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January 2026 Edition



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# Editor's Note



*Wishing all our readers a very warm and hopeful New Year.*

As we step into 2026, the social sector stands at an important moment. Childhood today is being shaped by forces that are constant and often unnoticed. Screens. Social media. Continuous digital presence. This is where Clear Cut finds its purpose. We try to slow things down. To look closely. And to bring evidence and lived experience back into public conversations.

The January edition places children at the centre. Not as symbols or numbers, but as real lives shaped every day at home, in schools, in public systems, and online. Our cover story looks at how constant connectivity is changing children's inner worlds. It explores anxiety, self-image, attention, and emotional tiredness. This is not about fear or blame. It is about noticing what we are slowly accepting as normal.

We also examine how systems respond when children need protection the most. The Policy Analysis focuses on the POCSO Act. The law is strong in intent, but its implementation often falls short. The article asks what justice feels like for a child moving through legal processes. In our Policy Champion section, we feature Amod Kanth, whose life's work reminds us that care, compassion, and rehabilitation must guide child justice.

This edition also brings together varied voices and ideas. A Tête a Tête with Priti Mahara reflects on leadership and accountability. A Deep Dive looks at how habits form early in life. Articles from culture, philanthropy, grassroots work, and play based STEM learning widen how we understand childhood today.

At Clear Cut, our intent remains simple. To ask better questions. To stay grounded. And to keep children visible in policy, practice, and public thought.

Regards,

Paresh Kumar

# CLEAR CUT

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Declaration

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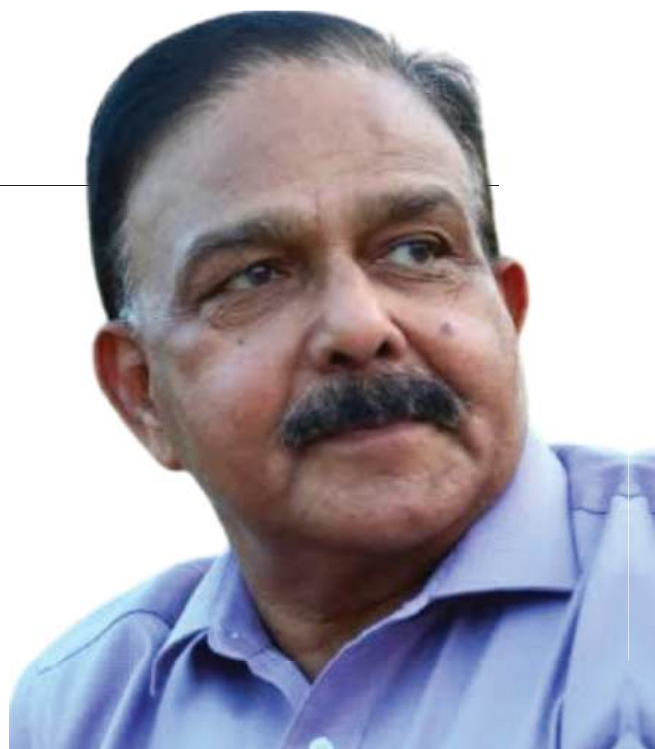
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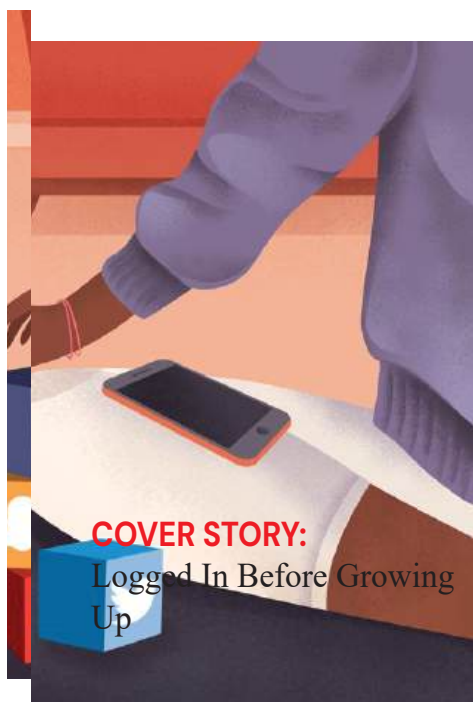
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# Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to express my sincere appreciation for the November 2025 edition of Clear Cut Media, which I had the pleasure of receiving on the 15th at the Devi Awards in New Delhi.

The magazine is a marvel of insightful journalism and striking design. The articles are both engaging and thought provoking, and the cover story, “The Great India Balancing Act” by Ms. Rajni Singh, stood out for its depth and relevance. I also wish to commend the entire editorial and production team for the high quality of the content and the impressive graphics throughout the issue.

Please extend my compliments to the authors and all the staff whose dedication made this edition possible. I look forward to many more inspiring publications in the future and wish the team continued success.

Thank you for your excellent work.  
Warm regards,  
Amit Gupta  
Business Leader & Humanitarian

“Thanks Clear Cut Team for nudging on this very serious issue facing our children. It’s a national shame that even after 78 years of independence we are still fighting malnutrition. Yes, this is not charity but an investment in the human capital of the country.

We need to really make a big noise and keep amplifying it to ensure quality implementation of nutrition programmes on the one hand and strict enforcement of FSSAI guidelines to curb the unlimited profits being made by FMCG companies by feeding HFSS foods to our children.”

By: Vidya Raghavan

“Dear Manas sir, Clear representation of public crisis. Our political system must act in well do get actual normalization for all strata of society...”

By: Dr Balasubramanian Mohan

“Excellent web site you’ve got here.. It’s hard to find high quality writing like yours nowadays.

I really appreciate individuals like you! Take care!!”

By: Anonymous

## WHAT THE WORLD'S TALKING ABOUT

**World Bank to partner with global vaccine group Gavi with \$2 billion funding**



**December 10, 2025:** Gavi, the global public–private vaccine alliance, plays a critical role in protecting the world’s most vulnerable populations by vaccinating over half of the poorest children against life-threatening diseases. Recently, the organization announced an expanded partnership with the World Bank Group aimed at strengthening immunization initiatives and supporting countries in developing resilient health systems. According to Gavi’s Chief Executive, Sania Nishtar, this collaboration reflects a long-standing joint commitment to improving global health outcomes. However, Gavi’s funding landscape has faced significant political challenges. In June 2025, U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. stated that the United States would discontinue financial support to the alliance, citing concerns about vaccine safety and calling for detailed justification of the approximately \$8 billion contributed since 2001. Similarly, the Trump administration had previously indicated plans to reduce its annual contribution of roughly \$300 million as part of broader cuts to international aid. These developments underscore the complex interplay between global health priorities and geopolitical decision-making.

**Child deaths under 5 believed to be rising for first time in decades**



**December 7, 2025:** Margaret Miller, a senior program officer at the Gates Foundation, noted that global health has seen remarkable improvements over the past 25 years, particularly in reducing deaths among young children. She warned, however, that this progress is now in jeopardy. Advances in medicine, public health, and social conditions helped lower the global under-five mortality rate from about 88 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to roughly 36 per 1,000 throughout the 2020s.

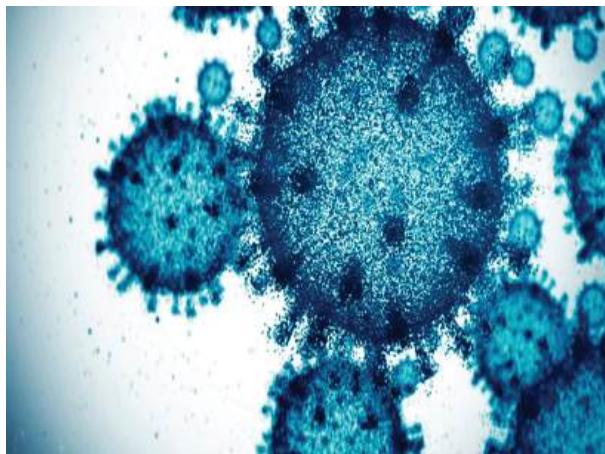
According to the Gates Foundation’s Goalkeepers report released last week, this trend is reversing. The under-five mortality rate is projected to rise to 37 per 1,000 live births this year, marking the first increase in child mortality in the 21st century. Last year, an estimated 4.6 million children died before reaching age five; this year, that number is expected to climb by more than 200,000 additional deaths.

**More than 400 million children globally live in poverty, missing out on at least two daily needs - nutrition and sanitation**



According to UNICEF's flagship report *The State of the World's Children 2025: Ending Child Poverty*, more than one in five children in low- and middle-income countries—approximately 417 million—are severely deprived in at least two essential areas necessary for their health, development, and wellbeing. The report warns that global funding cuts, conflict, and climate change are placing even more children at risk. Drawing on data from over 130 countries, UNICEF identifies multidimensional poverty across six indicators: education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation, and water. Findings show that 118 million children suffer three or more deprivations, while 17 million face four or more. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia bear the highest burden. Although deprivation rates fell from 51 percent in 2013 to 41 percent in 2023, progress is now stalling due to crises, rising debt, and reduced development assistance. UNICEF stresses that child poverty undermines health, learning, and long-term wellbeing, calling for stronger government action to reverse these trends.

**WHO launches new, unified plan for countries to manage coronaviruses: COVID-19 and beyond**



The World Health Organization has introduced its first unified strategic plan for managing coronavirus disease threats, including COVID-19, MERS, and future emerging corona viruses. Covering 2025–2030, the plan marks a shift from emergency response toward long-term, integrated management. Drawing on five years of COVID-19 experience and previous work on SARS and MERS, the strategy guides national health authorities in strengthening surveillance, preparedness, and respiratory disease control. Although the global impact of COVID-19 has declined, SARS-CoV-2 continues to circulate and cause severe illness, while around 6 percent of infected individuals develop prolonged illness. Recent rises in virus activity and uncertainties about future evolution reinforce the need for sustained action. WHO emphasizes integrating coronavirus management into broader infectious disease programs to build resilient health systems. As part of the plan, WHO has expanded its Coronavirus Network (Covi Net) to 45 laboratories across human, animal, and environmental sectors to enhance global monitoring and complement existing influenza surveillance systems.

### **Cambodia introduces lifesaving rotavirus vaccine nationwide to protect children from severe diarrhoea**



The Ministry of Health of Cambodia has launched the nationwide introduction of the rotavirus vaccine, a major step toward reducing child morbidity and mortality caused by severe diarrheal disease. Rotavirus is responsible for roughly half of Cambodia's severe diarrhea cases and contributes significantly to malnutrition and stunting among young children. The WHO-recommended vaccine, already introduced in 131 countries, has proven highly effective, reducing hospitalizations by 59 percent and deaths from severe diarrhea by 36 percent. Cambodia's rollout aligns with its National Immunization Strategy 2021–2025 and Health Strategic Plan 2025–2034. Health Minister Professor Chheang Ra emphasized that the vaccine will save lives, strengthen progress toward Universal Health Coverage, and lessen the burden on families and health systems. WHO, UNICEF, Gavi, and CHAI praised Cambodia's commitment, noting the importance of strong data systems, community engagement, and high-quality immunization services. Supported by Gavi, the vaccine will be given orally in two doses at six and ten weeks of age, ensuring early protection for infants nationwide.

### **Study in Karnataka flags high burden of colorectal cancer among Indians below 45**



A new study in the Indian Journal of Surgical Oncology highlights a worrying rise in colorectal cancer among younger Indians. Researchers at Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology found that nearly one in three of the 964 patients studied between 2019 and 2024 was below 45 years. Corresponding author Dr. Pavan T. Sugoora noted that young-onset colorectal cancer is increasingly common, often detected late, and biologically more aggressive. The study revealed that younger patients were more likely to have aggressive histological subtypes, advanced-stage disease, and metastatic presentation. Nationally, colorectal cancer accounts for 7–8% of all cases, with over 70,000 new diagnoses annually, and the average age of onset in India has dropped to 50. Rectal cancers formed two-thirds of all cases. Experts attribute the rising trend to changing diets, better diagnostics, and possible genetic factors, stressing the need for earlier screening and attention to symptoms like bowel changes or unexplained weight loss.

# TÊTE-À-TÊTE With Priti Mahara

*In this edition, the Clear Cut team conducted interview with Priti Mahara, a Global Influencing Lead at Terre des Hommes, Netherlands. She empowers the teams to drive systemic change by fostering child participation and holding global stakeholders accountable for ending exploitation. She speaks about how her journey shaped her contribution in issues related to children.*

**1. You have spent over two decades working in child rights. What first inspired your journey, and how has your purpose evolved through your global experience?**

My first encounter with gender-based discrimination and violence sparked a lifelong commitment to social justice. Since my college days, I have evolved from a grassroots volunteer to a seasoned advocate, gaining deep insights into complex issues like trafficking, child abuse, and systemic inequality.

I believe that addressing these global challenges requires strong leadership and perspectives from the Global South. By leveraging my hands-on experience with NGOs, I aim to bridge the gap between community needs and policy-making at national and international levels through practical, evidence-based interventions. Also by engaging directly with children and youth, I facilitate opportunities that empower them to navigate and influence advocacy platforms at every level, from local to global.

**2. From your perspective, where do the core challenges in child protection originate—within family and community systems, or in the wider socio-economic and rapidly changing digital environment?**

From your perspective, where do the core challenges in child protection originate—within family and community systems, or in the wider socio-economic and rapidly changing digital environment?

Effective child protection is a multidimensional challenge that requires a holistic approach across the entire socio-ecological spectrum. While families and communities are responsible for fostering digital awareness, the private

sector and governments must be held accountable for maintaining ethical, rights-centric standards. Because risks are often compounded where individual, social, and digital vulnerabilities intersect, meaningful safety can only be achieved through the combined efforts of local support systems and international human rights oversight.





Picture Credits: Priti Mahara

**3. As children spend more of their lives online, how is social media reshaping their vulnerabilities—whether around exploitation, identity, safety, or mental well-being?**

Social media has significantly amplified the risks faced by children, exposing them to a complex landscape of safety, privacy, and psychological vulnerabilities. Beyond the immediate threats of cyberbullying and online predators, children face long-term consequences from data harvesting and the permanence of their digital footprints. The digital environment often erodes well-being by fostering harmful social comparisons and providing algorithmic pathways to extremist or self-harm-related content. Ultimately, the pressure to maintain an online presence, coupled with excessive screen time, has created a public health concern linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among young users.

**4. Among the various digital risks online grooming, cyberbullying, misinformation, algorithmic exposure what concerns you the most today, and why?**

Children globally, regardless of their background, are increasingly vulnerable to severe digital threats, including grooming, coercion, and the exploitation of their personal

data. The unregulated nature of the internet has allowed offenders to manipulate younger children into sharing intimate content or engaging in sexual behaviours, a crisis now exacerbated by artificial intelligence and virtual reality, which facilitate the instant creation of abuse material. To address these evolving dangers, it is critical that policy and legislation move beyond traditional frameworks to reflect the modern intersection of offline and online realities, prioritising comprehensive protection and the fundamental safeguarding of children's rights.

**5. Working across India and abroad, and engaging with global advocacy networks, what patterns do you observe in how countries are responding to digital-age child protection?**

Regional mechanisms (like European Union, ASEAN, SAARC, African Union, etc.) and individual nations are increasingly prioritising child safety online, moving beyond basic protection from abuse to advocating for a balanced approach that ensures equitable access to education and self-expression. However, significant hurdles remain in implementing these goals globally. The current landscape suffers from a lack of homogenous technical standards, which leads to fragmented enforcement. Critical gaps include the absence of coherent age-verification

frameworks, insufficient regulation regarding AI-generated child sexual abuse material, and a lack of national education policies designed to help systems safely harness digital products.

To address these challenges, there is a decisive shift away from industry self-regulation toward comprehensive, rights-based legal frameworks that emphasise shared responsibility between governments, tech companies, and educators.

**6. Could you share an initiative from your work that created meaningful change in safeguarding children—particularly in contexts influenced by digital behaviour or online risks?**

TdHNL, through its flagship programs like SCROL, Down To Zero, SUFASEC, etc. has reached out to children and youth to make them digitally aware and has empowered them to participate in the national, regional and international policy-making processes. We have played a pivotal role in shaping international regulatory frameworks by conducting research (eg. Harmful sexual behaviours, Voice and Safety by Design) and drafting key policies and legislation across multiple regions. Some of the examples are:

Through strategic partnerships with networks like ECLAG and Euro Child, TdHNL has contributed to shaping the 2024 EU Recast Directive to combat child sexual abuse. We are still advocating for a protective definition of affirmative consent and the criminalisation of modern threats like AI-generated CSAM, grooming, and sexual extortion, pushing for the abolition of statutes of limitation to ensure long-term justice for survivors and advocating for mandatory child safeguarding policies and rigorous criminal record checks across EU member states.

