



The COVID Chronicles: Impact on the Lives of Children in India *Podcast Transcript*

Host: Satchit Balsari, Assistant professor in emergency medicine at Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Guest: Enakshi Ganguly, Co-founder of HAQ: Centre for Child Rights

In the second episode of The COVID Chronicles podcast, in collaboration with the Times of India, Dr. Satchit Balsari speaks with Enakshi Ganguly, child rights activist and the co-founder of HAQ: Centre for Child Rights. In July 2020, Ganguly was part of the 11-member expert committee set up by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on human rights; especially those of marginalized and vulnerable sections of the society. Ganguly led the discussion related to the advisory on the rights of children.

Discussing the impact of COVID-19 on children, education, and the families of migrant workers, Ganguly says that the pandemic has unfolded as a child right's crisis. She touches on the importance of mid-day meals in addressing the food insecurity and unemployment engendered by the pandemic. She observes that the marginalized children are paying the heaviest price as millions of young people are not able to access remote learning during school shutdowns. Highlighting the spike in domestic abuse, school dropouts, and child labor because of the change in norms during the pandemic, she stresses on the need to strengthen child protection mechanisms at the local level. The children and young people will be living with the long-term secondary impacts of the pandemic unless we choose to address this issue with effective policy interventions, she concludes.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Satchit Balsari: Hello and welcome to this episode of 'India in Focus' podcast. This is Satchit Balsari. Welcome to the Covid Chronicles, where we examine science, policy and societal responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

For this episode, we are joined by Enakshi Ganguly, human rights activist and co-founder of HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, which she co-directed till 2018. Enakshi is now an honorary professor at the National Law University in Orissa. Welcome, Enakshi.

Enakshi Ganguly: Thank you, Satchit.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, pleasure to have you on the show. While India is bordering on returning to some new normal, and many are keen to put the pandemic behind, there is global concern that children have been left behind in many parts of the world. In November, the National Human Rights Commission of India released advisories related to the Covid pandemic and its impact on children. You have spent a lifetime advocating for the rights of children. Can you tell us what the NHRC found and what we should be on the lookout for?

Enakshi Ganguly: In July of this year, the National Human Rights Commission set up a committee, an 11-member committee of which I was a member, to develop advisories on a number of issues relating to the human rights violations that are taking place in Covid and how to address them. They included children, women, transgenders, health, migrants, prisoners, so it was a range. The ones that they released yesterday related to food and nutrition, health and rights of children. Rights of children is the one that I led in terms of the discussions.

So, the idea was to first assess what the situation of children is with respect to what is happening with them in the face of the pandemic, and what state governments and other institutions must do. So, what I have tried to do to bring to them the advisory was to do a series of discussions with multiple stakeholders and bring their recommendations in. The major findings, as you will have noticed, relate to health, education, provision of midday meals, Aanganwadi centers, provision of food in the Aanganwadi centers, immunization, and all the other basic services that children will require, and which the NHRC promises to monitor once they have sent the advisories to

the state government. That is, in a nutshell, what this is about.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, I would love to ask you some questions about how the monitoring mechanisms are placed but can we take a step back and can you help me understand what interrupted schooling in India is looking like? Because in the United States, as you know, there is much debate about whether schools should reopen or they shouldn't because it's really hard on parents, especially in single-parent households, or where both parents are working for parents to stay at home to chaperone their children through using web-based interfaces as Zoom to access their schools.

I would think in India with larger family structures, this may play out differently. What are the challenges in India? Are there challenges with children staying at home?

Enakshi Ganguly: There are multiple challenges with children staying at home. The first challenge, and again it's of course divided by class and access to the internet and all of those, but let's start from the very bottom. We are talking about millions of children who do not have access to either the internet or to a device. Most of them, therefore, cannot, even if there were Zoom classes which are being offered, they cannot access it because they do not have a device. There might be one device at home, which is to be shared by everybody in some families. There was, in fact, a report of a girl having committed suicide in Kerala because she was feeling so unhappy about not being able to access any schooling because she did not have a device, that is really the extreme. But the fact is, lots of children are without devices and without access to the internet. That's one level.

The second level is of those people who do have some access, but perhaps living in a very tight surrounding. Can you imagine, in a room, three children trying to access Zoom classes, almost next to impossible for them to concentrate, to be able to listen in, also spending hours, and the devices, we are not talking about computers, we are talking about little Android phones. What does it mean for them to be concentrating and sitting on these machines, these little phones for hours together and trying to understand? In any level of education, as it is the quality of education was something that was, you know, there was enrollment, but the quality is something we have always been concerned about. Now, with this kind of transmission, what is going to happen to their learning is up for question.

