

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CHILDREN: A STUDY IN THE COASTAL AREA IN ALAPPUZHA DISTRICT (KERALA)

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ABSTRACT: *This micro-level study presents the disturbing data on coastal life, livelihood, economic backwardness, discrimination and disadvantages faced by families in coastal region which directly affects the living conditions and human rights of children. The coastal communities generally live in physical, economic and social isolation and are deprived of the basic Human Rights to food, shelter, drinking water, sanitation and education. It is the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of life. It is the duty of the state to recognize the right of every child and to provide a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, moral and social developments. Many children in coastal area are engaged in the fish processing and ice factories. This invisible and seasonal work is damaging their mental, physical and emotional development. The problem of girl child labourers is alarming as it is unrecognized, unpaid, invisible and unrewarded. Child marriages, though prohibited by law are still prevalent in the area. Every child who is out of school is a child labourer in the field of fishing, fish farms, ice factories, fish processing units or in fish marketing. Only a working together approach can protect and preserve the basic rights of children.*

Key Words: *Invisible child labour, Rights based approach, Right to development, Coastal community, Partnership approach*

INTRODUCTION

The state of Kerala has achieved great socio-economic development in the fields of education, health, public distribution system, land reforms, welfare measures to the marginalized sections of the society etc. The state attained tremendous progress in favour of the less privileged classes and the society became more egalitarian compared with any other states in India. Yet, Kerala has not achieved uniform development in all areas. In the coastal areas there is lack of many essential requirements including health, educational, insurance, public distribution systems etc.

The social and economic life of the people of the coastal area in general and the consequent violation of basic human rights of children in particular are very much pronouncing.

AREA OF THE STUDY

Alappuzha is bestowed with 82 km of coastline and rich island water bodies with fresh water rivers, canals, ponds and lakes. Fisheries are one of the important developmental sectors having socio-economic importance in the district. Fishing and related Industries offer direct employment to above 45,000 people in the district. There is also a host of related industries like ice plants, fish processing plants etc which provide employment for a large section of coastal population. To learn the socio-economic conditions of the coastal community of the district a micro level survey was conducted in households. The survey focused the socio-economic status of the households in general, examined the social-economic and educational conditions of the children and also the measures adopted to protect their basic human rights.

The coastal communities are increasingly at risk from various hazards. Coastal habitats such as coral reefs, mangroves, wetlands are being destroyed. Over fishing and destructive fishing are causing the decline of fishery resources and changes in marine ecosystem. The degradation of the coastal environment from chronic human induced actions threatens food security, livelihood, overall economic development and well being of coastal communities. These areas are relatively densely populated where basic survival and disaster warning and response mechanisms are limited.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study academically seek the following:

1. To study the social, economic and educational conditions of the people of the coastal area in general

2. To enquire the human rights situations of children of coastal area in Alappuzha district
3. To find out a workable solution of the problems of coastal area and thereby protecting the fundamental freedom and human rights of children.

HYPOTHESIS

1. People of coastal area especially children living in a condition of social and economic isolation.
2. Children of the coastal area are deprived of many fundamental human rights and freedom.
3. Schemes and programmes of central, state and local self government institution for the improvement and welfare of the people are not properly implemented.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study presents intensely disturbing data on coastal life, economic backwardness, discrimination and disadvantages faced by fisherman families, especially by their children. There socio economic backwardness of the family may directly or indirectly affect the physical, mental and emotional development of children.

Thus study is an attempt to evaluate the Human Rights aspects of the children in coastal area.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for the study were collected through field surveys. Six hundred households having children were selected for the study. Data have been collected separately for socio – economic backwardness of the household, availability of basic amenities like drinking water, health facilities, access to food items, educational facilities, welfare schemes etc.

The survey also focused the facilities provided to children in the field of shelter, health, facilities to play and leisure, schooling and higher education facilities, protection from communicable diseases, job oriented training etc.

Information collected from welfare Departments of Government of Kerala, local self-Government institutions and educational institutions are exhibited as a guideline for the field study.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There was acute shortage of data from official documents. While studying the drop out level of children from school in coastal area, it was found that the recorded drop out level is below 1.5 percent. But during the survey it was found that the actual level is above ten percent. Most of the family members of the survey area were absent during daytime. It was due to their nature of work in fishing and allied sectors. Naturally data collection through direct interview became very difficult.

HUMAN RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

In order to examine the child rights situation in coastal area, the basic human rights of children are also examined. Recognizing the fact that children are vulnerable, the particular needs of the children are addressed by the UN convention on the Rights of Child (1989).

Children constitute the most fundamental and valuable resources of any society. Development projects and priorities must be made accountable to the rights of the child. The protection of children right is the starting point of the full development of the individual's potential in an atmosphere of freedom, dignity and justice.

There has been a paradigm shift in the approach towards child rights in recent years.