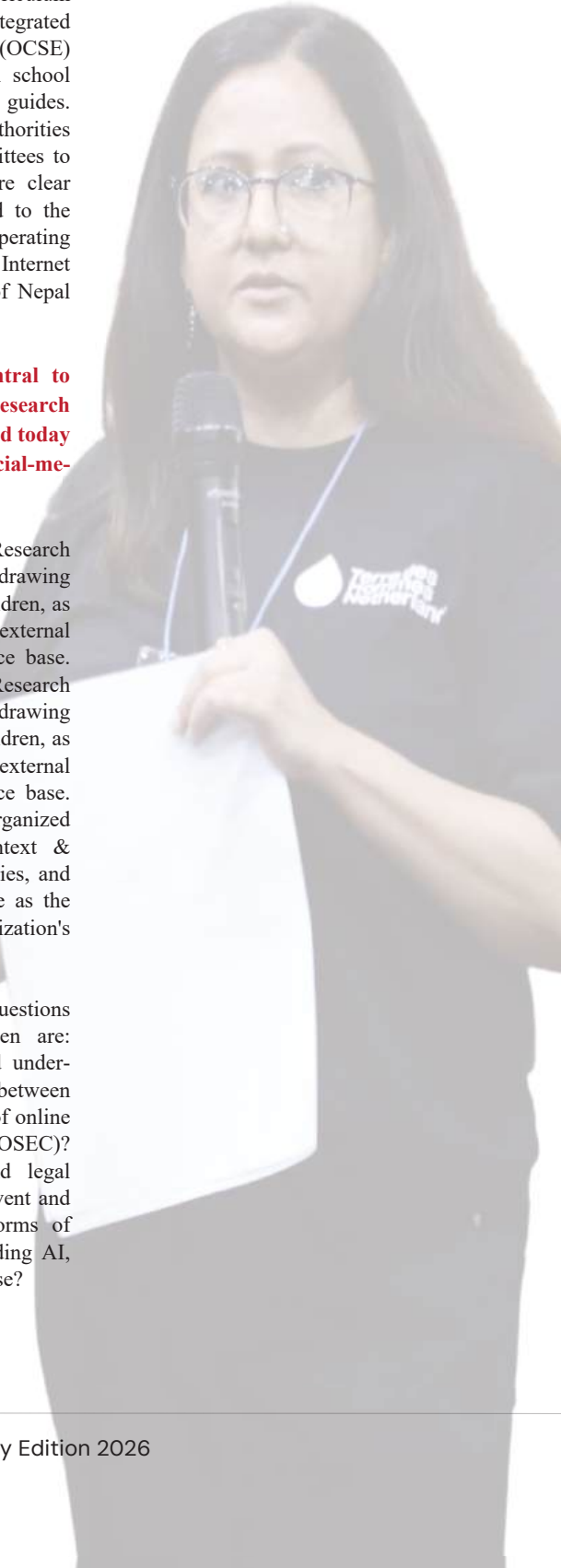
TdHNL's work in Nepal demonstrates a multi-stakeholder approach, involving law enforcement, the education sector,

and the private industry to create a safety net for children online. In 2024, after rigorous advocacy, the Curriculum Development Centre officially integrated Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) prevention content into national school materials and teacher training guides. Working closely with Cyber Authorities and School Management Committees to ensure reporting mechanisms are clear and accessible. Also contributed to the development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the Internet Service Providers' Association of Nepal (ISPAN).

**7. Evidence generation is central to your advocacy. What types of research or data are most urgently needed today to understand and mitigate social-media-driven harm to children?**

We developed our Global Research Agenda a couple of years back, drawing on the collective expertise of children, as well as internal, partner and external experts and the existing evidence base. We developed our Global Research Agenda a couple of years back, drawing on the collective expertise of children, as well as internal, partner and external experts and the existing evidence base. This strategic framework is organized into three central pillars—Context & Vulnerabilities, Systems & Policies, and Risk & Resilience—which serve as the guiding structure for the organization's investigative priorities.

Some of the key research questions related to online safety of children are: How can there be an improved understanding of the relationship between technology, well-being and risk of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)? How can existing policies and legal frameworks evolve to better prevent and respond to rapidly changing forms of online child exploitation, including AI, grooming and live streaming abuse?



**8. What are the key technical and strategic complexities when advocating for stronger digital-safeguarding policies with governments and global bodies?**

The strategic weakening of CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) through restrictive funding laws (globally) creates a technical vacuum. CSOs often provide the "last-mile" technical literacy and reporting assistance that state systems are often not able to do. As funding shrinks, the bridge between vulnerable communities and formal policy-making collapses, leading to "top-down" laws that fail to address ground-level realities.

Laws must be drafted in consultation with children and youth to ensure they address real-world experiences. Policies should be **tech-neutral** and **future-proof**, allowing them to adapt as new technologies (like generative AI or the metaverse) emerge.

Technically, mandating "Safety by Design" requires embedding safety at the kernel or protocol level of a product rather than as a reactive layer. This involves complex trade-offs between end-to-end encryption (privacy) and the ability to detect/remove Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Technologies that pose a higher risk to child safety should be subject to more stringent oversight to ensure their responsible use and mitigate potential harm. National education policies must integrate online safety into school curricula. By building the capacity of teachers, parents, and even tech professionals (like engineers and product managers), we create a community-wide shield for children.

Effective protection requires a unified response across government, law enforcement, the tech industry, and civil society. This collective effort ensures that survivors have a legal right to compensation and that the system addresses the root causes of abuse.

**9. What advice would you give to young researchers or practitioners who want to work in child rights and evidence-based advocacy?**

Cultivating a scientific temper starts in early education, where young researchers must be grounded in ethical protocols and the protection of human subjects. When exploring sensitive areas like Childhood Experiences (CE), it is vital to integrate trauma-informed care into the research design to prevent re-traumatization and manage vicarious trauma for the researchers themselves.

This foundation is strengthened by valuing "lived expertise," ensuring that those directly impacted by the issues are active participants in the knowledge-building process rather than just data points.

To translate this research into actual change, a robust dissemination plan is essential, as data alone does not create policy; policy makers do. Researchers should utilize rigorous qualitative and quantitative methodologies—informed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and intersectional factors like culture and gender—to produce credible evidence.

This approach ensures that findings are not only scientifically sound but are also presented as clear, actionable recommendations that resonate with those who have the power to implement systemic reforms.

**10. If you had the opportunity to fix one systemic issue in global child protection, what would it be and why?**

The structural causes of child exploitation, and the systems that drive child exploitation, are complex and multifaceted. The work to change these systems is also complex, and often requires change to happen in multiple places and among different actors. Creating such change is not a linear process. At TdH Netherlands we consider four structural factors that are mutually reinforcing in causing and driving child exploitation: 1 Poverty, 2 Harmful social and cultural norms, 3 Lack of access to education and information, 4 Inadequate child protection and child friendly services. These factors are often linked, and change in one may influence change in another. We also recognise the role of climate change and humanitarian emergencies in creating and exacerbating existing risks and vulnerabilities among people, resulting in increased exploitation of children.

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*Priti Mahara is Global Influencing Lead at Terre des Hommes, Netherlands. She empowers the teams to drive systemic change by fostering child participation and holding global stakeholders accountable for ending exploitation. The two-decade career is dedicated to leading large-scale protection programs and advocacy campaigns that transform children's lives through a focus on rights and gender equality.*

**Picture Credits: Priti Mahara**

# Policy Analysis

## POCSO ACT



STOP  
CHILD  
SEXUAL  
ABUSE

## Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012



Nidhi Chandrikapure

### Introduction

Children are frequently hailed as a country's future symbols of growth, hope, and continuity. Millions of children in India suffer from dangers to their safety, dignity and well-being, which contrasts sharply with this idealised image. Children continue to be among the most vulnerable groups in Indian society. Despite constitutional protections and progressive laws, especially when it comes to crimes involving sexual abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence. The crux of India's current child protection problem is this paradox between the promise of childhood and the ongoing failure to protect it.

The POCSO Act, 2012, is a significant piece of legislation that addresses sexual offences against children using a framework that is both gender-neutral and child-centric. To expedite justice, the Act established strict penalties,

child-friendly investigation and trial processes, mandated reporting, and specialised courts. However, even after over ten years of deployment, concerns about its practical efficacy persist. The goals of the law are nonetheless undermined by low conviction rates, drawn-out trial times, poor infrastructure, a shortage of qualified staff, and the secondary victimisation of children.

This section of policy analysis uses an examination of significant case laws to critically assess the goals, procedures, and court interpretation of the POCSO Act. It also aims to identify global best practices that can inform legislative reforms and enhance enforcement mechanisms by situating India's child protection framework within a comparative international context. By arguing that child protection is not only a legal requirement but also a moral and social imperative essential to India's democratic and developmental goals, the analysis adds to the larger conver

**Table: Reported POCSO Cases in India (2020–2021)**

Source: NCRB, *Crime in India 2021*

| Year | Reported POCSO Cases | Absolute Increase | Percentage Increase |
|------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 2020 | 47,221               | —                 | —                   |
| 2021 | 53,874               | +6,653            | +30.8%              |

**Key takeaway:**

The sharp rise of 6,653 cases within a single year indicates heightened vulnerability of children during the pandemic period, compounded by socio-economic stress, prolonged home confinement, and increased online exposure.

sation on protecting childhood.

**POCSO Act, 2012: Meaning, Scope, and Historical Context**

When the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, was adopted, India was experiencing a dramatic increase in crimes against children. Prior to this statute, there was no single national law that addressed sexual offenses against minors. The Indian Penal Code's general sections, which were not intended to acknowledge children's vulnerability, were used to manage such cases. This was altered by the POCSO Act. It established a precise legal framework to shield all children under the age of eighteen from exploitation, sexual abuse, and harassment. The law establishes child-friendly reporting, investigation, and trial procedures, is gender-neutral, and imposes severe penalties.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, research and criminal statistics showed widespread

child sexual abuse and substantial under-reporting, which made POCSO necessary. Many cases remained unreported because of social stigma, fear, and the lack of child-sensitive systems. There were significant gaps in protection since non-penetrative abuse and child pornography were not recognized as separate offenses by the existing legislation.

The necessity of reform was further emphasized by India's 1992 adherence to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A specific child protection statute has been regularly demanded by courts, civil society organizations, and the statute Commission. The POCSO Act, which was passed in 2012 as a result of these efforts, changed the way the legal system handles crimes against children.

**Amendments to the POCSO Act**

In response to growing instances of child sexual abuse and public outcry over low conviction rates, the Protection of

Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act was amended in 2019, marking a significant move toward harsher criminal penalties. The amendment introduced the death sentence for the most serious crimes, particularly those involving minors under the age of twelve, and strengthened penalties for penetrative and aggravated penetrative sexual assault. As part of a legislative strategy focused on deterrence, minimum terms for penetrative sexual assault were raised to 10–20 years and for serious offences to 20–life in prison.

Additionally, the amendment greatly broadened the definition of child pornography, making it illegal to produce, distribute, save, browse, or transmit child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

Pornography-related offences now carry a 3-7 year prison sentence, with repeat offences carrying a 5–10 year sentence. In addition to these modifications, the POCSO Rules, 2020 increased

collaboration between police, medical authorities, and Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and strengthened victim protection mechanisms by requiring interim compensation and the recruitment of trained support personnel. Together, these changes sought to strengthen responsibility and improve the justice system's responsiveness to child victims.

### **Government Initiatives for Child Protection**

In order to combat child abuse, exploitation, and neglect, the Indian government has implemented a multi-layered strategy that combines institutional, legal, welfare, and awareness-based interventions in addition to legislative change. The foundation of the law is the POCSO Act, 2012, read in conjunction with the POCSO Rules, 2020, which guarantee severe penalties, required reporting, kid-friendly practices, and temporary respite.

CWCs, Juvenile Justice Boards, Child Care Institutions, foster care, sponsorship, and rehabilitation programs are all supported by the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). Complementary laws that address vulnerabilities resulting from early marriage, hazardous labour, and lack of care include the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006, and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016.

While the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) oversees implementation, inspects institutions, and investigates infractions, flagship programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) focus on enhancing the survival, education, and safety of girl

children. The PM CARES for Children Scheme (2021), which provides financial aid, educational support, health insurance, and welfare benefits to children orphaned by COVID-19, addresses post-pandemic vulnerabilities. These programs show a move away from reactive measures and toward a framework for child protection that is more preventive and rehabilitative.

### **POCSO E-Courts and Fast-Track Mechanism**

The government initiated a centrally supported Fast Track Special Courts (FTSC) program in 2019 with the goal of establishing 1,023 FTSCs, including 389 exclusive POCSO courts, to address growing pendency and delayed justice in child sexual abuse cases. There were 758 FTSCs operating in 29 States and Union



Territories as of May 31, 2023, including 412 exclusive POCSO courts.

According to the POCSO Act, investigations must be completed within a month, and trials must be completed preferably within a year. By utilising the e-Courts Project, which enables e-filing, virtual hearings, digital evidence presentation, and online case tracking, FTSCs seek to operationalise these schedules. To lessen secondary trauma, child-friendly infrastructure has been advocated, including segregated waiting spaces, video-link testimony, one-way mirrors, and minimal direct contact with the accused. Although FTSCs have increased disposal rates in several states, their efficacy remains hindered by capacity issues and uneven implementation.

### **NCRB Data: A Decade of Rising Crimes Against Children**

According to NCRB data, there has been a consistent increase in crimes against children, with over 1.6 lakh cases reported each year in recent years, a sizable percentage of which are covered under the POCSO Act. This increase is attributed to both a rise in incidence and improved reporting, which is facilitated by laws mandating reporting and heightened awareness. The fact that 94–96% of offenders are known to the child—typically through relatives, neighbours, or acquaintances—is a crucial finding from NCRB data that makes reporting and prosecution more difficult.

Concerns regarding deterrence and the administration of justice are raised by the fact that over 85% of POCSO cases are still pending in court, and conviction rates range between 30% and 35%. Although the majority of victims are females, an increasing number of cases involving



boys highlights the importance of POCSO's gender-neutral framework.

### **POCSO Act Landmark Judgements**

The development of POCSO has been greatly aided by judicial interpretation. The Supreme Court rejected the "skin-to-skin" theory in *Attorney General of India v. Satish Ragde* (2021), ruling that sexual assault is defined by sexual intent rather than physical contact. In *Independent Thought v. Union of India* (2017), IPC laws were harmonised with POCSO, making marital rape of children between the ages of 15 and 18 illegal. The Act's child-centric philosophy has been reinforced by several significant verdicts that have established age determination norms, victim identity confidentiality, and evidence standards.

### **POCSO Act Criticisms**

Notwithstanding its advantages, POCSO faces numerous difficulties. The criminalisation of consensual adolescent relationships, low conviction rates brought on by

shoddy investigations, uneven age verification procedures, and trial delays in spite of fast-track procedures have all been noted by courts and academics. The death penalty clause is still controversial, with detractors cautioning that it would discourage reporting in situations involving known criminals. Gaps in rehabilitation, compensation delays, and limited counselling infrastructure further weaken victim recovery.

### **Way Forward**

Expanding FTSCs, investing in investigation capacity, and providing uniform training for police, medical personnel, prosecutors, and CWCs are all necessary to strengthen POCSO. Strong rehabilitation programs, community-based reporting methods, improved child-friendly court facilities, and clear standards for consensual adolescent cases are crucial. To ensure that POCSO fulfils its commitment to safeguarding every child's right to safety and dignity, a change from a strictly punitive approach to a survivor-centric, prevention-oriented framework will be essential.

# A Life Carved in Courage and Quiet Conviction: Nandita Das



**Ayushman Meena**

Indian cinema has some personalities who do not follow the limelight - the limelight just turns to them because of their nature. Nandita Das is one such of very few people. She has navigated the spheres of film, art and activism with a kind of faithful genuineness which is somewhat like an antique in today's time. However, her journey has been far from being ordinary. Her narrative is not about stardom. It is about faith. It is about making such choices that may not be greeted with an assured of the applause but almost always spark the thought. Moreover, it is essentially about hearing the world with the heart before trying to change it.

## Roots That Shaped Her Ways

Nandita grew up in a house where one creative thing was not a weekend hobby but the language everyone spoke. Her dad, the painter Jatin Das, made everyday life colourful and abstract. Her mom, the writer Varsha Das, made it full of depth and insight. So, with such influences, her childhood was more about questioning the world than following rules, why are things the way they are, why do people act the way they do, why does society choose to be silent most of the time?

These childhood impressions made her very different from other people even before the filming lights ever touched her face. You can also witness it today: the way she talks softly but with authority, the way she listens without preparing the reply in her mind, the way she prefers to utter subtle words rather than loud ones.



Basically, she is someone who, according to her nature, has been very much concerned with the real lives of other people.

### **Stepping Into Cinema, and Into Difficult Conversations**

When Nandita started her career movies in the 1990s, one could describe the mainstream Bollywood of that time as full of glitz and following a certain formula. She took a turn completely different from that. Her first association with the likes of Deepa Mehta and Govind Nihalani was not to show off her career but it was an obvious and instinctive choice of stories which had more substance in them.

Her performance in *Fire* went on to become one of the very few landmark moments of contemporary Indian cinema. The film was a brave one in the way it dealt with desire, repression and companionship of women. These themes in the cinema space were far ahead of their time. The controversy surrounding it might have scared a newcomer. However, Nandita chose to support the film with her own grace and therefore, she did not

compromise the film's message or distance herself for convenience. She did something quietly and revolutionary, "choosing integrity over acceptance".

In subsequent years, she starred in movies such as *Earth*, *Bawandar*, *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi*, and *Before the Rains*, the roles being complex, agonizing and politically inclined most of the time. Every movie presented a different emotional landscape, starting with the trauma of the Partition and going to the strength of the village women rising against the injustice.

Nandita did not treat these roles as mere characters, instead, she saw them as real people whose shared stories were the most important ones. Her acting was not aimed at winning. It was aimed at invoking the feeling.

### **A Shift Behind the Camera: Storytelling with Purpose**

As Nandita went on with her art journey, she started feeling that certain tales deserved to be presented in a different way. Through acting, she got to be a part of the strong stories, but with directing,

she had the power to make them. The change was not influenced by her ambition but by the necessity, the necessity to express what she thought the world needed to face.

Her first film as a director, *Firaaq*, came at a time when the communal violence related conversations were painful, polarising and generally people chose to avoid them. The movie didn't show the riots. It dealt with the aftermath of the riots - how terror stays, how the past becomes a heavy load, how the common people become the victims of the extreme side of human nature. It was a movie of quiet times, uneasiness and being very accurate with the emotions.

The accomplishment of *Firaaq* was documented neither by figures nor by its reach. It rather went to festivals, came into the education system and became the part of the talks relating to identity and humanity. People, in fact, praised not the making of the film, but the giving of the film.

