

EDITORIAL NOTE

India stands at an inflection point in the advancement of children's rights and welfare. Over the years, legal frameworks, policy interventions, and institutional mechanisms have evolved considerably, reflecting a growing recognition that children are rights-bearing individuals. Yet, despite these reforms, systemic gaps persist in translating these rights into tangible, lived realities. Children today navigate a complex landscape where socio-economic disparities, diluted/injusticiable economic-social-cultural rights and evolving digital environments and legal ambiguities intersect with questions of autonomy, protection, and well-being. Ensuring their holistic development requires a nuanced understanding of these multidimensional challenges, combining rigorous studies of inter-sectionalities, legal interpretation, evidence-based policymaking and sustained public financed interventions.

The eleven papers featured in this volume collectively offer a comprehensive examination of these issues, analysing the intersections of fiscal planning, child protection, education, nutrition, digital safety, and adolescent agency. These studies do not treat children merely as beneficiaries of law or policy; instead, they highlight children as active participants in the shaping of their lives, emphasising that legal, social and economic interventions must respond to their evolving needs. By interrogating structural challenges alongside emerging issues, this collection underscores the urgent need for integrated, context-sensitive and evidence-based approaches to child welfare in India, ensuring that the promise of rights translates into practical, meaningful outcomes.

India's public finance landscape for children is a critical area of concern. Vishal Anand, in *Pennies for Progress? Evaluating the Adequacy and Imagination of Public Finance for Children in India* identifies a paradox where impressive national economic growth has not translated into proportional investment in child welfare. Anand highlights how shrinking budgetary allocations to child-focused sectors, especially child protection and early childhood services, have created a persistent gap. He distinguishes between "adequacy" (ensuring enough funds are consistently allocated) and "imagination" (the innovative and strategic use of those funds). Drawing on budget analysis and scheme evaluations, Anand shows that flagship programs such as *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan* and *PM POSHAN* expand access but fall short of improving outcomes due to an input-driven, siloed

approach. The paper argues for outcome-oriented financing, catalytic philanthropy, and stronger local governance as pathways to transform limited fiscal resources into real developmental progress for children.

Turning to the emerging challenges of the digital age, Nimisha Menon and Udbhav Sinha focus on sextortion in *Between Exploitation and Criminalisation: Towards Child-Centred Responses to Sextortion in India*. They argue that sextortion, where children are coerced into sexual acts or image-sharing under threat, remains a glaring blind spot in Indian law, as there is no stand-alone penal provision addressing it. Their study shows how children can be both victims and, in some cases, groomed into being offenders, which complicates legal and protective responses. With the rise in online exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors call for legal recognition of sextortion as a specific offence, coupled with preventive strategies such as digital literacy, cyber-patrol mechanisms, and victim-sensitive enforcement frameworks. This analysis underscores the urgent need to extend child protection into the rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

The question of access to education in the face of economic inequality is examined in *Economic Inequality and Child Education: A Study of School Dropouts in Odisha* by Savitribala Dash and Prof. Mrutyunjay Swain. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods across Ganjam and Nabarangpur districts, the study identifies financial hardship as the dominant driver of dropouts, particularly in upper primary and secondary schooling. Children often leave school to engage in paid work, while irregular parental employment patterns exacerbate educational instability. The research also reveals behavioural and psychological challenges: in Ganjam, social media distractions were significant, while in Nabarangpur, school phobia was widespread. Structural gaps such as weak infrastructure, poor teacher-student communication, and low-quality teaching further aggravated the problem. The authors propose solutions such as mother-tongue-based teaching, targeted remedial education, community participation, and improved teacher training to create an inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem.

Adolescent sexuality and the rigidity of existing legal frameworks are explored through multiple papers. Shalini Shukla, in *The Grey Area of Consent: Judicial Inconsistency and Adolescent Rights under the POCSO Act*, shows how the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) is inconsistently applied by courts in cases involving consensual teenage relationships. The mandatory reporting clause

often conflicts with adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services, leading to outcomes that compromise both protection and autonomy. Similarly, Apoorva Bhardwaj and Anjana Kumari, in *Between Consent and Crime: Rethinking Legal Boundaries for Consensual Teenage Relationships*, examine whether India's fixed age of consent at 18 adequately balances adolescent welfare with their developing autonomy. Their paper stresses that a purely protectionist approach risks criminalising normal adolescent behaviour, and instead calls for reforms such as differentiated treatment of consensual peer relationships, evidence-based sex education, and policy frameworks that acknowledge adolescents' evolving capacities. Together, these works highlight the urgent need for legal reform that respects both protection and autonomy.