Approaches towards Child Rights:-

<i>Earlier Approach</i>	:	<i>Present Approach</i>
Needs of children	:	Rights of children
Welfare	:	Development
Institutional and Residential care	:	family based care
Segregation and Isolation	:	Inclusion in mainstream.
Beneficiary and Recipient	:	Participant and partner.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Children (1980) stipulates the non-discrimination in its application of the Rights of children. The Rights of children should be ensured without any kind of discrimination

irrespective of the child's parents, his guardian's race, colour, sex, and language, and religion, social or economic status. In all actions concerning children whether undertaken by government, courts, administrative authorities, legislative bodies or private parties the best interest of the child should be a primary consideration.

Every child has the inherent Right to life. The birth of a child should be registered immediately and it shall have Right to name, Right to acquire a nationality and parental care.

It is the right of the child to enjoy of the highest attainable standard of health and facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. No child is deprived of his right of access to such health care services.

Every child has the right to social security, including social insurance.

It is the duty of the state to recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, moral and social developments. The state should recognize the right of the child to education. Primary education should be compulsory and free. The state should encourage general and vocational education accessible to every child and financial assistance in case of need. Higher education should be accessible to all on the basis of merit. The state should take measures to encourage regular attendance to school and reduction of dropout rates.

Children have the right to rest and leisure. He has the right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural and artistic life.

The state should recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

The state shall take steps to provide all children from families below the poverty line with adequate supplementary nutrition and measures for ensuring environmental sanitation and hygiene. The state should also recognize every child's right to a standard of living that fosters full development of the child's faculties.

All children have a right to be protected against neglect, maltreatment, injury, and trafficking, sexual and physical abuse of all kinds, corporal punishment, torture, exploitation, violence, and degrading treatment.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN COASTAL AREA

The socio-economic condition of the coastal area in Alappuzha District is worth mentioning in the study of human rights perspectives. Considering the criteria like literacy level, housing conditions, health conditions, income level etc, there are wide differences between the coastal areas and other regions. It is found that the coastal area is much backward and alienated from other regions of the state. Lack of necessary facilities in the area generally affects the socio-economic life of the people in general and children in particular.

The Occupation Pattern of the Coastal Community

The occupation pattern of the 600 households studied for the paper revealed that 46.2 rely on fishing, 36.54 on fishing related jobs and only 17.44 is in the non fishing occupations.

TABLE I
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF PEOPLE IN COASTAL AREA

Occupations	No of people Working	Percentage
Fishing	530	46.02
Fishing related	421	36.54
Non-fishing	201	17.44
Total	1152	100

Source: Field Survey

The crucial factor in the occupational pattern is that 13.96% of the total workforce in fishing sector and related occupations are children.

TABLE 2
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN IN COASTAL AREA.

Occupational Category	No of children working	Percentage
Fishing	64	5.55
Fishing related	78	6.77
Non-fishing	19	1.64
Total	161	13.96

Source: Field survey

Among the child labourer 5.55% are engaged in fishing and 6.77% in fishing related activities. The study finds that only 1.64% is engaged in other occupations.

Child labour

Many children are being used in the fish processing and ice factories where the simple repetitive manual tasks that do not require long years of training or experience. But the work is low-paid and seasonal involves drudgery and is hazardous. Child labourers in coastal area are the worst sections of this lot as their works are invisible and only seasonal.

Child Right Situation

Every child in the area who is out of school is a child labourer in the field of fishing, fish farms, ice factories or work on vendors. Education is an important variable measuring social status and level of development. The study indicates the continued state of coastal backwardness in the field of education. About 30% of the people still remain illiterate. Only 3 to 5 % got higher and professional education. In comparison with other region of Kerala the educational facilities are much less and inadequate.

The dropout level of primary schools is very high in comparison with other regions of the district. Children were occasionally engaged in seasonal fishing and consequently stay out from school. It was very difficult to identify such children because neither the parents nor the school authorities were willing to give the details of children who were permanently or seasonally absent. Yet, during the survey more than 161 children with the age group of 6-18 were identified as child laborers.

Educational pattern of selected household are as shown below:

**TABLE 3
EDUCATIONAL PATTERN**

Educational category	No of children (6 to 18)	Percentage
Illiterate	18	.2
Primary	550	2.6
Secondary	940	74
Degree	71	9.
PG & Professional	21	3

Source:Field survey

The table 3 reveals that the level of educational attainment of the majority of the children is upto secondary level. This implies that the incentives, extended by the state and central government for promoting higher education among marginalized sections have not made much influence in coastal area.

About 66% of children in the sample households have been doomed to drop out at various levels before reaching to higher level of education. The highest percentage of drop out is found at high school level.

**TABLE 4
THE DISTRIBUTION OF DROPOUT IN SAMPLE HOUSEHOLDS**

Level of Education	No of drop out	Percentage
Primary	122	12.2
Upper primary	140	14.
High School	371	37.1
Higher Secondary	23	2.3
Uty	5	.5
Total	661	66.1

Source: Field survey

The high dropout rate at high school level levels signifies that the majority of the children did not have motivation to continue their studies from their families. The economic and social backwardness, lack of inspiration for study, lack of motivation from family are the important reasons for the dropout in various levels of their studies.