Nandita, when she later directed *Manto*, moved into even more challenging area. Saadat Hasan Manto's works were





daring, disquieting, and made painfully of the truth, all these characteristics Nandita strongly identified with. In the film, she depicted a community very much like Manto's, grappling with separation, censorship and moral judgement, by holding a mirror to it. Manto was beyond a biographical drama of an artist's life. It was an indication that, frequently, the opposite of the truth brings the retaliation.

### **Beyond Cinema: The Advocate Within**

Parallel to her creative work, Nandita has been a loud and clear advocate of social issues, but her activism was never a show. She is not the kind of a celebrity who makes use of her influence, rather she decides to be with the people whose lives she talks about.

Her fight against colourism, "India's Got Colour," was just a straightforward and

strong reaction to an obsession that spreads to millions of people going from children in schools who are bullied because of their skin colour to grown-ups who are kept back.

The campaign did not blame the society. It let the people think. And it has always been Nandita's way, bringing the change through knowing, not by fighting.

She has championed child rights, gender justice, education reform and mental health awareness. What makes her advocacy impactful is that she does not arrive as an expert but as a learner. She spends time in communities, listens to testimonies and acknowledges complexity. That humility makes her stand apart in a landscape where activism often leans on slogans rather than substance.

Through her voice she has been the

strongest supporter of children rights, gender equality, education system reform and mental health awareness. The thing that makes her advocacy so powerful is the fact that she is not coming as an expert but as a learner. She really gets involved in communities, hears different people's experiences and realizes the intricacies. This humility is what differentiates her in a world of activists who normally rely on catchy phrases rather than the actual facts.

### **A Career Defined By Meaning, Not Momentum**

While most actors navigate success through visibility, Nandita has taken long pauses in her career, devoting time to writing, travelling, reading, and living life beyond film sets. These pauses are not gaps; they are grounding moments that enrich her perspective.

In recent years, with films like *Zwigato*, she has shifted her lens towards the everyday struggles of India's working class. The film follows a delivery worker in the gig economy, a world defined by unstable income, invisible labour, and silent resilience. Instead of dramatising hardship, Nandita captured the fragility and dignity of an ordinary family.

### **The Path Ahead: Influence Rooted in Integrity**

Nandita Das keeps carving her own path, not just up in the stardom, but in the plethora of thoughtful films. Her impact nowadays is more of a soft, complex and lasting one. She is very often asked to be on the panels, juries, academics and other such venues of a global town, not for the flash but for the sparkle of her mind. Her leadership style is such that even if she were to whisper, her voice would still carry far.

When she moves to different roles, a mentor, a writer, a public thinker, the biggest problem for her will be the same one she has always accepted, being truthful in a world that is always forcing compromises. However, if only her life so far is a signal, she will keep on making the difficult choice of being honest rather than going the easy way.

Nandita Das is not just a filmmaker or an actor. She is the keeper of significant narratives. She makes us remember that cinema is the most powerful medium when it listens, when it asks, when it helps.

In that respect, her work is not a play.  
It is a gesture of empathy, made through art.



# Who Is Amod Kanth?

A Journey from Police Officer to Policy Advocate

**A**mod Kanth is a unique personality in the Indian public scene. He has changed his career path very efficiently from quite different and strict world of the police to the more sensitive areas of child rights, social justice, and policy advocacy. He is best known as the ex-Indian Police Service (IPS) officer and the founder of Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre Society. Kanth's professional life is a reflection of his movement from the use of force in governing the people to the adoption of reformatory, people-oriented policy.

Amod Kanth hailed from the era of post-independence India. He made his way to the Indian Police Service in the seventies. This was when policing was still very much influenced by the colonial system of India both in terms of structure and mindset.



**Janmojaya Barik**

## POLICY CHAMPION / *Amod Kanth*

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During the initial years of his career, he undertook various roles in Delhi. One among those was the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP). It was in this time-span—more specifically through the work with juvenile offenders and street children—that Kanth saw the educational system's failure. In a manner so obvious it could only be the criminal justice system which is the one that treats children in conflict with the law as criminals first and children second.

Kanth did not consider the commission of a crime as a standalone event. Instead, he began to recognize the factors behind it—poverty, abandonment, abuse, lack of education, and absolute non-existence of institutional care. Children were not choosing crime but the circumstances were forcing them in it. The state, however, reacted through detention, punishment, and neglect. For Kanth, the gap between the law and the ground reality was too big to be overlooked.

In 1988, he established Prayas, a voluntary organization aimed at the care, protection, treatment, development, and rehabilitation of children in difficult circumstances, while he was still serving in the police force. The significance of this move was not only in the organisation but also in the philosophy it represented. Prayas was an organisation founded on the conviction that children in conflict with the law must not be looked upon as threats to society but as social failures. This concept—now a standard in the child rights field— was a breakthrough then.

Kanth's initiatives often saw the merging of the different roles borne by him, a policeman, a social worker, and a policy reformer. He did not give up on the law; on the contrary, he probed deeper into its formulation, execution, and enforcement.

His work within the police system earned him the trust of people whereas his work beyond it made him a person of moral stature. This double role gave him the freedom to work as a link between the realities of the grassroots and the policy-making of the institution.

After his retirement from the IPS, Amod Kanth took a plunge into conventional politics and became a member of the Rajya Sabha (2010–2016). To him, the move to Parliament was neither a change of destination nor a change in the goal, rather it was a bigger spread of the same work. In the place of one single child to save, he was now dealing with hundreds of thousands—and the only way to help them was through laws and policies.

Over the years, Kanth has reshaped his identity in the public eye from one of his police officer past or founding an NGO to that of a policy champion a person who smartly combines his/her lived experience, institutional knowledge, and moral clarity to bring about a change in the state's perception of justice, rehabilitation, and childhood.

Understanding the first chapter of Kanth's life is indispensable for the comprehension of the subsequent ones. Reforming by ideology was not one of Amod Kanth's starting points; his transformation was brought about by witnessing the injustices firsthand. His narrative is not centered on authority and what he did with it but on activism.



### **The Work: Justice Through Child-Centric Policy**

If the initial phase of Amod Kanth's life journey was largely about witnessing the prevalence of injustice, the second was forcibly about remodelling the very system which brought about injustice. His biggest legacy is not found in the handful of personal contributions to the rehabilitation alone, but in how those instances were mooted to effect deep-rooted political and social changes.

Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre Society is at the core of Kanth's endeavours, which through a small-scale intervention grew into one of the most potent child rights organizations in India. Prayas reached out to the street children working in hazardous conditions, minors who had run away from home, abused ones, and children who had come into conflict with the law. It adopted a very comprehensive approach i.e. providing not only shelter and education but vocational training,

counselling, legal aid, and family reintegration as well. Prayas children were not put in custodial institutions; instead, rehabilitation was promoted at a loss of imprisonment, and dignity was given preference to discipline.

Kanth's distinguishing attribute from many other social workers was his point of view that policy decisions should be based on the realities of care at the grassroots level. Prayas did not sever its ties with the state; on the contrary, it cooperated with the police stations, courts, child welfare committees, and government departments. This allowed Kanth to point out the discrepancies between the intentions of the law and the practices by the juvenile justice institutions, in particular.

The revelations triggered the reforms at the national level directly. Kanth was instrumental in the creation of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) legislative framework. He was

the one who advocated for the system that is respectful of children as individuals who have rights just like anyone else rather than seeing them as objects which can be controlled. He maintained that if the criminal justice system was used on juveniles who commit crimes, this would only lead to the continuation of the cycles of violence and exclusion. He puts it that rehabilitation, education, and social support are not the acts of mercy but the ones that guarantee public safety in the long run.

While he was a member Rajya Sabha, Kanth extended his influence as well. In Parliament, Kanth exploited the legislative opportunities to talk about the topics that were most often ignored or pushed to the periphery of the society—child protection, trafficking, missing children, institutional abuse, and the failures of custodial care. His points were not abstract moral appeals. They were evidence-based critiques that drew their roots from his longtime experience on the front line.



On top of that, Kanth was in great liaison with many local and foreign groups. In fact, he was a member of several committees on child rights, justice reform, and social development. Besides this, he was involved in policy consultations, government task forces, and advisory boards. He was always relentless in his efforts to urge for coordination among different

sectors such as police, the judiciary, education, health, and social welfare. As per his opinion, the reason why children disappear in the cracks is not that there are no laws but that all these are separate systems.

One of the recurrent themes in his works has been the issue of state accountability. Kanth demolished the idea that NGOs bought to take over government responsibilities forever. To him, civil society was

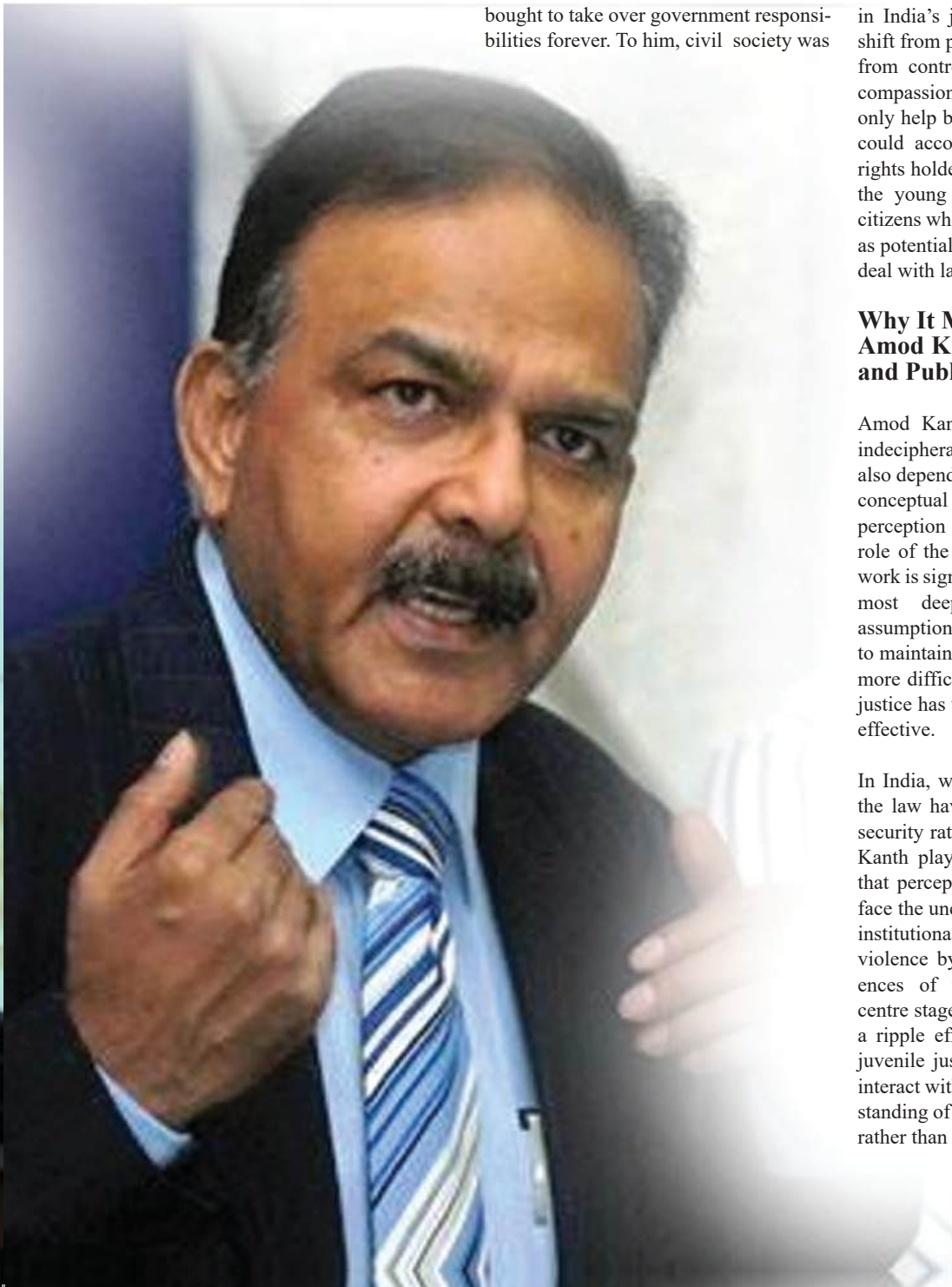
there to innovate, demonstrate and critique - that is, not to replace public institutions. This attitude made him both as state's collaborator and critic thus increasing his efficacy as a policy maker-rather than a peripheral activist.

Briefly, the question: Why does Amod Kanth's work still hold water? The answer is simple: it affected a major shift in India's justice system discourse—the shift from punishment to protection, thus, from control to care. When he aligned compassion with policy logic, he didn't only help building a new structure which could accommodate children as human rights holders but also, he set the base for the young ones to be looked upon as citizens who'd receive support rather than as potential criminals the law will have to deal with later.

### **Why It Matters? Amod Kanth's Legacy in Policy and Public Life**

Amod Kanth's importance is not only indecipherable from his actions, but it also depended on the kind of fundamental conceptual change that he made to India's perception of justice, childhood, and the role of the state. One of the reasons his work is significant is that it confronted the most deeply embedded governance assumption—punishment is the best way to maintain order—that it replaced with a more difficult, but more lasting one: that justice has to be restorative in order to be effective.

In India, where children in conflict with the law have been treated as a threat to security rather than a problem of society, Kanth played a major role in changing that perception. He made the authorities face the uncomfortable reality of poverty, institutional neglect, and structural violence by giving the firsthand experiences of the vulnerable children the centre stage. This shift in perspective had a ripple effect. It shaped the debate on juvenile justice, changed the way police interact with minors, and led to the understanding of rehabilitation as a public good rather than a compassionate act.



## POLICY CHAMPION / *Amod Kanth*

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The significance of his heritage goes beyond that. One of the cases that come to mind, when such moral panics are at work, is public outrage calling for harsher laws and quicker punishments. Kanth never gave in to this temptation. He maintained that reducing the age of criminal responsibility or expanding custodial measures could make the public anger go away, but children and society would receive the most significant harm. By doing this, he was advocating for evidence-based policy rather than emotional-driven one, which is a very uncommon place in democratic politics.

Kanth's example of leadership is just as crucial. Reform, he proved, does not mean getting rid of the institutions; rather, it is about changing them from the inside.

He broke the mould of the traditional roles when he was a police officer questioning policing, a parliamentarian social justice-focused, and a civil society leader holding the state accountable. Kanth's work is an example of how trust is earned through being faithful to your principles—integrating authority with morality and power with accountability.

Further, Amod Kanth serves as a departure point for future leaders and practitioners. His endeavors emphasize the significance of listening to the less privileged and allowing them to be the architects of the policy that affects them the most. It also indicates the indispensability of long-term vision in governance, especially when it concerns children whose neglect can have far-reaching

consequences for generations to come.

Lastly, Amod Kanth is important because he always reminded us that policy is not only about rules and institutions but mostly about people. His whole life's work is a constant reminder that the real strength of a state is not measured by its harshness in punishing, but rather by how prudently it safeguards its most vulnerable citizens. That very idea, which is pretty much radical under the surface and emphatically humane, is actually Amod Kanth's true legacy—the policy champion.

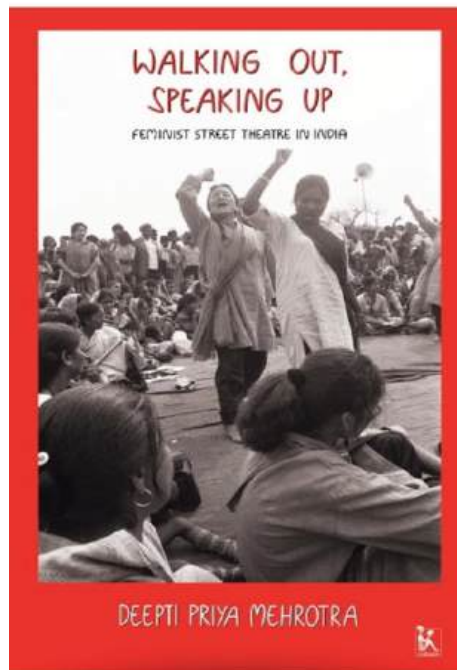


# Book Review:

## *Walking Out. Speaking Up.* Feminist Street Theatre in India



Paresh Kumar



*Zimmedar Kaun, at Red Fort grounds, 8 March 1992,  
by Sabla Sangh. Actors Vidya Thapa, Devi Kripa*

**R**eading Deepti Priya Mehrotra's *Walking Out, Speaking Up* feels less like reading a history book and more like sitting in a circle with the pioneers of India's feminist movement. The book is a deeply personal and meticulously researched account of how street theatre became the heartbeat of women's activism in India during the late 70s and 80s.

### Walking Out of the Silence

The book sets the tone in its opening section, where we are introduced to the

concept of "Walking Out." Mehrotra uses the story of Kanchan as a symbolic starting point—a woman who decides to leave behind a life of abusive domestic silence. It's a powerful metaphor because it reminds us that before these women could "speak up" on a microphone or a street corner, they first had to make the difficult choice to "walk out" of their homes and traditional roles.

### The Grind of the Street

One of the most striking parts of the book is the section dedicated to the iconic

anti-dowry play, *Om Swaha*. Many of us might think of activism as a series of high-energy protests, but Mehrotra highlights the "long haul" of it all. She includes a wonderful, gritty anecdote from Maya Rao that really grounds the narrative. Rao recalls the exhaustion of performing the same play for years. She mentions names like Gouri, Bharati, and Shettyji—the regulars who stayed through the grind while others came and went.

I found the detail about the "non-video times" particularly moving. In today's

world of viral reels, we forget that in 1979, if you weren't physically standing there in the heat, your message didn't exist. There is a great image of Vinod Dua playing the damru (a small drum) to attract a crowd, showing how these activists had to be part-performers, part-barkers, and full-time revolutionaries just to get people to listen to a story about bride-burning.