Then, of course, there are those in the upper classes where there are children who are sitting with devices, who have devices, but it's creating a lot of other kinds of ancillary mental health and other issues with families being all together, parents having to stay at home to monitor, we are talking about them spending hours online and then ensuring they are safe online. Online safety, as we know, is a huge issue now. So, there are multiple levels and multiple layers of issues.

The final thing that I want to tell you Satchit is schooling and going to school is not about learning and education. Going to school is about having friends, it's about learning to deal with your peers, it's about being able to talk to other people other than your parents, it's about friendship, it's about an access to childhood, adolescence, all of those. A school space is a wholesome space, it's not just classroom teaching. Now, children have been without this for months together. You can imagine what kind of an impact it must be having on them.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, you have worked with children for the greater part of your professional life and really understand these challenges around child development very well, but how do families think through this? Are you suggesting that schools resume and that children be sent back to schools? Would that put, especially in India where there are multi-generational families, I believe the concern is that kids will bring home infections to their grandparents or take infections to their teachers. What would you do if you could make policy decisions around this? What would your recommendations be?

Enakshi Ganguly: I'm going to take a step back and I want to take you to the mass migration that you saw in India. So, a lot of the children have gone back to their villages, they were living in nuclear families when they were in the city, now they are back in the villages trying to adjust to a new life. We actually do not have a headcount of how many children are now there in a new setting, and whether the existing resources, whether it is schooling, whether it is the Anganwadi centers that give them the mid-day meals for the early childhood care and development, we have no idea of what these numbers look like now at the moment. We do know that in 2008, 9.17 crore children were actually getting midday meals. The government has recognized that there needs to be continuation, and therefore, has put an extra 11.35 crore Rupees into ensuring midday meals continue, but we don't have the numbers, I don't know how many children there and what are the facilities there. Once you look at this and then you have to ask the same question that you asked me just a little while ago about what is it going to

mean in terms of their mental health, their physical health, whether schools should open.

Covid is not going to go away for a very, very long time, as I see it. Is it going to be school interactive for these children? Then remember that all those children who do not have access to the internet or phones or devices will all drop out. We already have news reports that children are dropping out and are going into labor. These are children who have barely been pushed into the education system are now being pushed out again, and once there is a break of a year or so, it's going to be very difficult to bring them back into the system. So, we will need to find ways to, yes, given that there is fear of infection and all of that, we will have to find ways to get them to safe schooling and that's what all of us are saying. How do we ensure the schools are sanitized, can we have protocols put in place in terms of safety measures? There was an interesting article that I read two days ago, in village schools teachers have started taking initiatives, which is amazing. India is amazing sometimes, when we look up and say what is the government doing and then we look around and see these people, the teachers, the Aanganwadi workers, then the Asha workers, what they are doing and they give you so much hope. These teachers have taken the children out into the field, into the open field and are teaching them with handheld mics so that children can continue with some level of schooling in these small schools. There's a picture of a teacher who has painted little blackboards along the wall of a school and each child is facing the small blackboard, which is just a black painted wall, and he is walking around teaching, so that they can be in social distancing. So, whether we offer solutions are not, teachers themselves are offering those solutions and we need to start looking at them. Don't you think so, Satchit?

Satchit Balsari: It's quite incredible and what is striking to me in some of these solutions that you've mentioned is the human element, right, where, yes, we understand that technology can scale but the realities and institutional voids that are present in resource constrained settings, like our villages, makes it imperative that we harness the human energy, which is extremely striking, the example, the visual of these blackboards painted on a wall, what a simple, elegant solution, which doesn't require an app or a device and yet also supports that human interaction between children. The challenge, of course, is to be able to give these kinds of ideas and initiatives regional or a national platform so that they can be expanded.

In healthcare we often seen, including in Covid, so many of the solutions that were really needed in places like India were not necessarily technologically sophisticated, but they were just not headline-grabbing interventions like masking and hand-washing, for example. What I feel I hear from you that education may also have simpler solutions like sitting in a field. India has one of the largest populations of malnourished children in the world and deeply integrated with the school system in India is the idea of the midday meal. It's a concept that urban India is not necessarily directly familiar with, nor is middle class India, certainly afford an audience cannot relate to going to school primarily for the purpose of also having access to food. Can you talk to us a little bit more about the midday meals and as you talk about the migrants, the question I had was well if the child was getting a midday meal in the city, does she then get the same meal back when she goes to the village. How does that work, what are you seeing on the ground, Enakshi?

