

CHILD ABUSE

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How can we remain silent any longer after having witnessed on television an evident case of child abuse?

Of all places, it happened at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall during the inauguration ceremony of the SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children in South Asia in the presence of the very people who had been responsible for the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, eminent delegates from the region working with children and supposedly sensitive to their well-being, lawyers, doctors, human rights activists, journalists, ministers, the President.

It happened when seven year old Kamal Ratnayake from Kurunegala, a child with stumps for hands and legs appeared on stage and read out a speech in Sinhala and later in English, evidently not written by him, in which he related the story of his life and which apparently moved the audience to tears. He ended his speech by thanking President Premadasa for giving him, what until that day had not been given, what any ordinary human being would aspire to, but not have the power to give, a reason for Kamal to live.

The silence following the Conference may have been due to the unawareness or rather the ignorance of what child abuse in fact is.

Child abuse is not limited to infanticide, abandonment, exploitation of children as cheap labour or battering as most people tend to believe.

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It is also realising through the child, one's own aspirations and using the child as a vehicle for this purpose.

This happens daily but is not always viewed as child abuse. For example, when a child is exploited as cheap domestic labour, the employer is not the main offender but the parent too, as the child's earnings are used for the benefit of the family. Parents who pressurize their children to achieve academically regardless of their abilities or interests may do so for themselves, for many personal reasons such as to climb the social ladder or to indirectly blame their own parents for not having provided them with enough opportunities during their childhood. Similarly, a child who must beg or perform for the benefit (not always financial) of an adult is also to be viewed as a victim of abuse.

School children are frequently made to participate in sports activities, religious and non religious ceremonies or political meetings. For these they have to rehearse for long hours often in the blazing sun, at times during school hours. Even if they do not always understand the purpose of the event, sometimes against their will, they are made to parade before eminent personalities whom they may not even know. As a result, their studies get disrupted and the health of some affected.

Ignorance could perhaps excuse some for remaining silent. However, it is hard to believe that it is ignorance that kept the entire audience at the conference silent. Assuming that indeed it was not ignorance, then let us hope that it was not fear. ■

Contd. from p. 30

16. Amin's name for all pre-capitalist societies where surplus is extracted as a "tribute" through extra-economic means.
17. "What has been called scientific agriculture and the Green Revolution is in reality a western patriarchal anti-nature model of agriculture which shifts the control of food systems from women to agribusiness multinationals and disrupts natural processes (p. 97)... (it was) designed by MNC and western male experts, homogenising nature's diversity and diversity of human knowledge on a reductionist pattern of agriculture" (p. 99). "It was power, profits and control that made global corporate and aid interests opt for "miracle seeds" which made peasants dependent on internationally produced seeds and chemicals. Other alternatives would have left control with women and peasants and would have kept people fed but would not have generated profits." (pp. 134; 96-178 passim).
18. Andrew Collier, *Socialist Reasoning: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Scientific Socialism*, Pluto Press, London, 1990, p. 160.
19. D.N. "Women and Forests," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 14, 1990.
20. Maureen Mackintosh, "Abstract Markets and Real Needs," in Henry Bernstein, Ben Crow et al (eds.), *The Food Question*, pp. 43-53.
21. Henry Bernstein, "Taking the Part of Peasants?" in Henry Bernstein, Ben Crow, Maureen Mackintosh and Charlotte Martin (eds), *The Food Question: Profits v. People?* Monthly Review Press, 1990. Hamza Alavi, "Peasantry and Capitalism: A Marxist Discourse," in Teodor Shanin (ed), *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Basil Blackwell, 1987.
22. Bernstein, p. 74.
23. Diane Elson provides a good overview of the issues involved in dependent development "Dominance and Dependency in the World Economy", in Ben Crow, Mary Thrope et al (eds.) *Survival and Change in the Third World*, Oxford University Press, 1988.
24. Achn Vanaik, *The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India* Verso, 1990.