### The Campus and the Basti

The book does an excellent job of showing how the movement bridged the gap between elite universities and grassroots communities. In the section on "Challenging Everyday Sexism," we see the energy of Delhi University students. It's fun to see names of people who are now well-known figures—like Malika Viridi, Theo, Kavita Ramdas, and Sanjoy Roy—back when they were just students from St. Stephen's or Hindu College trying to figure out how to use drama as a tool for education.

However, the book doesn't stay in the university bubble. It moves into the "Delhi Bastis" and eventually to Maharashtra and Gujarat, showing that the struggle was everywhere. The chapter on Mulgi Zali Ho (A Girl is Born) is a standout, capturing the cultural revolution that happened when women started scripting their own liberation in local languages.

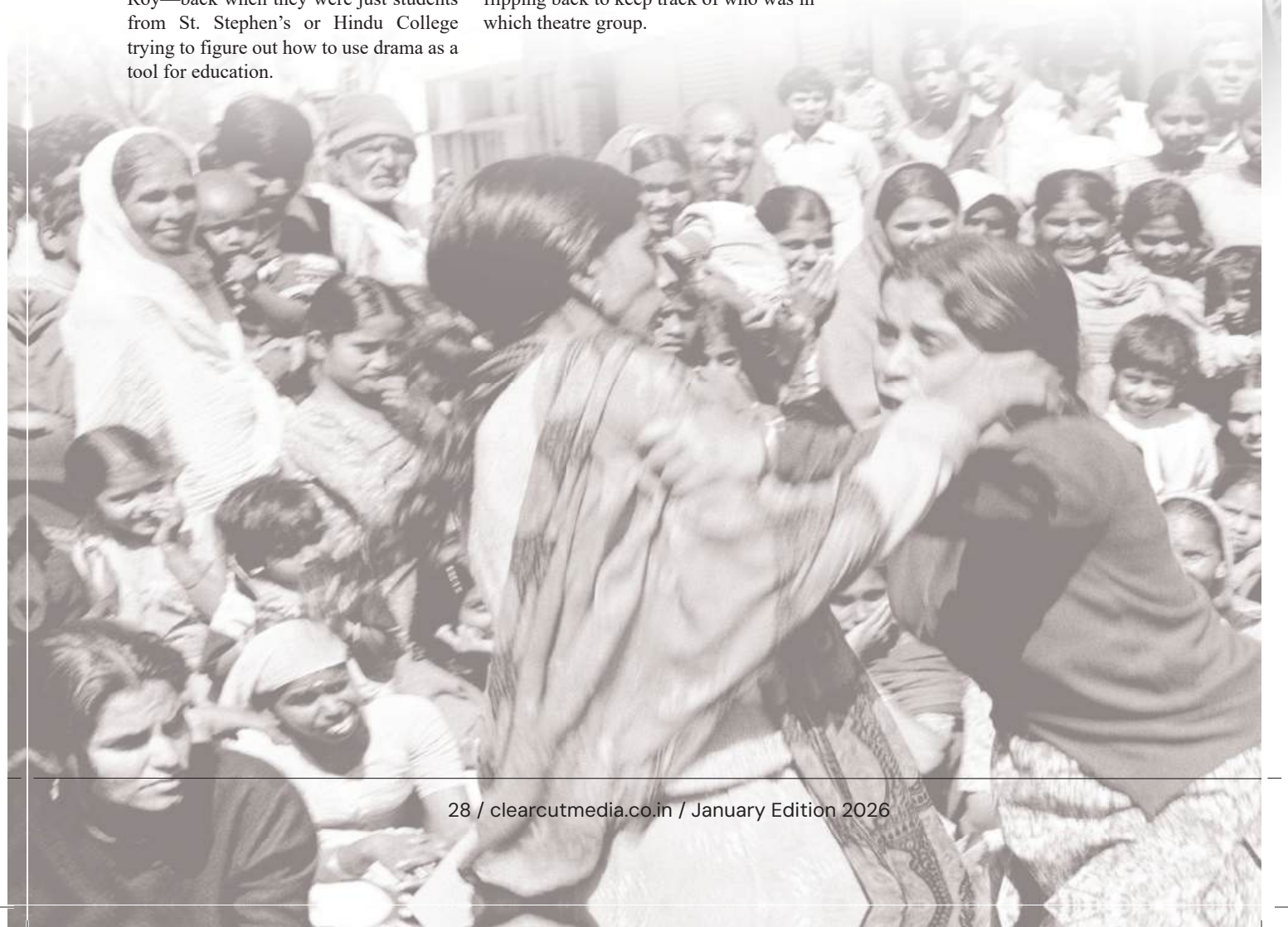
### A Few Shortcomings

While the book is an incredible archive, it isn't without its challenges for the reader. At times, the sheer volume of names and specific dates can feel a bit overwhelming. Because Mehrotra is so committed to giving credit to every single person involved, the narrative occasionally slows down under the weight of its own detail. A casual reader might find themselves flipping back to keep track of who was in which theatre group.

Additionally, while the book covers a lot of geography—from Bengal to Chhattisgarh to Rajasthan—some regions feel a bit more "scanned" than deeply explored compared to the rich, dense chapters on Delhi and Maharashtra.

### The Final Act

The book concludes with a beautiful reflection titled *Zindagi ke Natak, Natakon ki Zindagi*. Here, Mehrotra argues that these weren't just plays; they were rehearsals for a new way of living. The actors didn't just perform a role; they "became" the strength they portrayed.



# Spaces Safe for Children:

## An Intersectional, Feminist, Ambedkarite Approach



**Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra**

Child rights -- to education, care, health, safety -- are routinely violated. A research commissioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (*Study on Child Abuse: India 2007*) reported that 53.22 % children faced some form of sexual abuse, frequently by persons known to them, often in positions of trust and responsibility. There is no comprehensive public policy to deal with this disturbing reality. In such a situation, the efforts of Nirmal Initiative, a small, decade-old NGO, acquire relevance. Working at the grassroots, its intersectional approach seeks to transform the entire ecosystem in which child abuse takes place.

Nirmal Initiative has designed 'Sukhawati', a whole-school, community-oriented framework for primary prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). 'Sukhawati' signifies spaces where every child feels safe; it envisages strategic interventions in school and society, moving from a culture of stigma and suffering, to a culture of safety and accountability. The approach recognizes caste, class, gender, disability as part of the ethos which perpetuates violence against children. Dr Ruchi Sachan, a trustee of Nirmal Initiative, and Delhi University faculty member, notes, "Human dignity, a constitutional right, is denied to a majority of our children."

### **Sukhawati: Safe Spaces for Children**

Shweta Goswami, a PhD-holder from JNU, and founder-Director of Nirmal

Initiative, explains: "... systematic dehumanization, and the ecosystem of caste, patriarchy and ableism enable sexual violence." The rape-and-murder of 17-year old Dalit student, Delta Meghwal (in 2016), by a teacher in the institution in Rajasthan where she was studying, goaded Goswami into setting up Nirmal Initiative, to stop such violence.

Clearly, educational institutions need to ensure child protection, non-discrimination, and sexuality education. It is ironical that schools are specific sites of violence, where children are disciplined and categorised, fear inculcated. NEP (*National Education Policy 2020*) emphasizes the need for schools to address issues of child safety, yet teacher education programmes across the country fail

to provide requisite information or skills. Nor does CBSE's Adolescence Education Programme equip students with life skills to effectively handle abuse or exploitation.

Nirmal Initiative's teacher training module, piloted in upper primary schools of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, offers knowledge, skills and support to teachers, in the belief that "well-supported, responsible, confident, sensitive, and informed teachers can help equip students with a sense of self-care, mutual respect, implications of a variety of touches, language for disclosure, and so on." The module engages with schools over two years. Since CSA takes place in an intricate social matrix, addressing the issue requires rigorous, multi-pronged and sustained engagement.

An innovative colouring workbook, *Suraksha ka Adhikar (Right to Safety)*, and lively songs such as *Mein Hoon (I Am)* and *Hum Bache Chowkidar (We Vigilant Children)*, enhance awareness, validate children's feelings and develop shared vocabulary. They convey the importance of sensitive speech, instil a sense of confidence, and urge resistance to gender and caste oppression. Through creative teaching aids, 'Sukhawati' encourages self-protection, personal safety, a sense of ownership of one's body, the importance of touch, different varieties of touch, nuances of disclosure, and actions to be taken in case of sexual abuse.

Goswami notes, "We, including guardians, teachers, children, face an absence of language. What words shall a child use to talk about breach of trust, violation of bodily integrity, manipulation of innocence and curiosity?" Sensitive language is crucial, to build trust, conversation, sharing and acceptance, displacing the current climate of shame, silence and oblivion."

Sukhawati treats with respect the inner world of the child. Schools are encouraged to create teaching-learning environments with a sense of warmth, maturity, concern and compassion. Children are encouraged to be active participants in their own safety and welfare – though adults must play their part.

### **Importance of Intersectional Lens**

Nirmal Initiative critiques the traditional child-safety education model as insufficient - where children are taught to recognise 'bad touch good touch' and advised to 'Know-Shout-Run-Tell'; the one-size-fits-all curriculum fails to consider social and structural dynamics in which abuse occurs. For effective CSA prevention, differentiated realities must be recognised and an intersectional lens included, for marginalized identities experience multiple vulnerabilities.

Nirmal Initiative reaches out to community and parents for one to one conversations, and facilitates setting up of ward-level Child Protection Committees. Teachers, as trusted adults, are trained to be the point of disclosure of abuse. Some teachers find it disturbing to deal with issues children report, and are themselves offered counselling by the Sukhawati team.

The team discovered that disclosure of abuse often results in child marriage and school dropout for girl children. Caste and disability-based discrimination add further layers of complexity. Shampa Sengupta, founder-director of Shruti Disability Rights (Kolkata), relates the case of an adolescent girl with disability regularly exploited by her male cousin; a young boy with disability whose aunt touched him inappropriately while bathing and dressing. Such complex cases do not yield to easy resolution.

Anita Bharti, Dalit activist and ex-Principal of a government school, emphasizes, "Indian society, built on hierarchy and exploitation, has normalised abuse of children, especially Dalit/poor/ girls. When a child reports abuse, staff members try to squash the complaint, police refuse to act." She recalls recently taking a complaint to the police, but rather than file an FIR, police called the child's parents and brokered a compromise, leaving the child at the mercy of abusive adults. Bharti asks, "POCSO is a strong law, but how is it to be implemented? Police refuse to file FIRs. Rapists roam free. We have to strengthen our voices, to ensure justice for children."

### **Feminist and Ambedkarite**

Sukhawati incorporates an in-depth, long-term vision of social and individual change, reasserting basic values of human co-existence, communication and 'belonging'.

Dr Vandana Prasad, Director, Public Health Resource Network (PHRN), notes that abuse is interwoven into the very fabric of society, for instance during recent research in Malkangiri, Odisha, PHRN found adolescent girls, some 14 years old, married/ pregnant/ already mothers. Children exposed to violence often suffer from depression or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Pervasive patriarchy promotes CSA through control and sexualization of the body, cultures of shame and silence, and authoritarian child-rearing practices.

Professor Kalpana Kannabiran, Centre for Social Development, Hyderabad, notes that Brahmanical patriarchy, based on graded inequality, legitimizes violence against Dalits, minorities, women, and other marginalized groups. Its values have seeped into social consciousness, promoting cruelty. “Any solution,” she reflects, “has to turn away from cruelty – whether carceral, punitive or retributive and be rooted instead in genuine community. Ambedkar emphasized supplanting public morality with constitutional morality, and this remains very relevant today.”

Through the Sukhawati framework, Nirmal Initiative seeks to rebuild *Maitreyi* (community) and *Bandhutva* (fraternity), in consonance with Ambedkarite understanding. It focuses on *Manuski* or shared humanity, and *Samyak Seemayein* or safe spaces. The underlying motivation is to overcome *dukkha* (suffering), reawaken conviviality, rebuild relationships, and a culture of profound dignity, care and responsibility, equality and justice.

*About the Author: Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra is a political scientist, teacher, and consultant with specialization on gender, education and social issues. She writes in English and Hindi, has authored several books including acclaimed biographies of Irom Sharmila, Gulab Bai, stories of single mothers, and a history of street theatre in India.*

*Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position of the Clear Cut Magazine*



An illustration showing a person's hand holding a smartphone. The person is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a red string bracelet. The background is a warm, orange-red color. In the bottom left corner, there is a blue cube with a white Twitter bird logo on its side. A semi-transparent orange-red circle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text.

# Logged In Before Growing Up

# Logged In Before Growing Up



Nidhi Chandrikapure

*Children today do not enter the digital world—they are born into it. Screens glow beside cradles, and voices travel through devices before they travel across rooms. A swipe becomes the first lesson, long before a pen ever touches paper. Convenience quickly turns into a habit. Children are often calmed by screens, which also occupy their leisure time and accompany them to their beds and classrooms. This change feels slow to parents. It is all that children and adolescents have ever experienced. However, growing up with technology is not the same as growing up online.*



**I**n the era of reels, algorithms, and constant visibility, childhood is being subtly reshaped. What used to be a safe haven of play, seclusion, and slow self-discovery is now more often lived in public—documented, loved, shared, and profited from. Children are no longer just passive social media users in India's rapidly expanding digital economy. They are now consumers, influencers, performers, and, frequently, commodities. Long before adolescents realise the true cost of publicity, their routines become content, their faces serve as the focal point of brand advertisements, and their popularity is gauged in views. Children, parents, influencers, platforms, psychologists, and policymakers—all of whom exert influence in ways that are frequently unequal, opaque, and profoundly consequential—are among the many actors shaping this new childhood. This piece attempts to bring their interactions into sharp focus.

Today's childhood is being quietly remade. Reel after reel, algorithm by algorithm.

This article examines the various actors that shape children's digital lives today. These include children themselves, parents acting as managers, platforms designed to capture attention and brands searching for authenticity. It also considers the concerns raised by mental health professionals about the impact on children. Ultimately, it highlights governments' struggles to regulate a digital world. A world that is evolving faster than existing laws. The child is at the centre of it all, not only as a consumer but also as a performer, a commodity, and increasingly as a brand. This change has a distinctly gendered face in India's thriving influencer economy. Girls make up the majority of kidfluencers, who were raised to be noticeable, pleasant, and marketable.

The argument is not about whether children should be online, but rather about under what circumstances, as India watches Australia enact a social media ban for those

under 16 and its own courts start to recognise the risks associated with youngsters using the internet. This article does not portray technology as a lone villain or children as helpless victims. Rather, it depicts a complicated environment in which accountability is frequently postponed, and authority is distributed unevenly. It poses the question of what occurs when childhood gives way to contentment, when caring turns into administration, and when maturing entails learning how to act before learning how to be.

#### **How Did It Start? The Pandemic Effect**

When COVID-19 first emerged at the end of 2019, it altered childhood, in addition to closing cities and schools. Playgrounds vanished, houses became classrooms, and screens became lifelines. The pandemic forced children to spend more time online than ever before in a world that was already heavily digitised.

*Children are no longer just passive social media users in India's rapidly expanding digital economy. They are now consumers, influencers, performers, and, frequently, commodities.*

Children used laptops, tablets, and smartphones to learn, play, and keep connected when schools were closed, and physical interaction was prohibited. The amount of time spent on screens increased. Friendships, regularity, and normalcy were replaced by social media, online gaming, and video platforms. For many kids, using the internet to stay in touch with the outside world was their only option.

Digital platforms provided solace amid solitude and lessened feelings of loneliness. However, they also developed into coping mechanisms for anxiety, uncertainty, and stress. Anxiety was fueled by constant exposure to alarming news, such as an increase in cases, deaths, and economic collapse. Worldwide, about 50% of youngsters said that news about the epidemic made them feel afraid. Social media misinformation simply exacerbated the situation.

Overuse gradually replaced what had started out as necessary use. Children began using screens as a way to cope with emotional overload, terror, and boredom. Overuse of the internet undermined emotional equilibrium and decreased interest in offline life. Sleep suffering, shorter attention spans. Anxiety and depression become more prevalent.

Although it didn't start the issue, the epidemic made it worse. It normalized continuous connectivity and reduced the age at which people were exposed to screens. While adults and teenagers have been the subject of considerable research, younger children, who are still developing their identities, habits, and feelings, were silently taking in the effects.

Even though COVID-19 is no longer present, its digital impact on childhood endures. And that's where the actual discussion starts.

### **Inside the Kidfluencer Moment**

In India's rapidly expanding digital economy, children are no longer just audiences; they are creators, brands, and marketing tools. According to influencer marketing platform Qoruz, the number of Indian Instagram influencers under the age of 16 touched 83,212 by March 2025, marking a 41% rise in less than a year. Most of them are girls. Most of them are micro-influencers. And many of them are barely teenagers. Their feeds are filled with toy reviews, dance reels, fashion hauls, daily routines, and sponsored smiles. The playground has quietly moved online. Swings and slides have been replaced by likes and views. Bedtime stories are now brand collaborations.

For many of these children, the journey begins innocently—with a love for performing, dancing, or storytelling. But what starts as play quickly becomes work. Algorithms reward consistency, not rest. Brand deals demand deadlines, not mood swings. Childhood, once defined by privacy and experimentation, now unfolds in the public eye. Every mistake is permanent. Every phase is archived. And every growing-up moment is watched, judged, and monetised. This shift is also reflected in aspiration. A 2024 survey found that 37% of Gen Alpha children in India want to become social media influencers. The dream of becoming an astronaut or doctor is steadily being replaced by the promise of viral fame. The question is no longer whether children can be influencers—but whether they should carry the weight of influence before they fully understand it.

