

Child is the father of a Man

-Asok kumar G.

They say, Child is the father of a man. What happens in “childhood,” *apparently* does not remain in childhood. It carries on...and continues to affect the adulthood and old-age. The adage seems to have been ignored by the 1st generation administrators of independent India. Otherwise, how does one explain the appalling state of children in the country- and still grappling with it even after 72 years of self-governance? In India, even now, it is not the survival of the “fittest” in the world, but competition here is for survival of the fittest among the mal-nourished, impoverished, stunted, low birth weight children.

Right from the day it is conceived, the “*Bharatiya child*” is under stress—from being “*accidentally*” hosted on an anaemic, low-weight mother, who finds it difficult to garner a morsel of good nourishment from the leftover of the food she had painstakingly cooked for her entire extended family, before and after coming back from her-back breaking labor outside; to its delivery in an unhygienic condition, most probably under the “watchful eyes of a local dai” who makes the “first cut” to sever the umbilical-chord using an unclean blade, (its stress increases *exponentially* from now on, if “*it*” happens to be a “*she*”); to the formative years when it bumbles in and out of the periodic cycles of diarrhoea and illness brought about by unclean drinking water, coliform infested environment, compounded by its low immunity and malnutrition; to reach a dilapidated school many kms away to study irrelevant subjects from an equally disinterested teacher, IF it *survives* these ordeals in its first five years. Our planners speak of the great demographic dividend of having 65% population below 35 years- yes there are the numbers (quantity) but where is the quality? In the formative years after independence our founding-fathers should have focused on *laying a solid foundation* for a great nation by *facilitating* the families to “*make healthy and quality babies*” -ie should have cared for and “empowered” our women and invested in primary education lot more. Had we done that, we would have been reaping its dividend now, like China. With plethora of healthy adults brought-up in a healthy childhood, our GDP would have been much bigger, productivity many-fold better and millions of man-days lost due to sickness avoided, pegging the GDP growth-rate a few notches higher.

From a nation in 1950 with 36.1Cr population, and having IMR 189.63/1000 live birth, MMR 1000/1 lakh live birth and 28.05% children dying before it reached 5 years of age, we are now 1.3bn people and have IMR of 28.7, MMR of 113 and only 3.71% of children dying before attaining the age of 5. A great achievement, indeed. But insignificant compared to what other similarly-placed countries have accomplished during the same period. 38% of the Indian Children are stunted- fourth highest in the world. It has been scientifically established that stunting growth happens in the first 1000 days of pregnancy and cannot be corrected afterwards. Why are we not able to care-for our children, at-least in its first 1000 days of life?

True, governments have belatedly realised the folly and have been making efforts to rectify it. Policy initiatives like National Policies for Children-1974/2013, National policy for education-1986, National Nutrition Policy-1993, National Charter for Children-2003, National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy-2013, India New Born Action Plan-2014 etc have been taken. These policies set action commitments to honour the obligations enshrined in our Constitution to provide care and protection to all children before and after birth and throughout the period of childhood, Comprehensive health and nutrition programmes for all children, Free and compulsory education until the age of 14 years, Special attention to children from marginalised backgrounds or with social-handicaps, Protection of children against abuse, neglect, cruelty and exploitation etc. Based on these, the notable schemes launched are Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS-1975) to address the need for early childhood care, implementation of immunisation programmes since 1978 to protect children from avertable life-threatening diseases, Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS-2009), National Nutrition Mission etc.

But lot more to be done, setting priority to focus on women empowerment, infant and child care, sanitation and drinking water and primary education for building up a strong generation for an India aspiring to be the “Viswa-guru”!