

Empowerment through Participation of Children at Risk

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Every parent feels delighted when children help them in the kitchen or in keeping the house clean. Similarly every village Sarpanch/ward member feels when children participate in keeping the streets clean, school tidy or bring back school drop outs back to school. We not only feel happy but appreciate, feel proud of the children's **participation**.

A. The Challenges

Today we are speaking of the “**Right of children**” to participate. I feel that we adults do not take seriously this “**Right of Children to participate**” By children we mean all who are below 18 years. Which parent consults the children while planning to build or buy a house? Which Sarpanch or Municipality Chairperson seeks the suggestions of children for the development of the village/municipality? Do Collectors district chair persons seek the opinion of children for the development of the District? Which Chief Minister or Home minister invites children's suggestions for the well being of the state? Does the Prime minister or the planning commission ever try to elucidate the opinion of children in the nation building process? We make a mockery of children's participation. All we do is to attend children's cultural programme on Nov. 14th and make a lengthy speech praising the children.

We often complain that our young citizens (Youth) are not contributing to the development process at the village, district, state or national levels. How can this happen if as children their contribution was not encouraged? If we are serious about the participation of children we need to think of a mechanism to elucidate their participation. Such a mechanism should have the democratic process built into it. Children learn to participate not individually but as a group democratically.

The Children parliament is an excellent mechanism for children to participate. This mechanism of Children's Parliament has been tried extensively in several states and found to be working wonderfully well. It is well suited to the attitudes of children and they enjoy the parliament meeting. All it needs is the presence of a child friendly adult once in a week for an hour. Shall we see then how to make a “CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENT”

The child friendly adult person gathers around thirty children of a **neighborhood**, and explains to them the idea of the children's parliament. The word **neighborhood** is important as neighborhood has common problems and aspirations. Children from far-flung parts of the village will not be able to participate in meetings or share in the common aspirations. While talking to children of the neighborhood the child friendly person asks them: Do you like your village? “Yes” comes the answer. Do you want to make it better? Oh! Yes. Then he tells them that if they join the children's Parliament they can make the village better. Most of them volunteer to join. The group then elects a

Prime Minister, a Speaker, Home minister, health, education, finance, sports, cultural, gender and now planning to introduce child minister for differently-abled ministers. A short training to fix the roles of the ministers and democratic way of conducting the weekly meetings is provided. The members /ministers take the oath to serve the children of the neighborhood. The Children's parliament is ready to function.

A book written by Mr. Joseph Ratnam describes the method of forming the children's parliaments, the election process, oath taking ceremony, the responsibility of the ministers, the meeting procedure and other activates. The book is available in English, Tamil and Telugu versions. .

The speaker conducts the Parliament meeting with the help of a prepared agenda. The word parliament comes from the Greek word "PARLARE" and so children ministers and members must speak about any problem they face in the neighborhood particularly relating to children and their rights. The prime Minister selects one of these problems for the week's discussion and leads the members to pass a resolution to solve the problem. The action plan is set to implement the resolution. The children also have birthday celebrations, songs, jokes and story-telling after the agenda is over. The children are so delighted when they are able to contribute to the betterment of their neighborhood. We call these achievements of children as "success stories" and we have lots of success stories coming in from the field. (Relate one or two S. stories).

Children who have contributed to the development of their neighborhood will certainly grow up to be **responsible citizens** and participate better in the nation building project. Children parliament is an excellent training to **CITIZENSHIP**. Should we not invest into this vital training of children?

Some parents may object to this 'Children's parliament in the busy schedule of children with school, home works and tuitions. Do children love their village and want to make it better? "Yes" they say. Then they can give one hour a week to Children's parliament. The problem is with parents who pressurize their children to unhealthy competition to get marks. We teach them to be unconcerned about the neighbor and neighborhood. The nature of children is different. They are so enthusiastic, adventurous, creative, sharing, caring and eager to improve the situation around them.

Federating: Several neighborhood parliaments can be federated (electing 1-2 representatives from each neighborhood Parliament) to form a Panchayat parliament. The Panchayat Children's Parliament can be recognized as the official representative of children for the Panchayat / Gramsabha meetings.

Similarly all the Panchayat Parliaments in a Mandal can be federated to form a Mandal parliament. This Mandal children's parliament can be consulted for the development of the Mandal. The Mandal parliaments in a district can be federated to form a District parliament. The Collector can get the opinion of children from this District Children's parliament. Similarly state, national and world level Children's parliaments can be formed. Children's opinion can easily be obtained at all levels from these Children's

parliaments. The Neighborhood children's parliament is the basic unit from which the higher level bodies are built.