### **Behind the Camera: Parents, 'Momagers', and the Rise of Mom Influencers**

No kidfluencer exists alone. Behind every viral child is an adult

*According to influencer marketing platform Qoruz, the number of Indian Instagram influencers under the age of 16 touched 83,212 by March 2025, marking a 41% rise in less than a year. Most of them are girls. Most of them are micro-influencers.*

***A 2024 survey found that 37% of Gen Alpha children in India want to become social media influencers. The dream of becoming an astronaut or doctor is steadily being replaced by the promise of viral fame.***

managing the account, approving content, negotiating brand deals, and deciding what aspects of childhood to share publicly. Enter the momfluencer—a growing force in India’s influencer economy.

India had over 3.79 lakh parenting influencers on Instagram by March 2025, according to Qoruz. Nearly 64% of them are women. Many began by sharing pregnancy journeys, parenting tips, or daily family life. Over time, children naturally became part of the frame—first casually, then consistently. For some families, social media became a source of income. For others, a full-time profession.

This is where the line between parenting and production begins to blur. Children appear in reels because brands prefer “real families”. A tantrum becomes content. A birthday becomes a campaign. A school morning becomes a vlog. While many parents insist their children enjoy the process, the power imbalance is impossible to ignore. Can a child truly give informed

consent when the camera is always on? Can they opt out when the family’s livelihood depends on engagement?

Some parents are cautious. They limit screen time, avoid comment sections, and seek their child’s permission before posting. Others treat content creation as a structured routine, similar to extracurricular activities. But unlike dance classes or sports practice, social media offers no clear boundaries. There are no fixed hours. No labour protections. No guaranteed privacy. Momfluencers, too, are now feeling the pressure of changing platform rules. As age restrictions tighten, many see this as an opportunity to shift the focus back to adult-led content. Yet the ecosystem they helped build still relies heavily on children’s visibility. The child remains the hook—even when the adult holds the handle.

**India Rethinks Children’s Social Media Use, Australia Shows the Way**

As governments grapple with the growing risks of children growing up online, Australia’s under-16 social media ban is emerging as a global reference point—one that India’s courts and policymakers are now beginning to look toward in shaping their own child digital safety framework.

Australia’s decision to prohibit minors under the age of sixteen from using social media is a significant change from recommendations to binding laws. The rule, which is framed as a child-safety precaution, assigns platforms full accountability by requiring age verification, removing accounts belonging to minors, and imposing severe fines for noncompliance. Australia has established itself as a global test case for whether the state can effectively participate in children’s digital lives, despite ongoing enforcement issues and privacy concerns.

This regulatory urgency is now being

echoed in India, albeit in a different way. Recent observations by the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court indicate a judicial acknowledgement of the same problems mentioned by Australia: children's increased vulnerability online, easy access to bad content, and cyber exploitation. The court situates India's concerns within a global policy discourse by specifically mentioning Australia's ban on players under the age of 16. It also calls for immediate action through awareness, parental controls, and child-rights education, and urges the Union government to consider similar legislation.

The Indian strategy is incremental rather than prohibitive, at least for the time being. The focus is on platform compliance under current IT regulations, parental accountability, and user regulation rather than a complete ban. However, the underlying message is evident: dispersed awareness efforts and voluntary measures are no longer considered adequate. Similar to Australia, the emphasis is shifting toward formal legislation, more transparent intermediary responsibility, and a more robust state role in regulating children's

digital environments.

Australia is not the only country in the world. While countries like Malaysia and New Zealand are considering more stringent regulations, others, such as Denmark, France, Germany, the UK, and numerous US states, are revisiting age thresholds, parental permission models, and platform obligations. Together, these actions demonstrate a growing understanding that strong legislation, enforced compliance, and cross-border coordination are now essential to protect children online, in addition to parental vigilance.

### **The Anxious Generation: When Childhood Moved Online**

In his book, "The Anxious Generation", social psychologist Jonathan Haidt makes a claim that feels both unsettling and painfully familiar: something fundamental broke in childhood around the early 2010s. Rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and loneliness among children and adolescents began rising sharply—not gradually, but suddenly. This was not a slow cultural drift. It was a rupture.

Haidt contends that the timing is not coincidental. Childhood crossed an invisible line around 2012. The game was moved inside. Independence decreased. Additionally, social media and smartphones have become constant companions, particularly for teens and preteens. Children's social lives were rearranged around technology, not only adopting it.

This change from a "play-based childhood" to a "phone-based childhood" is what Haidt refers to. Children in previous generations developed resilience through activities such as climbing trees, engaging in face-to-face arguments, experiencing boredom, and solving problems independently. There was minimal physical risk, and recuperation was quick. A fall caused pain before healing. The battle came to a conclusion, and then moved on. Errors and forgetfulness were common in childhood.



***India had over 3.79 lakh parenting influencers on Instagram by March 2025, according to Qoruz. Nearly 64% of them are women. Many began by sharing pregnancy journeys, parenting tips, or daily family life. Over time, children naturally became part of the frame—first casually, then consistently. For some families, social media became a source of income. For others, a full-time profession.***

## Crisis in the making: Over 40% urban Indian parents admit their children between ages 9–17 are addicted to videos, gaming & social media

- 55% urban parents say their children aged 9–13 years have access to smartphones for all or most of their day (outside of in-person school classes)
- 71% say their children aged 13–17 have access to a smartphone for all or most of day
- Parents believe their habit of using gadgets excessively and giving early access to children along with school activity becoming online during pandemic are key reasons for addiction
- 68% parents believe the minimum age to open a social media account must be raised from 13 to 15

*Source: Based on findings shared by LocalCircles, a community social media platform that enables citizens and small businesses to escalate issues for policy and enforcement interventions*

This is not how the digital world operates. Errors on the internet persist. Embarrassment is stored away. Likes, views, and following counts are used to measure rejection. Social comparison is a constant. This continuous exposure is too much for a developing brain that is still learning to control its emotions.

The impact of social media on identity development is one of Haidt's most important cautions. Adolescence is a time for introspection: Who am I? Where am I supposed to be? These questions are relentlessly—and frequently cruelly—answered by social media. Rather than meaning, it provides metrics. Approval turns into a number. Silence feels like rejection. Popularity becomes visible, permanent, and brutally public.

Haidt observes that girls seem especially susceptible. Image-based platforms increase self-surveillance, appearance-based validation, and body comparison. Anxiety frequently manifests as withdrawal, perfectionism, or silent self-loathing rather than as panic. Boys, on the other hand, withdraw into virtual worlds and video games, frequently at the expense of social skills and emotional expression in the real world. The isolation remains the same, but the results differ.

The Anxious Generation's most unsettling revelation is that good parenting is no longer sufficient on its own. Platforms that are designed to circumvent boundaries, exploit psychological vulnerabilities, and foster compulsive involvement pose challenges for even watchful and well-intentioned parents. Youngsters quickly acquire the skills necessary to conceal apps, create multiple accounts, and maintain parallel online lives. Supervision becomes a catch-up game.

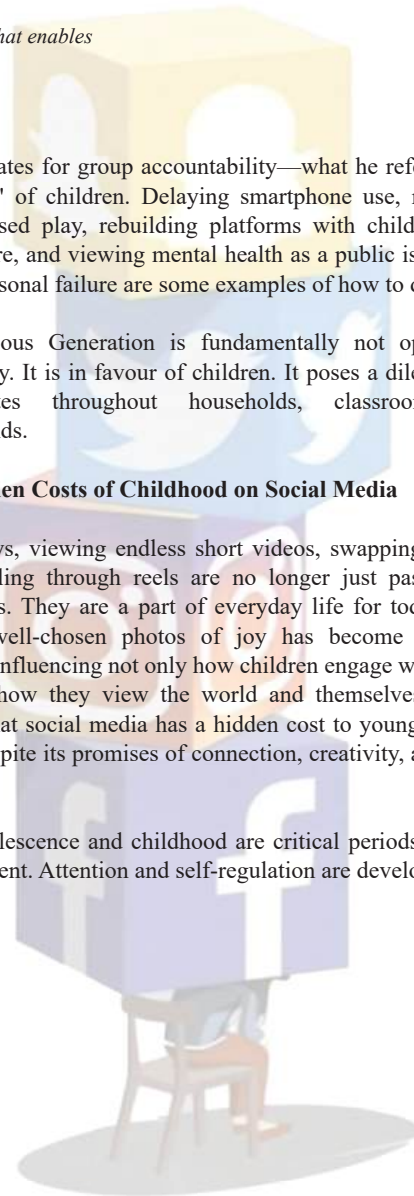
He advocates for group accountability—what he refers to as a "rewiring" of children. Delaying smartphone use, reinstating unsupervised play, rebuilding platforms with child safety at their centre, and viewing mental health as a public issue rather than a personal failure are some examples of how to do this.

The Anxious Generation is fundamentally not opposed to technology. It is in favour of children. It poses a dilemma that reverberates throughout households, classrooms, and playgrounds.

### The Hidden Costs of Childhood on Social Media

These days, viewing endless short videos, swapping pictures, and scrolling through reels are no longer just pastimes for grown-ups. They are a part of everyday life for today's kids. Posting well-chosen photos of joy has become the "new normal," influencing not only how children engage with friends but also how they view the world and themselves. Experts caution that social media has a hidden cost to young, growing minds despite its promises of connection, creativity, and enjoyment.

Early adolescence and childhood are critical periods for brain development. Attention and self-regulation are developing,



emotional abilities are changing, and neural pathways are growing. According to Dr Vinit Banga, Director of Neurology at Fortis Hospital in Faridabad, "At this point, external influences have a much deeper impact, and social media has emerged as one of the most powerful influences in a child's environment."

The impact of social media on attention spans is one of its most obvious impacts. Platforms are designed to be quick, providing immediate satisfaction for likes, comments, and shares. Dr Banga cautions that children's brains become accustomed to constant novelty, which makes it more difficult for them to concentrate on activities that call for patience, such as reading, learning, or engaging in creative play. Teachers and parents are the first to notice that children who spend a lot of time online find it difficult to focus, quickly lose interest, and grow irritated when tasks take a long time.

Another casualty is emotional well-being. Self-esteem is gradually eroded by endless feeds of idealised bodies, lifestyles, and accomplishments.

Stress is increased by unfavourable remarks and the need to appear "perfect" online, which frequently manifests as irritation, withdrawal, or anxiety. "Children's self-worth starts getting tied to likes and comments rather than real-life relationships, leaving them emotionally vulnerable," says Dr Supriya Mallik, Consultant Developmental Psychologist at Embrace X Madhukar Rainbow Children's to Hospital in Delhi.

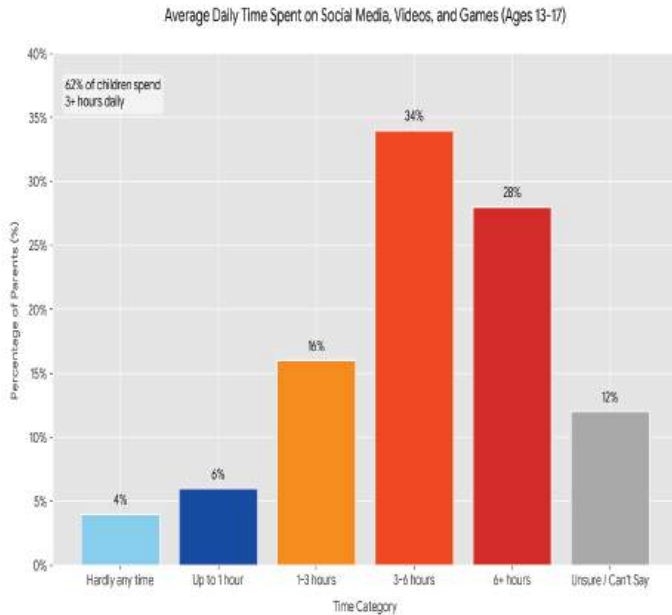
Physical well-being also declines. Melatonin production is suppressed by late-night screen usage and scrolling, which can interfere with sleep. Insufficient sleep contributes to feelings of fatigue, irritability, impaired concentration, and poorer academic performance. The cycle is repeated: social media frequently upsets the delicate balance between mental, cognitive, and physical health.

Safety and privacy are additional issues. Due to their lack of control over their digital footprints, children are susceptible to data exploitation, hazardous information, and cyberbullying. Social confidence and emotional stability may be impacted by the invisible burden of being "always online."

Is social media prohibition the solution, then? No, experts say. A methodical, supervised approach is more effective. Children can safely navigate online spaces by delaying exposure, establishing clear screen-time limits, fostering offline interests, and teaching digital literacy. While in-person connections foster resilience, creativity, and emotional development, limiting social media use can help reduce anxiety, improve sleep, and enhance focus.

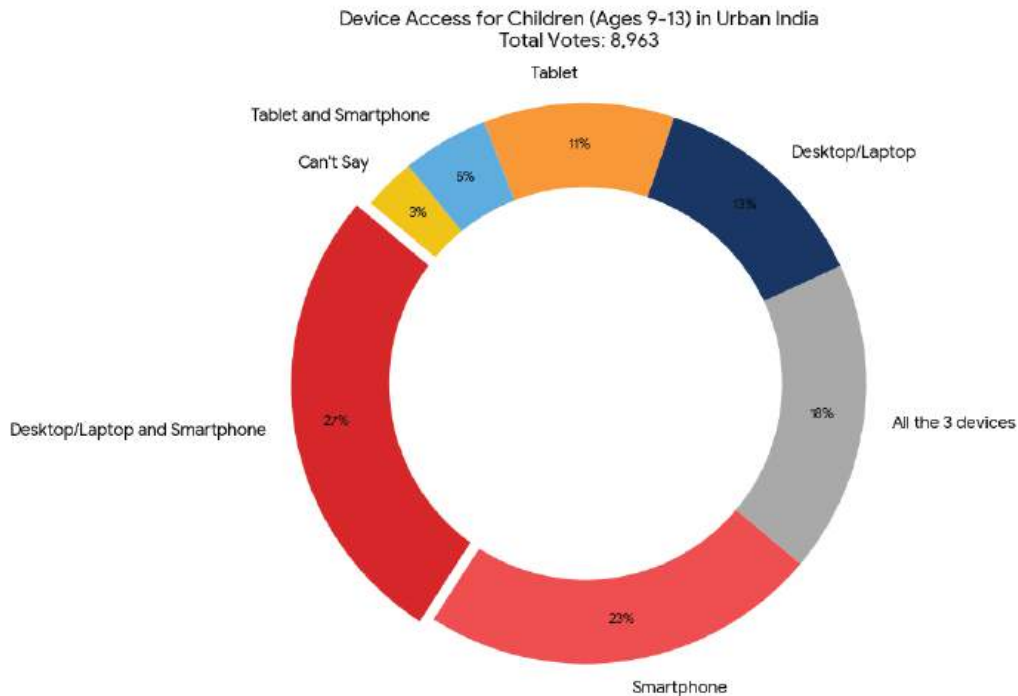
***According to Dr Vinit Banga, Director of Neurology at Fortis Hospital in Faridabad, "At this point, external influences have a much deeper impact, and social media has emerged as one of the most powerful influences in a child's environment."***

## COVER STORY / *Logged In Before Growing Up*



The graphs show that children in metropolitan India between the ages of 9 and 13 are becoming more dependent on technology. It brings out data released by LocalCircles, a community social media platform to escalate issues for policy and enforcement responses. According to data on device access, smartphones—either alone or in conjunction with laptops and tablets—dominate children's internet interaction. A significant percentage of kids have access to several devices, which emphasizes how simple it is to stay connected unsupervised outside of school hours.

This trend is further supported by the donut chart, which shows the share of users in Urban areas, has access to both computers and cellphones. All of these trends point to how deeply ingrained digital devices are in kids' daily life, which raises issues with screen addiction, decreased physical activity, and the need for more robust parental supervision and legislative measures to encourage safe and balanced digital use.



*Source* : Based on findings shared by LocalCircles, a community social media platform that enables citizens and small businesses to escalate issues for policy and enforcement interventions.

## Breaking the Cycle of Anxiety

Children can re-establish a connection with intrinsic motivation and real-world accomplishments when social media is reduced or eliminated as a source of validation.

## Encouraging Healthier Alternatives

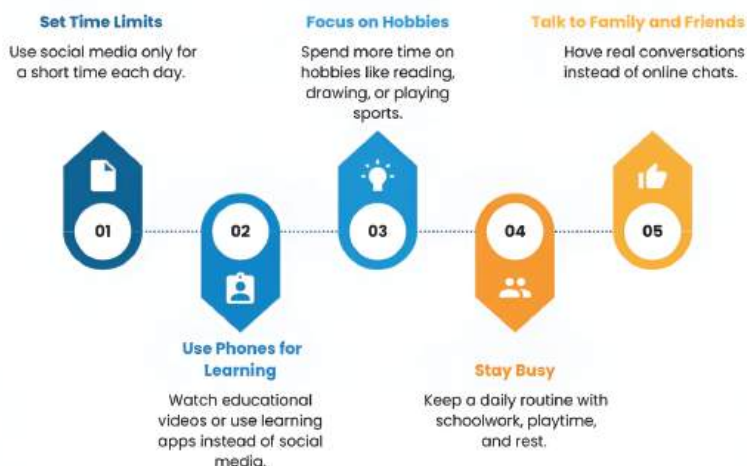
Experts emphasise that cutting back on screen time works best when combined with meaningful offline interaction. Experts suggest engaging in activities that promote mental, emotional, and physical health in place of passive scrolling. Hiking and team sports are examples of outdoor activities that reduce stress while fostering social skills and resilience. Art, music, and crafting are examples of creative endeavours that promote concentration and emotional expression. While offline games like chess and puzzles improve patience and critical thinking, community involvement, especially volunteering,

promotes empathy and teamwork. While practical STEM projects foster curiosity and problem-solving, physical activities like yoga and dancing promote mood stability and improved sleep. Journaling and meditation are two other mindfulness exercises that support children's growth in self-awareness and emotional control.

