

URBAN POOR  
AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

*A discussion paper*

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INTRODUCTION

*For a long time, the special needs and problems of the children of the urban poor in developing countries have tended to be neglected, since they have been lumped together with the rural poor, or with all urban groups.*

In what ways does the environment of the urban child of the poor differ from that of the rural one, and how does this affect his growth and development? Is there in fact a special problem, other than that of poverty in general, and does it call for special solutions? What attempts have been made so far to deal with these and with what effects? What are the implications for the future? The following pages will attempt very briefly to elucidate some of these issues.

URBAN AND RURAL POOR

In assessing the economic and social status of the urban poor, it may be useful to consider them as within either the "organised" or the "unorganised" sector.

*The urban proletariat includes, especially in the large industrial and commercial centres, ports and railway towns, etc., the more settled "blue-collar" workers employed in the organised sector, public or private. This group which has often been resident in the city for more than one generation, is more affluent, better educated, with more secure income, often housed in industrial estates, and with access to certain minimum medical and educational facilities. Some of them can be categorised as lower middle-class, while others belong to the upper strata of the poor. This distinction is important in view of evidence which shows that existing services are generally monopolised by the upper strata.*

On the other hand, the really poor belong to the unorganised sector and are usually rural migrants with more or less strong ties to the village home. They tend to work in petty trades and unskilled occupations, to be self-employed or employed in small shops and business, with insecure jobs and uncertain incomes, living in various

kinds of crowded shanty-towns, huts, or other euphemistically described "unauthorised colonies". Some even live on the sidewalks. From the economic standpoint, the factors which affect the child most under conditions of extreme poverty are not only the congested living conditions, poor nutrition, poor sanitation and subsequent propensity to disease, but even more so, the insecurity of economic environment.

From the point of view of the child, three other factors, vitally affecting development, are the large proportion of urban mothers who are working, the predominance of the nuclear family, and the phenomenon of child labour. Each of these needs a little comment.

In rural areas too, women in the lower economic strata are obliged to work, and it is a widely observed phenomenon that the nuclear family is more common as one proceeds down the economic scale. But in the rural occupations, the family as a unit has a greater chance to live and work, and it is a widely observed phenomenon that the nuclear family is more common as one proceeds down the economic scale. But in the rural occupations, the family as a unit has a greater chance to live and work and move together, with the mother often keeping the children close to her while working in the fields or forests. The nature of urban female occupations rarely allows for this. Women are mostly employed as domestic servants, hawkers and vendors, sweepers, unskilled labour (if at all they are employed outside their homes) servicing, in other words, the more affluent sections of the urban population. This obliges them often to travel long distances and to be away from home at odd hours, and this leads to unavoidable neglect of the children.

Child labour, in the exploitive sense, is again a phenomenon that is more associated with the urban areas. With the exception of certain cottage industries which are dependent on children, child labour in rural areas usually refers to helping with the family tasks. Children are usually assigned such tasks as grazing cattle, looking after animals, fetching fuel and water, running errands, caring for young children and household chores. While this may often involve heavy work, it nevertheless carries the compensation of some dignity, freedom and responsibility which comes with being an active contributing member of the family economy. Children can take pride and pleasure in this work and learn some skills, though they are usually not paid for it.

*In urban areas, fewer tasks of this sort need to be done (with the exception of baby-minding as an occupation for girls), and more children have to help the family by working, again in the unorganised sector, and again for an exploitative wage. The urban child is caught up in a vicious triangle. Hazardous health conditions in the squalor and misery of slums, poverty, lack of health care as a result of the ignorance and illiteracy of parents, and the insecurity and hardship of life form one side of this triangle; the lack of adequate adult care, protection and guidance which can be attributed to the nuclear family and the absence of both parents and older siblings from the home is the second side; the third side is the social and cultural milieu of the slums.*

### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MILIEU OF SLUMS

Studies of slums have revealed the close ties and groupings formed on the basis of kinship, language, regional origin, caste, etc.; the tendency to cling to one's own is naturally strengthened in the alien ocean of the big city. With length of residence and economic improvement, these sometimes grow into formal organisations and even develop political affiliations; in the more elementary state, there is merely the huddling together for security and comfort of those who share a common misery.

The slum is an enclosed world with its own rules and regulations, its own outlets and channels for social relationships, its own cohesiveness, structures and priorities.