TABLE 5
MONTHLY INCOME LEVEL OF COASTAL HOUSEHOLDS

Income Category	No	Percentage
Less than 1000	204	34
1000-3000	332	55.33
Above 3000	64	10.66
Total	600	100

Source: Field survey

Family Income

The total earning members of the household only 10.66% earn more than Rs 3000/- per month. About 34% of the earners get only less than Rs. 1000/-. Naturally the families could not meet the educational, health, housing food and entertainment facilities for their children. Due to low income their basic human right, like right to life, health, shelter, education, and parental care are deprived.

The health situation of coastal children is equally appalling. There is clear lack of health facilities such as hospitals; nursing care and action plan against communicable diseases.

CONCLUSION

The study proved that the children of the coastal area are facing many socio-economic problems, which directly affect their human rights. The need for sustained efforts to ensure universal education is very much important. Fundamental human rights has to be addressed as this would give children hope for the future and skills to ensure that they have options in life besides living on unhealthy conditions, labouring under exploitative, hazardous and abusive conditions of life. Education is an enabling right that contributes to opening the space for the fulfillment of all other rights - to health, nutrition, and leisure and skill development. The poor families who decide whether or not to send their children to school should be supported by income generation scheme to enables the families to provide proper education to their children. Once the physical conditions, housing and health are improved, the educational objective would become, achievable and sustainable.

Large number of children in the area still lives much below the standards set by the constitutional, national and international law. They suffer from poverty, diseases and unhealthy living conditions due to social and economic backwardness.

Most of these children live below poverty line (BPL) without sufficient food and shelter and without proper health care. Many children are exposed to violence and exploitation and are naturally affected many by emotional disturbances.

Child labour denies a child the 'right to childhood'. Any work done by children would harms them, exploits them physically, mentally or morally. It is a severe form of slavery. The girl child labor is continuing as it is unrecognized, unpaid, invisible and unrewarded. The status of girl child should be enhanced by empowering her through education and providing her with skills to make her self reliant and economically independent.

DETERMINATION OF THE BEST INTEREST OF CHILD

This universally accepted principle should be applied in all decisions relating to children. While taking decisions relating to the needs of children by any governmental or other organizations, the best interest of the child should be the primary consideration.

WORKING TOGETHER APPROACH

In order to protect the basic Rights of Children a working together or a co-ordinate approach is necessary. The judiciary, governmental departments, local bodies, bureaucrats, NGOs, legal activities, police, lawyers, parents, health professional and all those people who are concerned with the rights of the child need to have a co-ordinated and a partnership approach. Interventions should also be made at the level of government programmes and policy directives towards ensuring the rights of child.

RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Children can no longer be considered as passive recipients of services. Governments and civil society must accept children as partners and facilitate their participation in matters, which affect their lives.

Although laws in the form of international conventions or national laws or regional orders are available none can contribute considerably towards the child rights. What matters is how laws are actually implemented, what is done to reach the ideals contained in these laws. Anyway solutions must be found to enforce the implementation and to ensure that children in the coastal area are also should experience true childhood.

Further research should be encouraged to identify the basic reason behind the negligence of basic rights of children in the underdeveloped and neglected areas. It is essential that the children are placed high on the governmental agenda of development. It requires allocation of more resources and preference to their needs. Funding agencies of Government have to provide adequate financial allocation for these most neglected children of the Kerala Society and greater aid to their social, economic and educational needs. It is also important that resource allocation should be accompanied by an effective mechanism for its utilization. Thus the realization of the rights of the child in coastal area call for a well defined, child-friendly programmes involving individuals and civil society, families and communities, local and state governments. Above all, create and sustain an environment in which children's rights can be realized. Such a child friendly movement will include families, schools, NGOs, media communities and neighbourhoods. And finally, good governance has a crucial role to play to ensure that children are at the center of development agenda that guide policy decisions and budgetary allocations as well as monitor progress.

Roughly nine per cent children in Kerala are living in coastal area and their demands for development and better living conditions sustainable to lead a dignified life must be ensured and protected.

The need of the children is specific but their existence cannot be or used in isolation from their families. Rehabilitation plan must take a holistic approach and must focus on family of the marginalized community.

The destitute children from the coastal zone are the worst targets of human rights violation. They should find special place in government's programmes.

The girl children who have completed school education should be given professional training. They must be given training in computer, handicrafts, garments making instead of traditional works in fishing and fish marketing.

Sensitization programmes need to be planned for school teacher's government officials, police and NGOs to care the specific needs of children.

Emphasis should be on the overall development of children and not just on their physical survival.

Child Labour Abolition Act should be effectively implemented. Prompt legal action should be taken against the accused. All children out of school whether they are engaged in hazardous work or in household duties should be treated as child labourer and must take effective steps to get them proper full time education in formal educational institutions.

Departments like social welfare, Police, Health, Education etc have the responsibility of ensuring the specific issues of children and a co-ordinate effort of them can attain good result.

Only a working together approach can protect and preserve the status of children. The judiciary, governmental departments, local bodies, bureaucrats, NGOs, legal activists, police, parents, health professionals and all those people who are concerned with the rights of the child need to have a co-ordinate and partnership approach towards the protection and preservation of the rights of children.

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