## The Benefits of Reduced Screen Time

Reduced screen time offers significant benefits for both physical and mental health. Reducing screen time enhances sleep quality by lowering exposure to blue light, which is known to disrupt the production of melatonin. Consequently, improved sleep promotes memory, focus, and emotional equilibrium. Stronger engagement with the world outside of screens and better academic performance are the results of structured screen-time limits, which also promote healthier daily routines.

### Don't use social media just because others do!

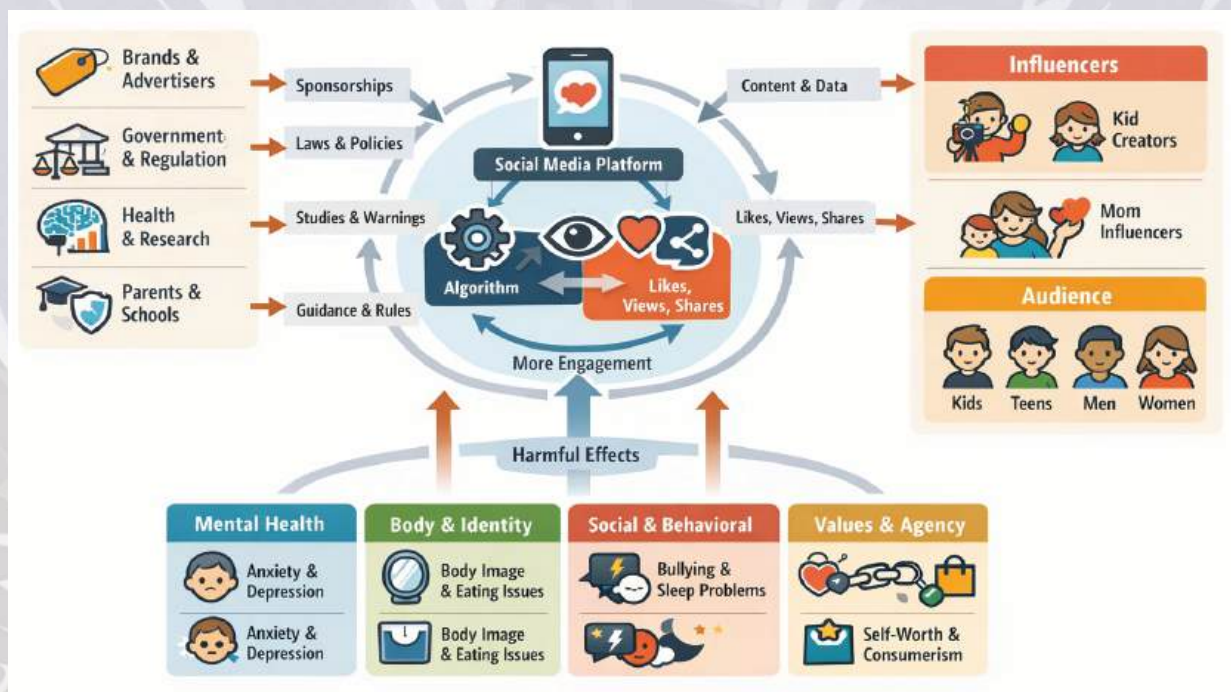


Source: Clear Cut

## Conclusion: The Complex Interplay of Digital Actors

The children themselves—the performers, the watchers, and the creators—are at the centre of this digital world. Their bodies, thoughts, and emotions are developing, brittle, and susceptible to influence. Everything else revolves around them. Children's perceptions, desires, and imitations are shaped by influencers and content producers.

Algorithms normalise comparison, promote trends, and reward participation. Likes and shares quantify approval, making one's value evident. The speed and complexity of online environments frequently outstrip parents' and caregivers' efforts to safeguard, control, and guide. While some try to protect their kids from the worst of the digital tide, others take on the role of managers, striking a balance between opportunity and supervision. By researching attention spans, emotional resilience, sleep habits, and mental health, psychologists and educators raise concerns.



*The Complex Interplay of Digital Actors*

Protective ecosystem, however, remains uneven and reactive. Regulatory measures often lag behind the pace at which platforms evolve. Australia and other nations have explicit age limitations. Platform compliance, parental accountability, and gradual frameworks are being tested in India. Laws can establish limits, but they cannot replace direction, compassion, and practical experience. Together, platforms, legislators, parents, and mental health professionals create a complex ecosystem that aims to protect children while fostering growth, connection, and creativity.

Everywhere you look, the effects of unbalance are evident. Attention can be broken by excessive exposure. Self-esteem can be damaged by idealised pictures. Scrolling late at night can interfere with sleep. Emotional and social security may be jeopardised by vulnerability to cyberbullying and data misuse. Identity formation, social skills, mental health, and physical health are all closely related. The system is affected by a single weak link. Risk is multiplied by a single failure to protect or educate. Conversely, thoughtful boundaries, mindful engagement, and informed guidance can strengthen resilience.

At the centre of this digital world are children, whose development is both remarkable and delicate. Every choice kids make directly affects them. The content they watch, the influencers they follow, the guidelines set by their parents, and the laws passed by their government. They are fundamentally creative, inquisitive, and self-assured. This core is surrounded by platforms, parents, psychologists, and lawmakers, all of whom shape, nudge, or restrain in both visible and unseen ways. Social media is neither good nor bad. Its ability to engage developing minds is what gives it its power.

Finding a balance between opportunity and protection, visibility and privacy, involvement and well-being is an obvious difficulty. Children's mental and physical well-being must not be sacrificed in the name of exploration, expression, and connection. Safety should take precedence over attention on platforms. Parents need to provide guidance, but not total control. Policies must safeguard without dehumanising. Research must be translated into useful action by psychologists and educators. Society can only guarantee that children become not only digitally literate but also robust, self-assured, and emotionally healthy by acknowledging this complex, interconnected environment.



## Money Matters at an Early Age: Why Financial Education should start when you are a kid



**Subhanshu Jaiswal**

**I**n many Indian homes, the first money lesson happens unintentionally - a child is given pocket money or plays with a parent's coins. Yet financial literacy: the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to manage money. It is a learned habit that ideally should be taught, not just caught. Experts argue these habits stick best when started young. As one OECD definition notes, financial literacy isn't just investing it includes basic saving, budgeting, planning and banking. In other words, teaching a child how to save a few coins

or allocate allowance is as fundamental as teaching reading or arithmetic. Simple classroom games (like handing out play-money to simulate budgets) have shown to engage students in practical decision-making. In one U.S. school, for example, eleventh graders played a bean-based budgeting game (beans as salary units) where they chose between "buying" a bus ride or car with their beans. These fun, hands-on lessons not only capture interest, but they also pay off: teenagers who had three years of high-school finance instruction were 40%

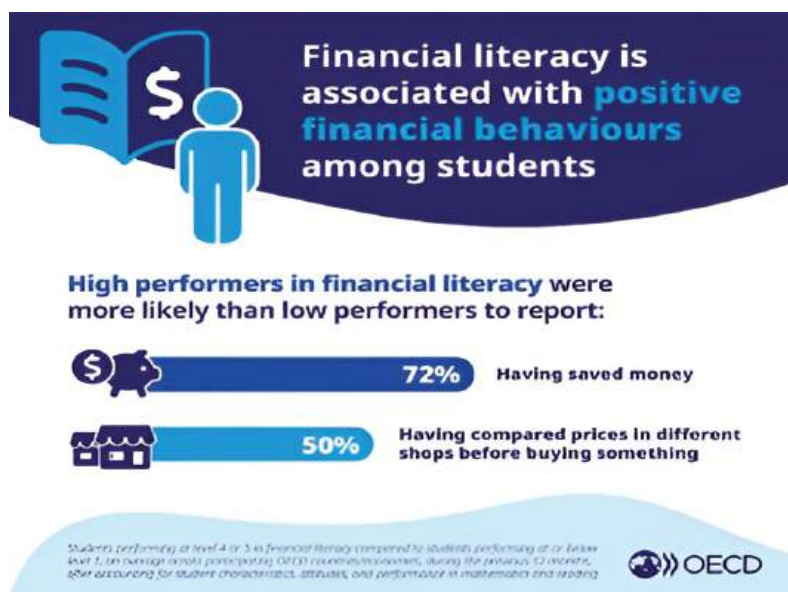
less likely to fall a month behind on credit obligations and had credit scores about 25 points higher as young adults.

More importantly, these benefits endure. A longitudinal study found that the gains from teen finance classes higher savings rates and faster debt repayment were still measurable 12 years after graduation. Remarkably, the ripple effects extend beyond the student. In the U.S. study, parents of students who took personal-finance courses saw better outcomes: their loan-default rates fell by about a quarter,

and their credit scores climbed about 5%. Even teachers notice. In Parkdale High School (Maryland), teacher Tamekia Davis saw her own savings grow after teaching budgeting games to students. These findings echo global research for example, a recent World Economic Forum analysis of a Peruvian financial-education program found parents' loan-default probability dropped 26% after their children's schooling. In short, early money lessons can transform whole families' financial health.

The evidence is clear that starting finance education young builds a stronger foundation. OECD's PISA global survey of 15-year-olds shows that students who talk to parents about money score significantly higher on financial literacy tests. In fact, children who ask their parents about money do on average 27 points better on OECD assessments. This illustrates that parents are already children's first financial teachers. An astonishing 94% of teenagers worldwide report learning about money from family members. In theory, then, educating children also educates parents. As one PISA report notes, most youths face real spending decisions (even in adolescence), so empowering them with knowledge makes them more financially resilient in shocks like a pandemic. It's a virtuous cycle: kids who budget well at home reinforce those habits into adulthood.

Yet India's reality falls short of these ideals. National surveys paint a worrying picture of low financial skill among all age groups. According to the 2019 NCFE-RBI survey, only about 27% of Indian adults could correctly answer basic finance questions (interest, inflation, budgeting). Even a broader RBI study in 2023 found just 62.6% of Indians met "basic financial literacy" criteria (knowledge, behaviour and attitude combined), well below the roughly 85% average proficiency seen among OECD 15-year-olds. These low rates coexist



*Students performing at level 4 or 5 in financial literacy compared to students performing at or below level 1 on average across participating OECD countries/economies, during the previous 12 months, after accounting for student characteristics, attitudes, and performance in mathematics and reading. □*

### Financial Literacy Behaviour

with wider education gaps: the ASER 2024 survey reports that 76.6% of rural Grade-3 children cannot even read a Grade-2 text, and 66.3% cannot do simple subtraction. In practice, that means most Indian children never even see money concepts in school because they are still struggling to read.

Despite these hurdles, India's youth are already a dominant economic force. A recent Snap/BCG report highlights that India's Gen Z (about 377 million people aged 12–27) already drives roughly 43% of the country's consumer spending. Put bluntly, almost half of the country's market purchases are influenced by young people. Their direct spending power is projected to hit \$1.8 trillion by 2035. Yet without guidance, much of this money flows into consumer debt or poor financial decisions. In fact, the World

Economic Forum notes that 51% of Indian adults report difficulty meeting debt payments - well above the global average. A generation holding this much spending power without financial know-how could easily fall into "buy now, pay later" traps or high-interest debt. This gap between spending power and skill has sparked action. Recognizing the risk, India's regulators and educators are starting to put financial education on the map. The government's National Strategy for Financial Education (NSFE) 2020–25 explicitly targets children and youth as priority audiences. In practice, this means curriculum changes and new programs. By 2022, for example, several State Boards and the NCERT began introducing financial-literacy modules into middle and high school syllabi. Even CBSE teamed up with the NSE Academy to launch an "Introduction to Financial

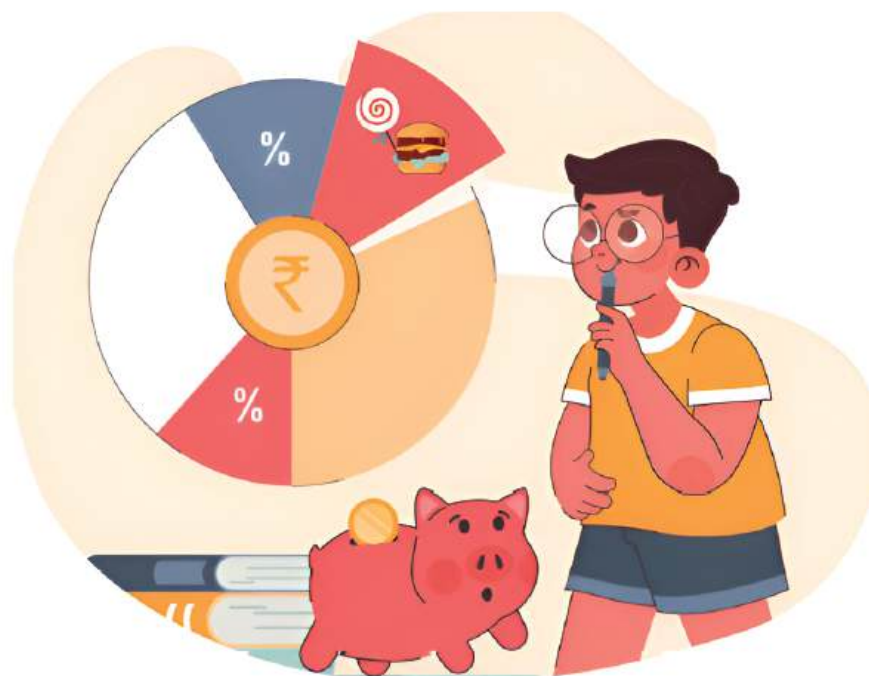
Markets” vocational course for Classes IX–X, signalling that money management is becoming a recognized school subject (at least as a skill). To scale teaching capacity, the National Centre for Financial Education (NCFE) - a body set up by RBI and others - runs teacher training (the Financial Education Training Programme, FETP) to certify “Money Smart Teachers,” and annual NFLAT exams to benchmark student knowledge. Banks and regulators also contribute like the RBI’s Financial Education Microsite offers games, comics and videos in 13 languages for schoolchildren, and its “Financial Literacy Week” raises awareness every February.

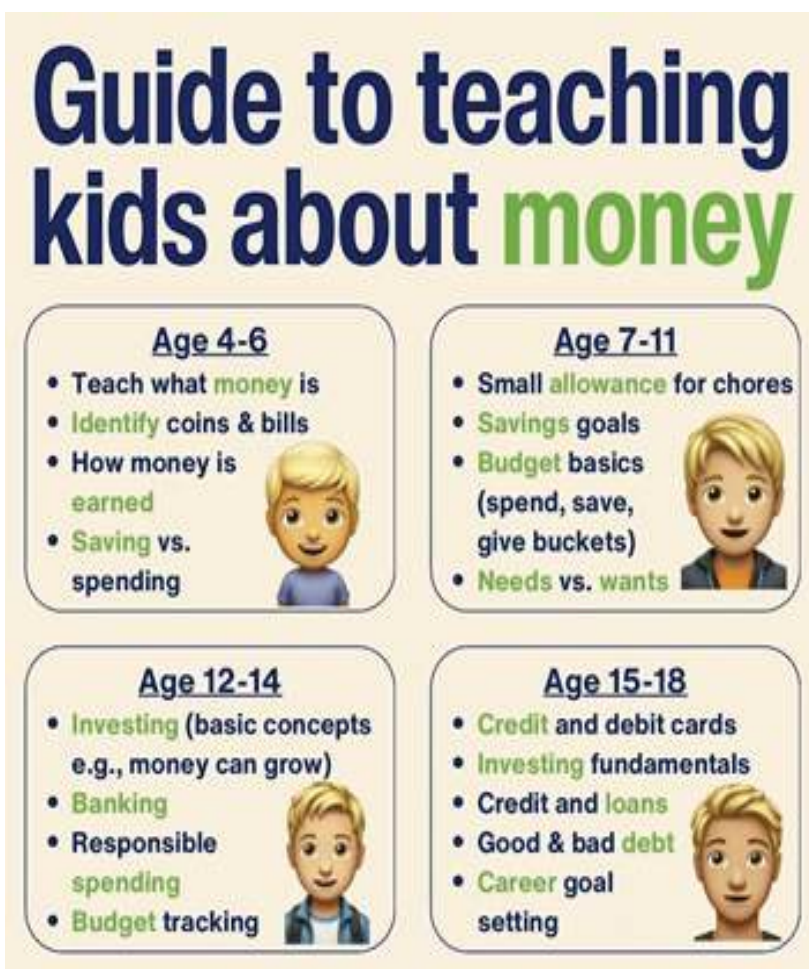
By combining storybooks and games, innovative programmes are showing how early lessons can work. In Project Nivesh (run by a Gurugram NGO),

students in primary school read a tale called “Mary and the Secret of Savings” and played interactive budgeting games. After the program, 75% of participating children began using a structured budget (the classic 50/30/20 rule of needs/wants/savings) to manage their pocket money. Equally important, the program ignited family conversations: the proportion of children who discussed savings with parents “almost every day” jumped by 37%. This case shows that even modest, localized interventions – when they engage kids with age-appropriate content – can shift attitudes. Children move from impulse spending toward planning and long-term goals (like saving for school fees), and they bring parents along. In one survey by India’s budget bank contests, over half of children chose “education” as their main savings goal, reflecting a budding

long-term mindset.

The home remains the cradle of finance lessons. Studies confirm that almost all students learn about money from parents or guardians. Yet many Indian families never openly discuss budgets or savings. A recent World Economic Forum survey noted that only about half of Indian children regularly talk about money with their parents (versus a global norm above 80%). Engaging families is therefore crucial. Simple practices help like giving a child an allowance tied to chores or asking them to help plan a small household purchase, turns daily life into finance class. Policymakers encourage such outreach like RBI-led Financial Literacy Centres run workshops in villages, teaching adults and kids together about saving and digital banking. Self-help groups and





NGOs organize parent-child finance games and booklets. When children learn a new money habit, they often nudge siblings and parents. In Peru, daughters who learned finance drove a 28% drop in family loan arrears. India too sees hints of this: for instance, teachers who have run budgeting exercises report parents telling them, “My child taught me how to use a bank app!”.