Enakshi Ganguly: Midday meal is very much an urban phenomenon too, as much as it is a rural phenomenon. And interestingly, when there was a lockdown, there were some schools in Delhi where the schools were shut but they were distributing food because they realized that there might be so many children without food during the lockdown. So, they would open up the school only for that one or two hours so that they could give out dry ration or give them food. Midday meal has increased school enrollment and we know that. It is because India recognized that children did not come to school because they had no food and they were hungry and midday meal filled that gap, it's an amazing program. Once we got the order of, in the middle there was a question of what kind of food, but then you know you remember it was decided that hot meals would be provided. So, that is the one hot meal that every child is guaranteed if they go to school and like I said, 91 million children were eating that meal. But now we do not know, if these children were in the cities getting access to meals and even if their parents were earning, they may not have been that needy for that meal. Now that they are back in their village, now that their parents are without work, what is the absorption capacity of the villages where they have gone back to? As I said, we do not know. And that is why the Supreme Court took suo moto cognizance of this and said that all children have to be provided with midday meals, wherever they are.

So, now that system will have to be worked, whether these children will now go back and register in schools in the villages, some of them are of course coming back again but many of them will not come back for some time until their parents decide it is safe. Their parents have given up homes in the cities, so coming back is not going to be an easy solution now. So what does it mean in terms of registering? If you look at our NHRC advisories, some of them are actually addressing these issues of whether there should be no requirement for identification for

registration into midday meal schemes, or Anganwadi schemes, or any other supplementary nutrition schemes for children. They should be just taken for where they are at that moment and provided that service. That's what one of our recommendations are and it is a recommendation that we made as a child rights coalition in an advisory where 400 of us put together and circulated and sent to the government and this is also part of the advisory that the NHRC is giving.

Satchit Balsari: Is that an implementable solution? Who pays for these midday meals, does it come from the state exchequer?

Enakshi Ganguly: It does come from the state exchequer, it does, because education is a state subject, but it is also concurrently the state as well as the center. The center has announced extra, as I said 11.35 crore, as a package for giving midday meals. But by now, what should have been done is a very rapid assessment of how many children and where are they. Without that how do you plan anything? And this planning has to be done at the ground level upwards, it cannot be done by the central government, it has to be done where it is, with the panchayats. The panchayats have to be empowered and given the go-ahead to actually do these assessments, do the surveys, provide the meals etc. And they have to be given the resources to do it.

Satchit Balsari: It's quite striking when we look at these images of migrant workers leaving the cities, now some of them are coming back as well and also these tens and millions of children as you were pointing out that are displaced, and that displacement is resulting not only in the interruption of their education but heightening food insecurity. Is this problem of food insecurity, how does this manifest in the adults? The children seem to be dependent on midday meals, but do low-income families in India not have access to ration cards? Is that sufficient?

Enakshi Ganguly: Yes, we don't have a portability of ration cards, you must know. Many do not have ration cards, but those who do, there is no portability. If they've moved from Maharashtra back to Jharkhand, there is no portability of the ration card that they have from Maharashtra to Jharkhand, right.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, I believe some states do allow portability, right? Like Maharashtra and Gujarat, for example, have portability.

Enakshi Ganguly: Some do, some don't. But what we need is portability across the country. Going back to hunger, it's interesting that poor people are saying that we will not die of Covid or Corona but we will die of hunger because there is no work, there's absolutely no work.

Satchit Balsari: Can you help me understand what... both the midday meal and ration card entail children and family too... What does a midday meal look like, what is it that these kids are so dependent on going to school for? What is on their plate?

Enakshi Ganguly: It depends on where they are located and how innovative the Principal is. So, I have been to schools in West Bengal, with the same amount of money, each child on a given day would be given a fish curry or an egg curry or sometimes even a chicken dish, with the same amount of money. But there are also places where I've been where I've seen only khichdi being given. In South India, they would be given South Indian food but that really is the best part of the midday meal, if there is no leakage, and I cannot promise you that, I have seen headmasters, headteachers or schools who really are concerned, have been able to provide a really good meal for the student. It gives them an opportunity to also make it culture-specific.

Satchit Balsari: Isn't it incredible when the public delivery systems work that they are able to deliver services at a scale the world is completely unfamiliar with. It's mind boggling right that 90 million hot meals would be served to children every day.

Enakshi Ganguly: Yes, and of course there are organizations like Akshay Patra, which cooks hot meals and provides hot meals and sends them to school.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, we've talked about children and their meals and you've brought up concerns for ration cards. What do workers get, what do families get, what are they entitled to through the public distribution center and when migrants receive this and they are on the move, they don't get meals, their children get meals. The migrants, I'm assuming, get food grains. Then what? How do you get access to fuel and where are you going to cook the food if you have no jobs and you're on the streets? A lot of our migrant workers live in temporary

shelters, can you help us understand typically where these meals are cooked?