Roshni Laskar and Zigisha Pujari, in their empirical study *Rehabilitation and reintegration of a Child in Conflict with Law: Issues and challenges with special reference to the state of Tripura*, take a close look at the rehabilitation and social reintegration challenges in the juvenile justice system. They highlight the issue of lack of trained professionals, inadequate infrastructure, vocational training and psychological counselling which de facto dilutes the rehabilitation and reintegration component of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2015, on ground. Additionally, they spotlight the lack of family support, community acceptance and after release care as other cognitive reasons in undermining a successful social reintegration. Based on their findings in the observational homes in Tripura the authors recommend mechanisms such as preparation of individual care plans, gender based plans and community based services to ensure the child's rights' protection and intentional creation of opportunities for sustainable reintegration.

Hritwik Ravi in *Childhood, Consent and Privacy: A Case Comment on In Re: Right to Privacy of Adolescents* analyses a landmark Supreme Court decision where the Court balanced statutory rigidity with restorative justice by suspending sentencing under Article 142. Ravi highlights how this case exposed systemic failures, police hostility, institutional neglect, and financial exploitation, which caused more trauma than the alleged offence. The judgment, though non-precedential, underscores the potential of judicial creativity in reconciling child protection laws with lived adolescent realities.

Beyond issues of sexuality, the scope of child welfare also encompasses children in conflict with the law. In *Children in Conflict with Law and Scope of Social Work*

Interventions at Observation Homes: Channelising Energy for a Better Future, Dr Shashi Rani Dev and Dr Shubham Kumar explore how observation homes under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2015, function as spaces for reformation and reintegration. Their empirical study highlights systemic challenges, including inadequate rehabilitation programs, weak coordination among stakeholders, and insufficient psychosocial support. The authors emphasise that observation homes must go beyond custodial care to provide holistic education, counselling, and mentorship, thereby transforming vulnerable children's trajectories towards constructive futures.

The foundational role of nutrition in child welfare is examined by Ms Manika Gupta and Ms Vanshika Yadav in *The Economics of Early Nutrition: Why the First 1000 Days Matter*. Drawing on global evidence and Indian programmatic shortcomings, they show that inadequate nutrition during the first 1000 days, from conception to age two, creates irreversible developmental deficits, including stunting and cognitive impairment. Despite constitutional guarantees and multiple government schemes, India's expenditure on child nutrition remains below international standards. The authors present a cost-benefit argument for scaling up early nutrition investments, linking them to long-term economic productivity and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. They call for systemic reforms to budgeting, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that nutrition is treated not as welfare spending but as a strategic investment in human capital.

Institutional and data-driven insights are provided by Dr Pradipta Kumar Sarangi and Dr Swagatika Samal in *Schools at a Glance: India & Odisha*, an infographic-based analysis that presents trends in school management, enrolment, teacher availability, and infrastructure between the years 2018-19 till 2024-25. The study highlights a decline in government schools and enrolment, contrasted with a rise in private schools, raising questions of equity and access. By visualising critical gaps, the paper situates the broader educational challenges identified in micro-level studies such as Dash and Swain's, offering a macro perspective that informs policy and planning.

Finally, Madhulika Tripathy's *Proceedings of the 5th World Congress' Official Satellite Event hosted by National Law University Odisha – Centre for Child Rights and CRY (Child Rights and You): Advancing Child-Centred Justice* underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration. Documenting deliberations at

this global forum, the paper highlights the necessity of cross-sectoral partnerships between the judiciary, policymakers, child rights advocates, and communities to prevent and respond to violence against children in justice systems. It demonstrates that advancing child-centred justice requires integrating evidence-based reforms, strengthening institutional accountability, and ensuring children's voices are central in shaping justice mechanisms.

Collectively, these eleven papers present a nuanced, multidimensional understanding of the contemporary challenges in India's child rights discourse. They reveal that progress cannot rely solely on legislation or policy statements but must be reinforced through responsive institutions, accountable governance, and participatory frameworks that centre children's experiences and aspirations. From fiscal adequacy and early nutrition to education, digital safety, adolescent autonomy, and institutional reforms, the studies demonstrate how gaps in one area can reverberate across multiple dimensions of child welfare. The insights offered highlight a clear pathway forward: integrating legal reforms, social policy, and ethical considerations to create an environment where every child can thrive. Ultimately, these original papers underscore that ensuring equitable and durable child rights requires vigilant interdisciplinary collaboration, sustained commitment, and the constant centring of children's voices in all policy, programmatic, and judicial decisions.

Building a temper of child rights not just in the children and their parents and teachers but also across the society and state and its instruments is central. Children are not merely beneficiaries but active participants in shaping their own future and acknowledging this principle and practising it, is essential for building a society grounded in justice, dignity, and opportunity for all. We hope this Volume VI, Issue II will be a step closer to achieving that.

Prof Biraj Swain
Chief Minister's Chair Professor cum Director, Centre for Child Rights
Editor, Journal on the Rights of the Child of National Law
University Odisha