*The child, no less than the adult, is confined within this small suffocating world with its limited aspirations, knowledge and potential for growth. Ignorance, apathy, mobility, drift, illiteracy and distrust have led to the phenomenon that slum dwellers do not make full use even of the available urban amenities. Studies in Bombay have revealed the appalling extent to which slum mothers were unaware of the health care and other facilities available for preschool children. A similar situation prevails with regard to the poorest in the rural areas also.*

### EXTRA BURDEN OF THE URBAN POOR CHILD

In some ways, where the poor are concerned the distinction, in the commonly accepted sense, "urban-rural" has little meaning, since so many of the urban poor are "rural" in so many senses. Yet when one considers the extra burdens on the child of the urban poor, summarised so far, there does seem to be a special problem. But the rural child has the advantage of plentiful space, fresh air and some amount of freedom, especially in the earlier years, to explore the world in his own way and is free from the pressures of overriding squalor.

*In addition - in urban areas, there are several other potentially damaging elements - exposure to mass media, the ubiquitous film, poster, radio and magazine is one of them. While this gives wider knowledge and the quick response typical of the urban street urchin, the presence of stimuli alone is not sufficient for development, and sensory over-stimulation can be counter-productive.*

Simultaneously there is exposure to the glaring inequalities, the contrast between rich and poor which is so much more obvious in the urban setting, and which cannot but set up psychological tensions and frustrations in the child's mind.

The urban child is also exposed to the dangers and temptations

of urban living - the possibility of making quick money through various means, the lure of financial independence and the easily turned but dishonest penny, the numerous attractive consumer items to spend it on, etc. On the other hand, in the congested surroundings of a slum, he is often obliged to watch at close range illicit and criminal activities of all sorts.

Allied to the lack of roots in the traditional culture and social structure, the wider family network and the rural recreations on the one hand, is the cultural barrenness of slums on the other - the lack of healthy recreation, of space, the absence of any sort of constructive activity or learning. The developmental consequences of being reared in such an environment are naturally alarming.

At the moment, it is sufficient to note that under conditions of equivalent poverty, as measured in the purely economic sense, the urban child may be much worse off than the rural child. However, this recognition has been late in coming.

#### OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMMES BENEFITTING THE URBAN POOR CHILD

Relating the currently available programmes in many countries to the developmental needs and problems of children in urban slums, a vast chasm appears to exist between the two.

*The three outstanding characteristics of all the programmes described so far are:*

- (1) Inadequacy - in sheer quantitative terms.*
- (2) Inappropriateness - whether this is seen in terms of the imitation of foreign models, application of models suited to rural areas, or even sheer inadequacy of response in devising programmes based on needs, the same conclusion emerges.*
- (3) Fragmentation - the single service in response to a single need, theoretically isolated from out of the interwoven web of needs - has led to the provision of a large number of diversified services, each operated by a different agency with little or no coordination, and each by definition incapable of even effectively fulfilling its own ostensible purpose unless suitably backed up by other services.*

What are the implications of these findings? What criteria can we evolve for appropriate programmes for children?

#### THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Academic interest in this area has been very limited and few studies, especially of an evaluative type, have been made in developing countries.

However, studies made elsewhere have had some impact. In the sixties, with the coming of Project Headstart and the subsequent War on Poverty Programmes of U.S.A. considerable interest was aroused and eagerness for similar intervention programmes grew. The early programmes in the U.S.A. were based on a middle-class approach, and stressed the various limitations of the so-called "deprived" child of urban poverty, but shortly afterwards the famous "deficit-versus-difference" controversy arose which is still inspiring debate.

At present, inter-disciplinary researches and the pervasive influence of anthropological and sociological approaches tend to favour the "difference" theory. However, in India, the few studies emanating from the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and one or two universities stick firmly to the "deficit" approach and support the middle-class norm as the ideal against which all other groups should be measured. (1)

Thus school achievement and I.Q. frequency counts of vocabulary, etc., are accepted as valid measures and are not seen to be circular arguments in nature. In the area of language development, there are no published micro-studies on the process of language development in various environmental settings. Again, in cognitive development, the extent of stimulation has received more emphasis than the nature of personal interactions.

*A valid model of compensatory education, even if based on the "deficit" theory, would need to study the following factors:*

*(a) stimulation-response, and the role of over-stimulation in the environment of urban slums;*

*(b) information processing or cognitive and learning strategies in the child, and the extent to which they varied with the nature of child-rearing and adult interaction, especially in fostering in the child:*

*(i) a sense of order and rationality in the universe, an essential component of the scientific attitude; and*

*(ii) a sense of power and control over the physical and social environment, an essential component in promoting self-confidence, competence and a positive attitude to life.*

How far do these exist under the conditions of urban slum living?