At this juncture I should caution my listeners about certain unrealistic hopes about Children's parliament.

- a. Children's parliament is not going to solve all the problems we face in the villages or towns.
- b. Children parliament is not a problem solving mechanism but a mechanism for children to exercise their right to Participation.

What is to be appreciated is the democratic process at work within these parliaments.

Secondly members of children parliament who have contributed to the development process tend to participate better in the democratic process as citizens.

B. Opportunities

The two concepts highlighted are DEMOCRACY and PARTICIPATION. Participation is the core of "**democracy**". Can we replicate the merits of children's Parliament to our national democracy? Before we do that let us take a close look at our own democracy and development through the democratic process. Many in India feel the democratic process is slowing down development. Look at China the development is faster there. What exactly is wrong with democracy?

The answer is:

- a. There is no participation or very little participation of the people in our democracy.
- b. The main mechanism of participation is the **election process**. Today the election process has become so complex that only the very rich can afford to stand as candidates. Democracy is out of reach for the poor. In a country like India the leaders of the political parties are the super rich. They can never form truly pro-poor government.
- c. For the poor it is same if the CONGRESS or the BJP or TDP forms the government. Election is a mela where the poor are told that their vote is supreme; it can make or mark the destiny of the party/Government. After the elections the poor are discarded like the curry leaves from a tasty dish. Practice of democracy in small neighborhood groups allows the poor to participate better, and have their say in the decision making process.

How can we say that there is a high degree of participation in children Parliament and that there is low level participation in our national democracy?

In the National democracy all our participation consists of casting the vote once in five years. After this we look after our own business and keep criticizing the politicians. Our justification for this runs like this:

We cannot participate directly in the governing this country or the in executive process. We do this indirectly through our **representatives**. We elect them once in five years. They are responsible for what happens to our village, city, mandal, district, state and country.

We participate through our elected **REPRECETATIVE**. The **election** is the mechanism for participation in our democracy.

We know that **participation** cannot be, meaningful or effective in large groups. People can get to know each other and their problems in small groups. In any workshop the leader of the workshop divides his participants into small groups to get their opinions. Social scientists believe 30 is a good number for participation. In our democracy a MLA constituency consists of more than lakh voters. An MP constituency consists of many lakhs of voters. Can there be any participation among such large numbers? Can an MP or a MLA truly represent his constituency when there is little participation between him/her and the voters or the voters among themselves? Often a candidate getting 10% of the votes is declared elected. Are the problems and aspirations of the people of the constituency known to all voters? Certainly not. That is why ours is not a democracy, but more a hypocrisy. It is a conspiracy devised by the rich to retain political power. What is the solution to this? For true participation and representation the present constituencies could be made into smaller units of around 30 families in a neighborhood. This is what we do in a children's neighborhood Parliament. Suppose we form adult **NEIGHBORHOOD PARLIAMENTS?**

Participation among these thirty families will be ideal. Their needs and problems are known to each other. They can elect a leader who can truly represent them. The election is not a costly process and no corruption can take place. They can meet as often as needed and discuss new requirements for their development. Very often the needs of such a small group are vitally linked with the neighboring groups. For example you cannot design a water supply system for 30 families. It can be designed for a Pachayat or larger bodies.

This brings in the need to federate such neighborhood groups (we call them parliaments now) into a Panchayt Parliament. Let us consider a Panchayat with 1000 families. Dividing these into neighborhood Parliaments, there may be 30 neighborhood Parliaments. A representative from each of the neighborhood parliaments will form the **Panchayat Parliament**. This is the **Panchayat governing body**.

Any development proposal /problem in the Panchayat is first discussed in the neighborhood parliaments and opinions are brought to the Panchayat parliament and a consensus decision is taken. If any neighborhood parliament feels their representative has not carried their opinion to the Panchayat the group can recall the representative and elect another. Since the group is small this can be done in a short time. The quality /responsibility of the representation improve. In a Mandal there may be 25-30

Panchayats. A representative each from the panchayat parliaments will make a Mandal Parliament. This Mandal Parliament is the **Mandal Government**. In the same way, District, state and **national parliaments** can be formed.

