

Child Welfare

November 14, Children's Day. It no longer gets the attention it used to even a few years ago. The media- print or electronic- mention it, hardly. No colour supplements tracing the origin and significance of the day; nor interviews with famous personalities about the importance of children, their own memories of childhood, their experience with children and so many other things our original thinkers in media come up with. No long features on what gifts to give, what could be concocted to entertain those young devils, no Archies scheme for theme cards or parties. The Day gaps off unmentioned and as far as one could make out unlamented. In short, no celebrations. A sad contrast to the hype we are served before and on Mother's Day, Father's Day, even Sister's and Brother's Days now, besides, of course, Valentine's Day.

Is it because Children's Day has not come to us from the West, as have the other Days, courtesy 'globalization', a term that has assumed synonymy with Westernization? What has not been endorsed by the West (more prominently the US of America) has little significance for us here in India.

It is perhaps only in the fitness of things that we do not celebrate Children's Day. Today's children seem to have lost out on childhood anyway. Most of them are little adults; many of those among the poor have to earn a living at a tender age, income, experiencing the hardships of life and becoming mature of mind much their time; if they belong to the super elite set, they have all facilities a fraction of which most others have to work all their lives to get. And with the aggressive advertising all of us are exposed to these days, the little brats have become canny consumerists much before their time; not satisfied with little joys but demanding only that which a lot of money can buy. One is surprised at the cynicism shown by even by even small children these days.

As a country, we are not over-sensitive to children or childhood. Of course , it is considered a 'duty' to have children (and, of course, in this context, to have male children. Technology is readily made use of to get rid of girl children by people short-sighted enough not to see the bleak future for their boys who may find no girl to marry in the future. Sadly enough, most of these fetus-murderers are from the 'educated' urban classes who can afford such tests and techniques. We would rather hush up child abuse and rape than bring 'dishonor' to the family name. child marriages take place. Enmass, on fixed 'auspicious' days with the law-makers as well as the law-enforcers as mute spectators if not active participants. Media coverage brings it all into the open, but no action is taken against the perpetrators, though we have a legal age for marriage on the statute.

Education has been made a fundamental right. This, feel our law-makers, is actually synonymous with full literacy and school attendance. We now have an educational cess, presumably to meet the challenge of educating all. We don't quite know how much money has been collected or where the money is being spent, how many of our villages have a school that actually works, and, more important, teachers who teach? Corporal punishment, casteist attitudes and the consequent social discrimination, obsolete methods of teaching, lack of dedication, all lead to a high degree of dropouts that no amount of compulsion on paper can overcome; and fudging the figures hounded at home and school land up in the town tea shops and dachas, putting in more than 14 hours of labour a day for a pittance and much abuse, to grow into icons of despair or associates of the local hoodlums to move fast along the highway to lucrative crime.

If they are lucky to go to school, the competition is so tough, and the pressure to 'do well' so nerve-breaking, that school work is no less than 'labour'. So we have suicides before results are out, and many children suffer stress-related diseases. All that talk about unburdening the school child, searching for aptitudes and developing them, allowing the child to take up vocational streams is just lip service; which parent will happily accept a child entering a low paid job paint and cannot earn a 'aptitude' ? what if the child loves to paint and cannot earn a living ? how will he or she questions are unspoken, or, if asked, they are brushed aside as irrelevant.

Somewhere along the line, both state and society have failed the children. Too many have been deprived of the healthy childhood that they deserve by right. Many November 14s may pass, and indeed another millennium may come before the goals we set on paper become remotely reachable.