Alongside families and schools, technology is opening new doors. India’s rapid digital growth means mobile apps and games can reach kids in towns and villages. The RBI permits secure youth accounts as of July 2025, any minor (via a guardian) can open a bank account, and children 10 years or older can operate

savings accounts independently. They can even receive debit cards and limited online banking (with parental oversight). This landmark rule is designed to make real-money practice part of learning. Some banks have started children’s accounts with rewards for saving. In parallel, NCFE’s Money Smart app and RBI’s gamified lessons allow children to earn virtual coins for learning finance concepts. Even popular cartoon characters have been enlisted in India’s financial-education videos. The result is a multi-pronged ecosystem: a child might learn budgeting in class, reinforce it at home with a piggy bank, practice with a mobile game, and then check her own savings account - all by age 12. Despite progress, gaps remain wide.

Across India, financial topics are still uneven in curricula: many rural and government schools simply lack finance lessons. Teacher training has begun but is far from universal.

Surveys show stark urban-rural divides for example, one consolidated study found only 22% of rural adults are financially literate (versus 35% in urban areas), and women lag men by similar margins. Similarly, only about 28% of youth (18–25) met basic competency in one national survey, highlighting that even younger people often rely on guesswork. Resources are thin textbooks with age-appropriate money lessons are scarce in Hindi and local languages. Many low-income families lack bank access or smartphones, so digital tools alone leave them out. Cultural taboos can stifle money talk - unlike OECD peers, only about half of Indian teenagers say they routinely discuss finances with family. Finally, measurement is weak, India runs few large-scale youth assessments of financial skills (NFLAT is one), so policymakers rarely see the full picture or where to target efforts.

To bridge these gaps, experts increasingly argue for a coherent, multi-pronged strategy that works across policy, classrooms, families, and institutions rather than relying on isolated interventions. At the policy level, this means moving beyond pilots to mandating financial education from the primary grades onward, as envisioned under India’s National Strategy for Financial Education (NSFE). Recent steps-such as the CBSE’s introduction of financial market courses and the RBI’s 2025 circular allowing children aged 10 and above to operate bank accounts signal progress, but these need to be complemented by simpler KYC norms and easier access to youth-friendly banking to enable early, hands-on learning.

Within schools, curriculum design and teacher capacity are critical. Financial concepts must be embedded into existing

subjects using age-appropriate, locally relevant material budgeting through mathematics problems, saving and planning through language and social science lessons, and everyday money decisions through stories and case studies. Public-private partnerships involving NCERT, NCFE, and financial regulators can help scale such content in multiple languages. At the same time, teacher training programs like the Financial Education Training Programme (FETP) need to be expanded so that financial literacy is not confined to commerce classrooms but reinforced across disciplines, supported by designated “financial literacy champions” within schools.

Equally important is family and community engagement, since children’s financial behaviours are strongly shaped at home. Structured parent-child activities such as maintaining a household budget diary or discussing savings goals at the dinner table can reinforce classroom learning. Evidence from PISA shows that students who regularly discuss money matters with parents perform significantly better in financial literacy, underscoring the need to design interventions that deliberately involve families.

Technology and product innovation can further strengthen this ecosystem. Gamified digital tools, interactive storybooks, and quizzes, particularly in regional languages can make learning accessible even in resource-constrained settings, while youth-friendly financial products such as junior savings accounts with parental oversight allow children to practice real financial decision-making safely. Finally, sustained progress requires systematic monitoring and evaluation. Expanding assessments like NFLAT, disaggregating results by gender and location, and tracking long-term outcomes will allow policymakers to refine strategies and ensure that early financial education translates into real improvements in financial well-being over time.

Starting early with financial education is not just a nice idea - it’s backed by data. Global research consistently shows large, lasting dividends. For instance, U.S. studies find that requiring personal-finance courses dramatically boosts future credit scores and sharply reduces delinquency rates (one analysis found students exposed to such courses for three years had credit scores ~29 points higher than peers). These effects persist long

after students leave the classroom. Similarly, classroom programs in Peru and Rwanda have shown that teaching kids to budget leads to better family saving and lower debt burdens. In India, early pilots are encouraging. Project Nivesh and others show even brief interventions make children think differently about money.

India’s youth are its greatest wealth, but only if they are also wise with money. As one expert puts it, embedding finance into schools and communities could transform a hard-to-reach adult population by channelling education through children. By contrast, ignoring the opportunity risks millions learning bad habits (or none). Given how our young generation already dominates spending, the cost of financial mistakes could be huge - personal bankruptcies, over-indebted households, and wasted potential. In contrast, investing a bit in every child’s money skill can pay off for decades.





Ayushman Meena

# MOTHER INDIA

## A Cinematic Epic of Nation, Womanhood, and Moral Strength : **Mother India**

Indian cinema has, in many instances, depicted the lifestyle of the people, showing their troubles, aspirations, and changes in their moral code. One of the movies which not only influenced the cultural imagination of India but also became a source of ideological guidance is Mother India. The movie, which came out in 1957, only ten years after India was freed, went far beyond the limits of fun to become a cultural text that ended up being the very ideals of a country newly born. The film, which had enormous success, is an allegory which can be read at different levels, beyond the most obvious one of the suffering and triumphant experience of a single woman, Mother India is really a metaphor of India, the earth, the people, and the ethical values.

Mother India, a film directed by Mehboob Khan, is considered to be one of the most iconic movies of Indian Cinema.

It is a combination of social realism and emotional depth where the personal tragedy of the protagonist is intertwined with the collective experience of the society. The film stays relevant for generations because of the way it tells a profoundly human story, at the same time, it deals with universal themes like justice, sacrifice, tradition, and change.

### Historical and Cultural Context

In order to grasp the significance of Mother India, one has to put it into the time frame of history first. The movie came out when India was recovering from the effects of colonization, extreme poverty, and the suffering of the villages. India was an agrarian country, but the farmers were continuously going into debt and had to rely on moneylenders. Such a social-economic situation is prominently revealed through the movie's



story.

Mother India's country backdrop is not idealized. Rather, it shows a reality that is characterized by droughts, floods, hunger, and exploitation. Therefore, the movie conforms to the convention of social realism, which is the use of film as a means to bring to light the injustices that are deeply ingrained in the system. Moreover, the film incorporates extensively the Indian cultural norms, in particular, the highly figurative role of the mother who represents the characteristic traits of the human being, spiritual supremacy, and the power of giving.

### **Narrative Overview**

Radha is the central character of the movie, a role that Nargis has brought to life with an impressive and gripping emotional intensity. Initial scenes depict Radha as a fresh and cheerful bride making her way to her husband's village.

But, unfortunately, her story turns out to be an unending fight with poverty, misfortunes, and the unfair treatment of society, especially a malign moneylender, who makes her suffer mercilessly.

Radha, who may be said to be the personification of misfortune, after losing her husband, suffering physical hardship, and getting emotionally devastated, nevertheless, decided not to give up her dignity or moral values. She goes on with her sons' upbringing by her indomitable spirit and arduous labor and therefore becomes a village heroine of the people's unshakable spirit. The ethical peak of the movie is the moment when Radha had to sacrifice one of the most unimaginable options, her justice and social order first, then her maternal instinct.

This story structure is one of the elements that moves the tale beyond the confines of a personal tragedy to that of a grand moral epic. The life of Radha can be seen as the

odyssey of India itself: a scarred but resilient, ailing but honorable, and ultimately a martyr for justice, steadfast to the very end.

### **The Mother as a National Symbol**

Mother India's symbolic use of motherhood is probably one of the most impressive features of the film. Radha, for instance, is more than a mere character she is the earth, the customs, and the moral basis of India. Her relationship with the earth - hoeing the land, feeding the fields, and enduring floods - is what actually tells us that the country is a mother who gives life to her children even though she is constantly tormented.

This symbolism is derived from Indian cultural traditions where the mother is respected as a moral guide and a protector. Radha's suffering is the reflection of the stereotypical portrayal of Indian

## ART & CULTURE / *Mother India*

women, which was dominant in the 1950s, the idea that a woman is a self-sacrificing, tough, and morally pure person. Although contemporary critics might challenge such idealization, it was a fact that the model had a strong hold in the culture at the time the movie was released.

### Gender and Womanhood

*Mother India*, when looked at from the art and culture angle, is a complicated case of how it depicted women. To begin with,

Radha is given power via her physical strength, independence, and ethical leadership. She went against the rule of males, faced up to being exploited, and eventually became the support both of her family and society. During a time when women were mostly given minor roles, Radha was a striking figure.

However, her power comes from a very sacrificial and suffering kind of a place. The movie propagates the concept that the most supreme quality of a woman is her capacity to bear pain silently when it

is for the welfare of others. Such a dual nature makes *Mother India* not only a significant work for comprehending the stereotyped gender roles and the set of rules that were expected to be followed at that time but also the social-cultural myths of the feminine sex that prevailed in post-independence India.

### Performances and Characterization

*Mother India*, emotionally, is very much a powerful film that owes a great deal to its performances.



Nargis in her role gave one of the most memorable and monumental performances ever in Indian cinema. She played Radha from her young days up to her old age, a touch that was not only visually, but also very emotionally, showing the character's physical wear, her inner pain, yet at the same time her indomitable will with an incredible faithfulness.

Sunil Dutt plays the role of Birju, the son of Radha, who revolts against the system and shows the rage and discontent that come from being dealt with unfairly by the system. His role depicts the influence of long-term oppression on one's sense of right and wrong. Rajendra Kumar, on the other hand, is the portrayal of the dutiful son, filled with self-control and compliance. These characters, thus, form a continuum of morality that intensifies the film's metaphysical layer.

### Music and Visual Language

One of the main attributes which brightened the film to a great extent was the feature of music which helped in depicting the emotional and cultural sides of *Mother India* in a highly artistic manner. All the songs take their roots from the folk traditions and represent the life of the village, the natural cycles of the farm, and the common feelings of the people. The songs not being only the amusement of the audience, the acts at different times of the film actually move the story forward and get the motifs of fight and hope strengthened.

The film was, in a way, one of the first to use visual elements that later became the standard for cinematography. The film's color usage, wide-open sceneries, and intense visuals—like the lightning splitting the sky and Radha standing firm amidst the storm—gives it the aura of a legend interwoven with the truth. In fact, the earth and its soil are portrayed as a new power, the one to decide the fate of the people who rely on it.

### National and International Recognition

*Mother India* garnered a lot of favorable attention and publicity both in India and abroad. It was the first Indian movie ever to earn an Oscar nomination for the Best Foreign Language Film category, hence, putting Indian cinema on the global map. The film was also presented at the Cannes Film Festival, which definitely contributed to its popularity and prestige abroad.

The movie was a huge success in terms of critical acclaim and recognition at the institutional level in India. At the Filmfare Awards, *Mother India* was awarded Best Film, Best Director for Mehboob Khan, and Best Actress for Nargis. These honors consolidated the film's status as a landmark accomplishment in Indian cinema and acknowledged its artistic, technical, and narrative brilliance at the national level.

Domestically, the film was embraced as a national classic. It resonated with audiences across linguistic and regional boundaries, reinforcing a shared cultural identity during a formative period in India's nation-building process.

### Legacy and Cultural Impact

Still today, more than 20 years after its premiere, *Mother India* keeps impacting directors, professors, and viewers and is still being referred to as one of the very few morally aware movies made in India. It showed, maybe, for the first time to such an impressive extent, that movies featuring heavy social issues could grab both the critical attention and the large audience. This movie opened the door to the films of the future which dared to merge realism with catchy narratives thereby confirming the stance of cinema as a double vehicle of art and social critic.

The image of Radha is often brought up as a source to explain the qualities of an

Indian woman, her virtues, and the Indian nation, which shows that these aspects are still very much influenced by this figure.

The very first point is that Radha's character is used as a moral reference in the political speeches, literary critiques, and academic debates, to name just one of the many situations where her influence is felt. Film studies and cultural history departments consider the movie not only as a landmark in Indian cinema but also as a 'social document' that records the fears, ideals, and contradictions of the country that came out of the independence struggle.

The main feature that makes the film still relevant to today's moral and its moral complexity. Instead of providing simple solutions, it challenges the audience with tough questions about justice, obligation, and individual sacrifice. The decisions of Radha still ignite the controversy, which shows how profoundly the film immerses in the ethical dilemmas that are still topical. *Mother India*, by its impressive story, emblematic richness, and soulful profundity, is still a landmark in the Indian arts and culture domain - a source that perpetually influences the way films depict society, nation, and human spirit.

## When Play Becomes Pedagogy: The STEMPlay Labs Story



Antara Mrinal



# STEMPLAY LABS

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Chennai is no longer just a hub of industry and intellect, it is becoming the heartbeat of a movement that is reshaping how young minds engage with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). This new approach to education is being led by a company called STEMPlay Labs. This company is creating a new way for kids to learn all the STEM skills without needing to use electronic devices. Kids will learn these skills through play and hands-on experimentation. At the same time, this new company wants to give every child the opportunity to experience STEM education in the most equitable way possible.

The development of this company started with a personal experience by the founder, Aditi Prasad. Aditi is a seasoned legal scholar with an interest in STEM education. She has always been passionate

about giving every child access to the highest quality education possible. Throughout her educational career, Aditi has been working to design a better way to teach our children through a combination of play and solid teaching of the basic principles of STEM education. Through her work, she has combined her passions into one venture called STEMPlay Labs.

Prasad utilized her own background as both a parent and educator when developing tools that made STEM (Science Technology Engineering & Mathematics) concepts more accessible, understandable and engaging for children. With this goal in mind, STEMPlay Labs was established in Chennai with a mission of using “play as the basis of future learning”. This ethos is tied to STEMPlay Labs’ philosophy of “Swadeshi 2.0: Born in India, Built for the World” - mixing local design styles with worldwide standards, thus capturing

the modern interpretation of India's long-standing tradition of innovation.

### What STEMPlay is All About

Unlike many other educational technology (ed-tech) companies, which are based around an application and/or screen, STEMPlay Labs focuses on providing an education through a physical, screen-free/sensory way as a primary learning experience. The core products that are offered by STEM Play Lab are Wonder Briks and PictoMath. These products grow along with children as they develop.

Wonder Briks are patent-pending, side-locking construction bricks that inspire open-ended creativity and spatial reasoning. These bricks go beyond traditional sets by allowing children to build structures that reflect their evolving

ideas, developing problem-solving and engineering thinking skills intuitively.

PictoMath has succeeded at developing an engaging way of learning for mathematics by turning what was once perceived as complicated into visual play with cards. With this card game, children and adults aged 6+ will explore their relationships with numbers, patterns, and logical thinking rather than memorizing them repetitively.

Both of PictoMath's products emphasize the importance of long-term engagement. While many toys are designed to only engage users for a short amount of time (days) before becoming throwaway items, PictoMath's products serve as tools for deeper investigation and continued educational use.

The overarching principles guiding the startup's development like screenless learning, hands-on learning, developing

skills for the 21st century while supporting a global vision of education through creativity, concentration, logic, and teamwork, represent a significant change in thinking about today's educational products in order to encourage a greater emphasis on these areas while also eliminating passive consumption during traditional learning.

Prior to launching STEMPlay Labs, Prasad founded Indian Girls Code, a program that seeks to support the empowerment of girls (particularly from Under privileged backgrounds) through interest and involvement in coding, robotics, and STEM-based education.

Prasad has achieved international success through her efforts within the educational sector. She was keynote speaker at the UNESCO Policy Forum in Bangkok, where she spoke about girls' education in STEM. Additionally, Prasad has spoken at both TEDx events in Chennai as well as

TEDx events in Mumbai. In 2017, she was also recognized as one of 15 Young Societal Leaders in the World by the Government of Singapore for her dedication to continuing to support education and social impact globally.

Her prior initiatives under Indian Girls Code have empowered hundreds of girls to pursue STEM learning they might otherwise never have experienced, illustrating a deep commitment to equity and inclusion long before STEMPlay Labs began (Robotix).

#### **CSR Initiatives and Social Impact**

While STEMPlay Labs is still a fledgling startup, it has clearly identified its intent and altruistic goals. The overarching purpose of the enterprise supports an educational equity mission, especially for children with inconsistent access to quality digital infrastructure or engaging educational experiences.



STEMPlay Labs provides a tactile learning environment for students; therefore, regardless of your ability to access tablets and/or high-speed internet, STEMPlay Labs is inclusive to all. STEMPlay Labs also possesses a broader corporate social responsibility philosophy that encourages companies to grow through community-based manufacturing and support for productive thinking and problem solving early in life to elevate communities throughout the world.