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(1) R.N. Rath, "Teaching and Learning Problems of Disadvantaged Children", Presidential Address, 12th Annual Conference of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, Bhubaneswar, December 1974; A.K. Singh, "Social Disadvantage, Intelligence and Educational Achievement", paper presented at the 14th Annual Conference of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, December 1976; R. Muralidharan and U. Banerjee, "Language Development of K.G. Children in relation to their Parental Occupations", *Indian Educational Review*, 1973.

How far can they be brought about by intervention programmes? Drawing on both Indian and other researches (1) one may indicate the importance of the following:

(a) *Continuity and reinforcement* in programmes for effectiveness. Short-term intervention is easily wiped out and leaves little trace;

(b) *A multiple or integrated approach.* Fragmented programmes are probably not only ineffective but also wasteful in terms of cost-benefit. Numerous examples could be given, but two will suffice. A nutrition programme, or a curative health programme, is likely to be ineffective unless combined with each other and supported by deworming, pure drinking water, immunisation, prevention of communicable diseases, development of sound health habits, family planning, etc. Similarly, preschool education is likely to be ineffective unless it is carefully organised to provide experiences supportive of the various cognitive and developmental growth points, for several hours a day and is extended over a period of several years, with continuous reinforcement. In other words, a full-day programme which is provided over several years, including the conventional years of primary education, is necessary to achieve the "take-off". Anything else is mere tinkering;

(c) *relevance of content*, firmly basing the programme on needs;

(d) *quality* which is of vital importance in any compensatory programme. Any sort of mere doling out of services in a routine manner is unlikely to make a dent. In this context, the routine, impersonal and mechanical nature of most of the Governmental programmes (whether it is doling out food in supplementary nutrition centres, or formal routine teaching in large classes as found in State primary schools) may be of little help.

*Summing up, one may list the four major criteria of intervention programmes aimed at the children of the urban poor as:*

(a) *relevance of content, both to the Indian situation broadly and to the particular situation of urban slums;*

(b) *quality of the highest order, to counter the pressures and problems on the child in such a situation;*

(c) *a strategy of multiple or integrated services touching the life of the child at various points and involving the adults closest to him;*

(d) *continuity and reinforcement over a period of years to enable some impact to be made.*

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(1) Unesco, *Review of Research and Pedagogical Considerations, in New Approaches to Education of Children of Preschool Age* (Bangkok, September 1978).

One may once more point out the success of small scale agencies in the voluntary sector, in meeting these criteria. This cannot be dismissed by the use of words like "dedication" and "commitment"; it is no magic but a valid and replicable model created by a steadfast application of sound principles of education, management organisation allied to hard work, clear perception of goals and an appreciation of the need for human resource development.

*The importance of personnel, their recruitment training, motivation and continuous development in response to the needs of the situation cannot be over-emphasized. A glance at the programmes of agencies which have had some success in the field would show the vital role played by personnel and their training, using the same criteria of relevance, quality, continuity and integration. The official attitude to personnel, which matches, in its lack of concern, the official attitude to the child, is short-sighted in this respect.*

#### CONCLUSION

Studies of partial programmes now in existence have shown that the prerequisites for success are high quality and an integrated and comprehensive approach on a long-term and continuing basis.

Half-measures will not do and are wasteful in cost-benefit terms. Examples exist to show that such programmes are possible and can meet the needs effectively. To replicate these models on a larger scale, we have the expertise, the resources, the models.

For if in urban areas we have large concentrations of poverty and squalor with all their concomitants, we also have clusters of talent, human and material resources and adequate funds, which can be harnessed to the cause.

If programmes for children are seen as developmental inputs for the future rather than as welfare and relief measures to stave off immediate disaster, then in turn investment in training will be viewed as an essential human resource development measure. Only such a change of perspective can stimulate work of the kind and amount that is needed.

*If there has been a low political commitment to children so far, it is partly a reflection of low public awareness and concern for children. The urban problem, for all its size, is still of a manageable order where voluntary agencies can take the lead in developing effective programmes and prodding the political leadership into supportive action. For the children of the urban poor, there are special problems and needs but there are also special opportunities.*