also arranged for training workshops for teachers and parents of handicapped children.

Kidnapping, trafficking abuse

The incidence of kidnapping in 1994 was not as high as in 1993, but the average was still over ten cases a day. Less than half of them were recorded by the police. There was an increased tendency in the thana to register a case only after, and if, recovery had occurred.

Kidnapping, when it was not simply for ransom, had two main motives, either sexual abuse or trafficking for proposes of sexual and labour exploitation.

Cases of sexual abuse remained high.

In a survey of a few police stations of Faisalabad district, an average of three children a month of 5-9 years of age were recorded as having been assaulted and left unconscious and bleeding or stung and dead in that one small part of the country.

The serais (doss-houses) at inter-city bus stops also served as male brothels. The Adda Pir Vedhai in Islamabad was one active centre. It had different names and rates for varying age-groups of boys, who mostly came from Hazara, Mansehra, Abbottabad and Azad Kashmir. Once trapped the boys could not break away from the trade. Many were found quietly buried after they had died of excessive abuse.

A UNICEF survey revealed that there were 40,000 Bengali children in the city put into sex trade. Auctions took place at railway stations in Karachi and the prices were often in the region of Rs. 2,000 for a boy and Rs. 4,000 for a girl.

Despite UAE's banning use of children as jockeys in camel races, smuggling of children for the purpose was still apparently going on. Three of a gang were once arrested at Lahore airport waiting to board a Dubai flight with three children of 6 and 7 years of age. The documents showed that the children were destined for the races. In another instance, one Tasleem Pathan was caught in Kotri kidnapping five drugged children of 8-10 years in his van to Rahimyar Khan, a starting point of much of the Gulf smuggling of the past.

Child labour

The child's right to participation was realised in an inverted form - through the child being put to labour on a large scale. The estimate of the working child is often disputed, but the figure was doubtless in the region of 10 million, which included besides brick-kiln workers and carpet-weavers, all those in the informal sector, working in small workshops, restaurants and as domestic servants. Nearly 40% of these were in the 10-14 year age-group. But in the brick-kilns, the under-14 constituted a clear majority.

Evidence abounded that the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act of 1992 and the Employment of Children Act of 1991, which regularised the hours and conditions of work of children, remained largely unenforced. Vigilance committees were set up in some of the districts to ensure that bonded labour no longer existed, but it transpired that many of the persons named to these committees were influential people, MNAs, MPAs and even brick-kiln owners. It was a case of setting a thief to catch a thief. In the event none was caught.

In November 1993 a foreign and a local NGO accompanied by a magistrate found 300 children of

4 to 10 years of age working in poor conditions in a Kasur carpet factory for 9 to 10 hours a day in return for advances of Rs. 500 to Rs. 10,000 made to their parents or guardians. That case went before the Supreme Court.

* In April 1994, HRCP's own survey revealed carpet-making workplaces with upto to two-thirds of the workers consisting of persons, mostly girls, under 14 years of age.

* Surveys of carpet factories in Thar and of mines in NWFP and Balochistan also showed components of children in the main or peripheral labour force.

* Three minors of 5, 8 and 9 years of age once escaped from carpet-weaving bondage in Karachi and were finally delivered by the police to the Edhi centre.

* Drug traffickers commonly used children as drug carriers within the country. The practice was found to be routine in Peshawar where children were paid Rs. 50 to Rs. 150 per trip depending upon the length of the out-station journey.

* In a raid on a nut-and-bolt factory in Lahore a magistrate found five children of 8 to 12 years of age packing plastic bags. They said that they worked for nine hours a day and were each paid Rs. 800 per month.

Government promised a new legislation to check child labour and a permanent commission on children. But the ruling coalition shot down an opposition move in the parliament to raise the minimum working age from 14 to 16.

Breach of principles

The country was in common breach of some of the basic principles required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to govern the treatment of the child.

(i) Non-discrimination

Discrimination was widespread, whether conscious or customary, systemic or a result of historical circumstances. It occurred on the basis of gender, religion, geography.

The girl child was discriminated against by the family, by society and by the state.

Within the family, preference for the male child remained strong. The girl was a lesser being, good for the second best, and put to home chores according to, often in excess of, her age and capacity to cope. The incidence of under-nourishment, disease and mortality was higher among the female than the male children. The proportion of the girl child declined in the higher age-groups. Pakistan was one of the few countries of the world where women were fewer than men: they constituted a little over 47% of the population.

Society discriminated against the girl child through customs and attitudes that kept them segregated, afforded them unequal opportunities and freedom for development, and considered marriage rather than career or culti-