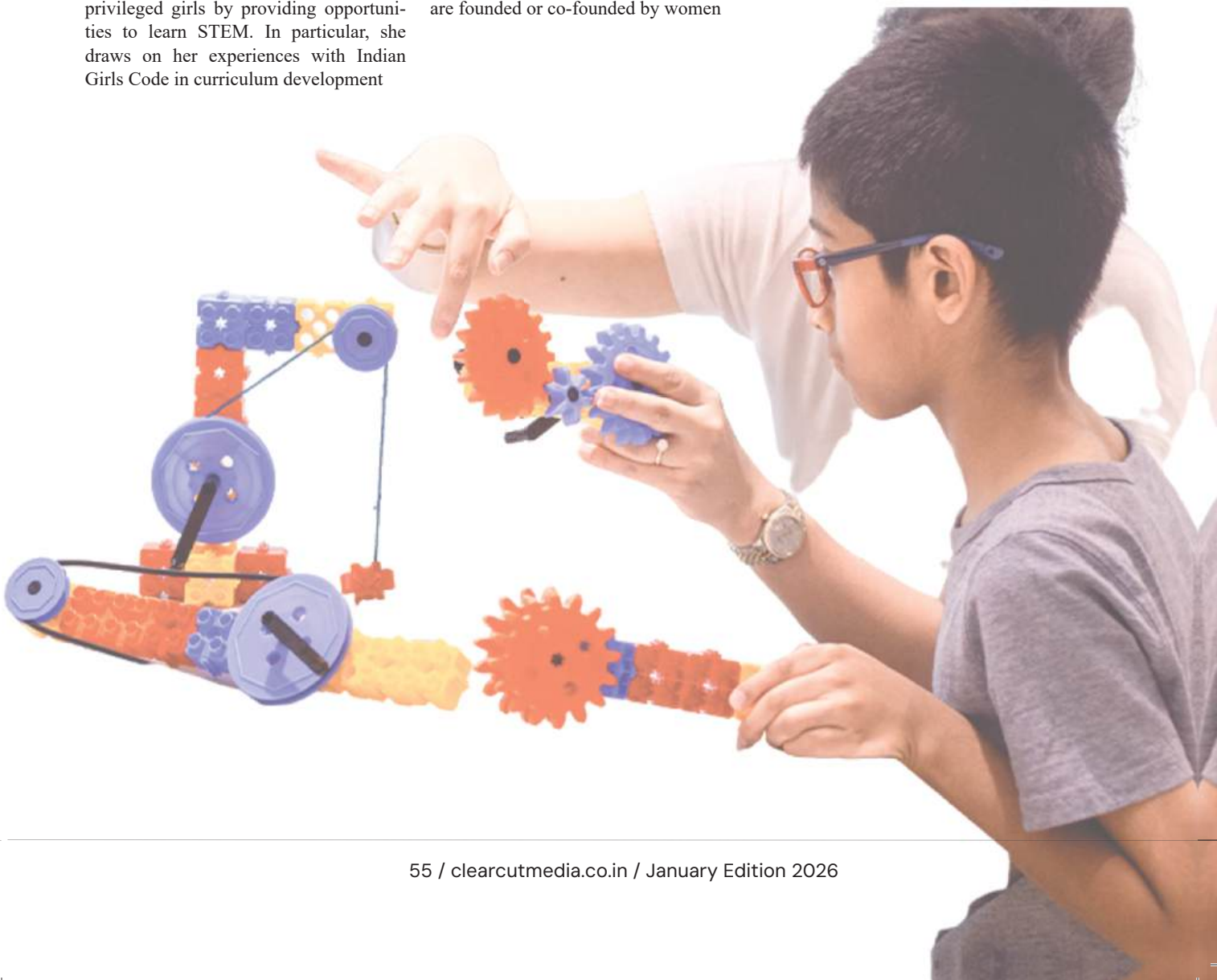
Prasad's leadership is an important aspect of the social mission of the enterprise because she builds on many years of experience enriching the lives of underprivileged girls by providing opportunities to learn STEM. In particular, she draws on her experiences with Indian Girls Code in curriculum development

and community engagement to further develop partnerships and outreach strategies throughout the country to close the STEM education gap (Robotix).

As STEMPlay Labs continues to build on its network of distribution both offline and online, the vision of the founders is a world in which young learners are engaged and inspired by interactive, collaborative, and quality educational opportunities, all without excessive reliance on digital media. The increase in recognition for developing authentic skills, coupled with the growing support for women entrepreneurs in India, where approximately half of the total startups are founded or co-founded by women

lets the company represent both creativity and opportunity.

In a fast-moving, highly-saturated digital world, STEMPlay Labs clearly illustrates how playing in an unstructured way with no interference from others is one of the best methods for preparing young children to meet future challenges. This Chennai-based start-up has an immediate objective of offering innovative products and a vision to create a new learner for the next generation through building a new image of STEM education, one brick and card at a time.





**Sonali Maheshwari**

# We Act, Children Win Inaction Is Not Neutral

## From Welfare to Rights: India's Child Protection Journey

India is currently experiencing a significant population shift. With nearly one-third of the population under 18, child protection is not a niche social concern but central to human capital development, social stability, and long-term economic resilience. Children's safety and wellbeing influence not only the course of individual lives but also the country's future. India's approach to child protection has changed over time in tandem with the country's overall development.

A rights-based, system-driven framework emphasizing prevention, care, and justice has gradually replaced what was once primarily a welfare-oriented paradigm centered on rescue and relief. A legal and institutional framework, such as the Juvenile Justice Act, the POCSO Act, and related regulations, has supported this change during the last 20 years. There are now district-wide organizations like Childline 1098, District Child Protection Units (DCPUs), Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs), Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), and Special Juvenile Police Units.



### **In-Between Silence: Law - Lived Reality - Implementation Challenges - Hidden Harm**

Although India has some of the most progressive child protection legislation on paper, children's everyday experiences show a continuing gap between rights that are given and those that are actually realized. Understanding how overlapping vulnerabilities build a child's risk profile and why current systems frequently fail to respond equitably or early enough is the fundamental problem as the nation fortifies its legislative frameworks and broadens institutional coverage. Risks associated with poverty, migration, gender, and digital exposure persist despite these legislative advancements, exposing deeper structural flaws that cannot be fixed by infrastructure and legislation alone. Although there has been improvement on paper, systemic coherence is brittle, coordination across institutions is poor, and implementation quality is still inconsistent. Only a small portion of children's actual experiences are captured by what is visible through crime records, helpline calls, and administrative data. The majority of everyday assault, coercion, internet exploitation, emotional abuse, and neglect go undetected.

According to data from India's 2011 Census, there were over 10.12 million working children and child laborers between the ages of 5 and 14. This indicates the number of children who continue to work in jobs that deny them access to education, health care, and a typical childhood.

According to the Access to Justice for Children program's own "Impact on the Ground" data for its End Child Trafficking in India work, over 44,900 children were saved from various forms of exploitation through over 27,000 rescue operations carried out across 24 states and union territories between April 2024 and March 2025. The majority of these children were released from child labor.

### **The Data Paradox: Plenty of Information, Little Insight**

Administrative systems, helplines, and digital platforms in the field of child protection produce enormous amounts of data on "cases," but these figures frequently conceal more about children's actual lives than they do. Official statistics document reports, investigations, and institutional reactions, but they seldom account for the reasons behind families' reluctance to report abuse, the ways in which gender and power dynamics influence risk, or the ways in which children themselves interact with protection initiatives. Because of this, dashboards and indicators can give the impression of control by using charts and trends to show progress while hiding persistent underreporting, misclassification, and the near-invisibility of the most marginalized children, such as those who are homeless, working informally, or lack identity documents.

Simultaneously, extremely sensitive data about specific children is gathered from disparate databases, frequently without the children's meaningful involvement or input. Children's voices and views are lost when lived experiences are reduced to decontextualized statistical pieces that are shared throughout agencies. This results in the well-known dilemma of "plenty of information, little insight," when decisions are made based on what is easy to count rather than what most urgently needs to change, and data is plentiful but comprehension remains superficial.

The ongoing conflict over child protection statistics is also fueled by this dichotomy. Advocates utilize statistics on missing, trafficked, or mistreated children as both authoritative evidence and known underestimates to mobilize resources and

attention, but they are often questioned for not accurately reflecting the extent of the harm. According to Bachpan Bachao Andolan's "Missing Children in India – A Pioneering Study," which included data from the NCRB, NHRC, and RTI, approximately 11 children disappear every hour. When governments dispute civil society leaders and civil society criticize official data as downplaying the issue, these inconsistencies can undermine trust.

### **Invisible Both Ways: Built for Children, Lost Between Systems**

The fact that children themselves frequently are unaware that there are institutions in place to safeguard them is one of the most basic, yet least recognized, weaknesses in India's child protection ecosystem. There is little consistent effort to make protection knowledge age-appropriate, accessible, or integrated into the regular settings where children live, study, and play. Instead, laws, programs, helplines, and protocols function primarily around children rather than with them.

Public data compilations of the NCRB "Crime in India" tables for serious POCSO offences (section 4 and 6) for 2023 show that approximately 96.6% of cases involved perpetrators who were known to the child, and only about 3.4% involved strangers or offenders not identified. These "known person" categories include family members, relatives, neighbours, family friends, employers, teachers, caregivers, and other acquaintances  
- Records Bureau

Despite their shortcomings, schools provide a crucial point of entry for safety reporting and instruction, but millions of kids never get there. Even basic awareness and prevention measures do not include those who are not in school because of poverty, migration, child labour, domestic employment, or relocation.

The fact that the majority of violence against children is committed by people they know, such as family members, relatives, neighbours, or employers, rather than by strangers, makes this omission particularly risky. Even when harm happens within a child's own circle of trust, the protection system still mostly depends on these same adults to identify abuse, report infractions, and start the help-seeking process. When taken as a whole, these gaps show a systemic failing that leaves the most vulnerable children least able to seek protection rather than an inadvertent error.

In a peri-urban government school, a 12-year-old boy regularly faced physical abuse by an older neighbour while returning from tuition. He believed the violence was his fault and ought to report it would get him "into trouble" for roaming alone. When asked months later whether he knew he could seek help, he replied, "If something bad happens, adults handle it. Children are supposed to stay quiet." He had never heard of Childline 1098, did not know what a Child Welfare Committee was, and had not been told by school, family, or community that safety was his right, not a favour.

The abuse stopped only when a teacher noticed his declining attendance and intervened.

### Digital Acceleration, New Risks

The digital age exacerbates these weaknesses while simultaneously making the paradox more intense. Opportunities for learning and connection have increased due to the rapid acceptance of digital technology, broad mobile use, inexpensive internet, and early access to online platforms. In addition, it has exposed kids to hazardous materials, grooming, cyber exploitation, and online sexual abuse, frequently with no protection. The majority of digital harms are still mostly undetectable to present child protection systems because current data only includes reported and recorded incidents, even though research on online abuse has started to influence policy discourse. Simultaneously, digital platforms produce enormous volumes of behavioral data about children's online

activities, yet the majority of this data is still locked within private business systems. The data required to identify risk patterns, emergent harms, or systemic failures is not readily available to child protection organizations and regulators tasked with preventing online abuse and exploitation. As a result, there is a glaring disparity between the abundance of data contained within corporate silos and the lack of morally sound, practical intelligence where children's rights are supposed to be upheld.

Many children today are digitally fluent: they know how to use apps, platforms, and devices with ease, but they often do not know that helplines, reporting tools, or child protection services exist, or that these protections apply to online harm. Safety awareness is rarely embedded into the everyday digital spaces where children spend their time. As a result, child protection systems remain out of step with children's digital lives; they are largely designed to respond to visible crises rather than to support children in navigating daily online risks, leaving a critical gap between digital access and digital safety.

### Financing Child Protection: Misaligned Priorities

Financial prioritisation presents another constraint. At the central level, child protection is primarily funded through umbrella welfare schemes focused on care, safety, and rehabilitation. These programmes are designed for population-level service delivery, where success is measured by coverage and outputs. Child protection, however, is inherently individual, rights-based, and crisis-driven requiring mandatory state intervention in hidden, high-risk situations.

A similar pattern is visible in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending, where Ministry of Corporate Affairs data analysed by DevInsights indicate that total CSR outlays have now crossed ₹34,000 crore annually across India. Whereas, sector-wise reviews by Protean and other national CSR outlook studies show that most CSR funds continue to flow into education, health,

or "women and child development," which means system-strengthening elements like child helplines, case management systems, legal aid, shelters, and aftercare remain significantly underfunded and under-recognised despite being highlighted as critical gaps in CSR and child rights assessments.

### Child Protection and the SDGs

A key component of India's goals under the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is bolstering child protection services. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledge that safeguarding children from abuse and exploitation is not a secondary welfare concern but rather a necessary condition for sustainable development. Ending violence against children is explicitly stated in SDG 16.2, however risk factors are included in many other goals, such as poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), education (SDG 4), gender inequality (SDG 5), and low labour standards (SDG 8). In addition to directly advancing SDG 16.2, preventing abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence also supports SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Child protection is not a standalone concern it is a cross-cutting enabler of sustainable development.

### What Must Change: Three Priority Actions

A deliberate and well-rounded strategy that acknowledges child protection as a separate system while maintaining tight ties to welfare platforms that facilitate early detection and prevention is required.

**System-level strengthening:** Child protection needs a specialized workforce of case workers, counselors, and attorneys, as well as clear legal ownership and allocated budgets. Welfare programs can aid in prevention, but they cannot take the place of an independent protective system.

**Sustained capacity building:** The foundation of protection is made up of educators, first responders, law enforcement, judges, medical personnel, administrators, and members of civil society. Instead of one-time orientations, their efficacy depends on ongoing sensitization, training, mentoring, and skill development.

**Service integration and coordination:** Only when supported by unambiguous referral channels, shared data systems, ongoing learning, and robust accountability mechanisms can schools, anganwadis, and health institutions serve as early warning points.

Through long-term support for infrastructure, case management, helplines, shelters, aftercare, and capacity building, CSR plays a crucial role in protecting children from violence.

### **Conclusion: Inaction Is a Choice**

Integrating child protection within welfare schemes can improve reach and prevention. But without standalone accountability, adequate budgets, and sustained expertise, such integration risks making abuse and exploitation less visible but not less prevalent. Protecting children requires more than intent; it requires systems that are equipped, accountable, and ready to act when it matters most.

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#### *About the writer:*

*Sonali Maheshwari is a senior social development professional with over two decades of experience designing and leading large-scale, multi-stakeholder programmes in India and South Asia. She specialises in behaviour change, policy engagement, and systems strengthening across child protection and safety, women's empowerment, adolescent and youth development, public health, social inclusion, and workforce wellbeing. Her work aligns closely with ESG priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals, with a strong emphasis on measurable impact, institutional accountability, and long-term sustainability.*

*Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position of the Clear Cut Magazine*

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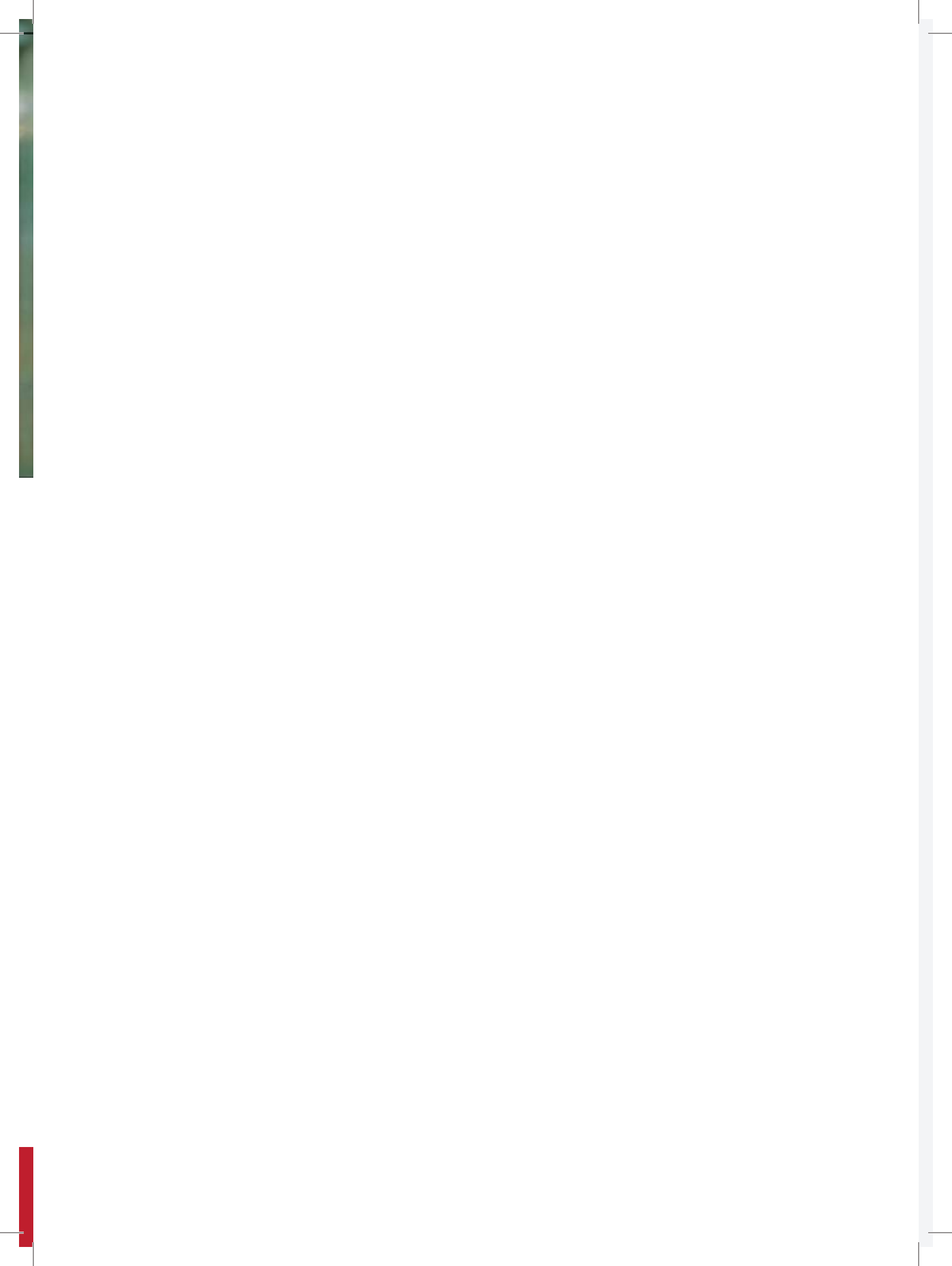
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