

Child rights activists appeal to citizens to Vote for the future of ALL of children in India

Let's vote against violence with impunity, cuts in funding of food, child care, education and killing in the name of religion and cow-vigilantism.

The upcoming election is crucial for the future of children in India, who are in a state of crisis.

Our Constitution guarantees all children the right to early childhood care, nourishment and education, equal opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. The constitution also promises protection to our children and youth from violence and exploitation, from being abused or forced by economic necessity to enter occupations unsuited to their age or strength.

There is no doubt that in the last five years, there has been a massive erosion of these Constitutional rights and of the wellness of India's children. Violence against India's children has increased disturbingly, while funds to support the basic needs of the most marginalized children has significantly decreased. Crime against children has risen by 16.39% between 2014 and 2016. Union Budgets for children have declined from 4.76% of the total allocations in 2012-13 to 3.25 % in 2019-20.

Child protection: In 2016, the Global Slavery Index reported that India leads the world in modern slavery, sex and labour trafficking. Children from vulnerable and marginalized groups have never been so insecure. Intolerance is being promoted actively. These children live in fear. Not only do they suffer from malnourishment, hunger and exploitation, have grossly inadequate childcare, and no practical access to education, increasingly children are victims of targeted and extreme violence like rape and cow lynching.

As horrifying as it sounds, rapes of children have increased by 82%. Equally horrifying is the fact that many of the child rapists continue to enjoy impunity, especially if the victims are Muslim, Dalit or OBC, as illustrated by the Kathua, Unnao and Muzzafarpur shelter home cases. Cow vigilantes have killed with impunity a 12-year-old Muslim boy traveling to an animal fair in Jharkhand and two other Muslim children in Dadri found with two buffaloes in their truck. The 12-year old was beaten to death and hung from a tree. The Hindutva fanatical rapists and murderers have been protected and defended simply because of their party and religious affiliation.

In the meanwhile, the introduction of death penalty for the rapists of children has put them in greater danger. Half of India's children are sexually abused. Research demonstrates that very often those who abuse the children are family members or care-givers, Thanks to the death penalty, they often silence the children with great brutality, sometimes even murdering them, to conceal evidence.

On top of that a clause was introduced in the Child Labour (Prohibition) Act of 2016 allowing child labour in "family enterprises and audio-visual entertainment," making at risk children more vulnerable.

In another regressive measure, the Juvenile Justice Act was amended to allow for children, between the ages of 16 and 18, to be tried as adults in case of heinous offences. Research shows, putting children into the criminal justice system further criminalizes them. Child rights activists and international children organizations say these children need education and an opportunity to reform and rehabilitation.

Education: The chances of a disadvantaged child fighting for a better future are being further smothered as free schools are being shut down and scholarships for higher education are being de-funded. Budgets for post matric scholarship scheme for SCs has been reduced by 60%; for girls' hostel for SCs by 40.32 %; for post matric scholarship for OBCs by 17.35% and boys and for girls' hostel for OBCs by 40%.

History and science text books have been rewritten and now blatantly misrepresent historical facts by replacing them with Hindutva-inspired myths. Textbooks and courses are re-enforcing regressive gender stereotypes. Girls are being groomed in some schools and universities to be “trained” in wifehood rather than career aspirations. In a Madhya Pradesh university, a three-month course on wifehood was introduced last year. A recent report by World Bank reveals that educated girls are dropping out of the work force because they are being groomed to aspire for marriage first. A BJP candidate in Rajasthan even promises to legalise child marriage if elected.

Nutrition and childcare: 38% of children under age five years are stunted; 21 % of children under age five years are wasted, and 36% of children under age five are underweight –all signs of malnutrition and hunger. An estimated 8,143 crèches have closed between 2013-14 and 2016-17, and the number of women and children benefiting from the National Crèche Scheme have been cut by 39% (from 474, 775 to 290,925). Anganwadi workers who cook and care for millions of children as part of the Integrated Child Development Services, the world's largest infant and pregnant mother nutrition program, are paid *one-tenth* of the legal minimum wage. They recently went on strike saying that the government wants to replace the food cooked by them with packaged products made by MNCs. They have not been given food supplements for the last year in many states.

May we take a moment to remind our nation that children have rights as citizens of India, to equality, to personal liberty and due process of law; to nutrition and health and education; to being protected from being trafficked and forced into bonded labour and of course the right of minorities and of weaker sections to be protected from discrimination, social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

Any attempt to demand better for our children is side-lined. We want this to change. We don't want children to be raped, forced to work, not go to school, neglected or be discriminated against. We want resources and measures for education, child care, and child protection. Most of all, we want our children safeguarded and their rights as equal citizens of India to be protected.

Let's vote for all rights for ALL children. India's four hundred and eighty million children deserve better. They can't vote today, you can.

Let's vote for love, not hate.

Sources: National Crime Records Bureau, Global Slavery Index, Government of India- Statements of Union Budget, HAQ-Centre for Child Rights, UNICEF

****Signatures as of 10-11 April, 2019 – Will be Updated as More to Come****

1. Ruchira Gupta, The Last Girl & Apne Aap
2. Enakshi Ganguly, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights
3. Ananya Chakravorty, West Bengal Commission for the Protection of Child Rights
4. Vibhuti Patel, TISS
5. Nandana Sen, Children's book writer
6. Ruchira Goswami, NUJLS
7. Satya Gopal Dey, Vikramshila Education Resource Society
8. Ayush Sharda, Ek Packet Umeed
9. Bappaditya Mukhopadhyay, Prantakatha
10. Prabir Basu, SPAN
11. Sneha Sharma, Centre for Child Rights, CNLU
12. Joyatri Ray, child rights activist
13. Tinku Khanna, Apne Aap
14. Cynthia Stephen,
15. Victor Raj, Campaign against Child Labour
16. Ishita Mukherjee,
17. Nalini Kant, Manavi
18. Sunil Jha, child rights activist
19. PK Sharma, Centre Direct,
20. Miguel Das Queah
21. Razia Ismail Grover, India Alliance for Child Rights
22. Saif Mehmood Khan, Writer and lawyer
23. Nicole Rangel Menezes, Lehar
24. Preeti Agarwal Mehta
25. Nikhil Kumar
26. Shaaz Ahmed
27. Arlen Manoharan, Bangalore
28. Robert Dequadros, Social activist
29. Kalpana Purushothaman, Psychologist,
30. Mehran Siddique, Social Activist
31. Antara Deb Sen, Writer