In this process we have elected the Panchayat, Mandal, District and State and National representatives without costly campaigns. The poor or rightful candidates have a chance to be elected. There is less chance of electoral corruption or purchasing of votes. Can we then opt for this form of neighborhood groups to build up a state and national democratic government?

The word **Parliament** comes from the French/Greek root: “Parlare” means to speak. The beginning of all development is talking about it and listening to others. In a neighborhood Parliament the members talk about the development needs of the neighborhood. Participation means participation in the **decision making process**. This means that every member’s opinion must be heard and considered. The final decision is taken by the group giving due weightage to everyone’s opinion. In a group of thirty every one can express his opinion in the decision making process. Since they have contributed to the decision they become **responsible** to carry out the decisions. They become “responsible citizens”

In this form of government the budget making will be truly a democratic process from the bottom. The development needs of each neighborhood Parliament is gathered and consolidated at the higher levels. This will give us the Panchayat, Mandal, district, state and National Budgets. Executing the budget is also easy as the budget is known by all and every one takes responsibility to carry out the works proposed by them. Any decision that can be taken at the lower level should not be on the agenda at the higher level

C. Learnings

Patriotic Idealism blooms in the youth. As a youth I may have tried to make my village /city/country a better place. This blooming idealism slowly died when the system did not allow me to participate in the development process. I probably did not participate in the decision to build the school in my village/city. An unknown contractor built it. My suggestions to improve the quality of the building were discarded. Slowly I found that the system did not allow me to participate unless I became the Sarpanch or M L A. I could not become one. So I agreed with the majority who said, “LET US LEAVE IT TO THE POLITITIANS”. It is more important to look after your family and children. I slowly became the selfish, unpatriotic person I am today.

Today the daily advise you give your child every morning is: “my child, study, study hard, you got 80 marks in last test, this time you should get 90, next time 95”..... When you find that your child has no pencil because he lent it to a fellow student who had no pencil, you disapprove of this and tell him to concentrate on his studies and not worry about others who have no pencils. That child has a parent....it is not your problem. **We should not be concerned with our neighbours’ problems or the problems of the village, city or country.** Look after yourselves and your studies In case the child retorts “Daddy why should I study so hard, you reply “If you study you will get a good job, earn lots of money, live in luxury like our rich neighbor. Your child

slowly absorbs the message “making money (by fair or foul means) is the most important task. By the time he is 21, a **citizen** he least cares about the neighborhood, Village, city, mandal district or state. This is the training-to-citizenship most children get

Let us not corrupt our children. The children are ever enthusiastic about sharing whatever they have with others and thinking creatively. How inspiring to see the poor child biting into his only chocolate to give half to his friend. Can we then train children to be “**GOOD CITIZENS**” and lay the foundations of a more participative, human society? This is the reason to make neighborhood ‘**CHILDREN’S PARLIAMENTS**’. When the children who have experienced “participation” in children’s Parliament grow to be adults, they may feel the need to form **adult** neighborhood parliaments, for a meaningful democratic society. This allows us to nurture the hope of creating a new democratic society where every one cares for his neighbor, enthusiastic about improving the neighborhood, village and city.

I would like to conclude this talk by drawing your attention to the rights children. As we value our human rights Children too have rights

The **RIGHTS OF THE CHILDREN** can be summarized into four:

- a. **The right to Life**
- b. **The right to Protection**
- c. **The right to Development**
- d. **The right to participation**

In our culture children rarely enjoy the **right to Participation** at home, in the School, in the panchayat or any other forum. We usually do not listen to children’s opinions or give value to them. They have no opportunity to participate. They become citizens without any experience of participation, without ever having participated in any development activity. They do only “studies”. The Children’s parliament is an excellent forum for children to exercise their right to Participate, to become citizens. ..

Children have an opinion on everything that is happening at home the village or city. They can express this opinion in the Children’s Parliament. They can contribute to the democratic process. They can decide to carry out small tasks for the village / city by themselves or they may go and meet executive officials at the village, mandal and district levels with their problems.

Children’s Parliament nurtures Humanity of children and builds in them human values like caring for the other children in their studies, developing the neighborhood, understanding the problems of the village, regarding education, health and development. In the absence of any human value education in most schools this children’s Parliament is an excellent means to instill human values like caring for the other children, for the neighbor, neighborhood and patriotic values. Their social responsibilities grow, they get opportunities to exercise leadership, they grow into citizens full of hope and courage.

So Let us make CHILDREN’S PARLIAMENTS