Enakshi Ganguly: For a very long time, till very recently, there was this huge surge of efforts made by civil society, there were also ordinary citizens who were going out and giving food to people. And it was just not the migrants, in the lockdown, there was food being distributed across cities by concerned citizens, civil society organizations, really it was amazing actually how the society, how the country just stepped in where the government had failed. They just stepped in, people were carrying food in their cars and going out and giving it out to people, people were carrying water and giving it out to people. There were these roadside dhabas, they had become feeding centers for migrants and other laborers. There was an upsurge of action in the absence of any systematic support from the state.

Sachit Balsari: Now that we are six months into the pandemic and folks seem to be returning to some kind of normalcy where permitted, the roads are busy, transport is grudgingly opening up, are things looking better among the migrants coming back? What does it look like to you in the streets in Delhi?

Enakshi Ganguly: Well, you must have seen the visuals of migrants being welcomed into Punjab with garlands. This country survives on interstate migration, some states provide them, some states receive them, but it is also true that migrants are coming into Delhi. I'm going to give you an anecdote, Delhi is now getting its migrants back, a large number of them have always been in the construction industry. There are hubs in Delhi where you will find the labor that sits down and waits for contractors to come in, pick them up and take them for work. Now you see them sitting there for hours and days because there is no money.

People are on salary cuts, 30 percent, 50 percent, these are anecdotal things that you watch and see, but I also know that there are a lot of people who used to have housemaids, for example, they can't afford it anymore. Then there is the fear of having housemaids in. So, domestic labor, people who worked in other people's houses are now sitting at home because their employers will not take them because they are afraid of infection, but they are also not being paid for sitting at home. Some of them may have been paid in the first few months but they are no longer being paid anymore. People in the small hotel industries, the dhabas, and the eateries, very few of them are opening up and the ones that employed people are no longer open. So, all these people who were cooks and waiters are without work. None of them have that much of savings that they can carry on for months together without work. So, we're going to see a new level of food crisis where there was none. These are not people who were hungry, there are people who are malnutritional and hungry in India, there have been, and I know that they were there, and we've always planned and worked for them. We now need to plan for this new level of hunger, new level of people who've never been hungry before who are now suddenly poor.

Sachit Balsari: Enakshi, you are talking about potentially tens to even hundreds of millions of people that will have a decreased caloric intake and as a clinician I'm concerned that these were not high calorie diets to begin with, few less calories than the normal diet, a few hundred calories here and there, especially if you are not having adequate food to begin with can have detrimental effects on your physical and mental wellbeing.

Enakshi Ganguly: Understand that all this crisis is pushing people into different kinds of other crises. We know that the women in the informal sector, they were in such a tenuous situation. Now, they are worse. We are seeing higher levels of violence in the homes, in the domestic setup. We are also seeing a high level of trafficking because children and women are going to be trafficked when there is that level of poverty, every other form of exploitation will kick in, and we are already seeing that. It is not true of only India, as the UNFPA chief has said it's a shadow pandemic across the world.

Sachit Balsari: Enakshi, that's very well true, in medicine, the concern is, of course, there will be these long impacts on both mobility and mortality not directly related to the SARS CoV-II infection, but because of these indirect impacts of the pandemic on interruption to access to healthcare. You will either just not go to the hospital because you are afraid to go or you simply can't because you have now lost your income, lost your health insurance in countries that have organized insurance schemes.

I think you raised really important but alarming facets of the pandemic's impact on the society like India where, not so downstream but almost direct impact on children on food insecurity reaches colossal proportion. You're talking about tens and hundreds of millions of people being pushed into alarming levels of food insecurity because of the lack of access to meagre wages that they were living on. What is the solution? If you were given a magic wand and if you could change policy, what can be done, at this stage now, months after the world's largest national lockdown.

Enakshi Ganguly: We did mismanage it, did we not? The lockdown was imposed in four hours, there was no preparation. At all. And now, we are seeing that the service industry is not functioning, MSMEs are under stress. So, we are part of the same global economic meltdown that's everywhere else, it's true. But India has one amazing thing that we could use and that is build up from the bottom up again. Instead of planning top up, we need to go from bottom up. We need to work with panchayats, for ensuring we build the safety nets within the communities, we have to build village level child protection committees. We have to our ASHA workers and our ANMs, we still pay them such low salaries and we treat them so badly and they are the ones on whom this whole recovery phase is standing, Satchit. You know if a schoolteacher, the Asha worker, the ancillary ANM worker, the ancillary nurse and health worker, the Aanganwadi workers who run the Baalwadi, the childcare centers, the entire recovery is on their shoulders. And yet, there are many who haven't been paid, they are not equipped with even the basic PPEs many times, they are not given the equipment that they need. We have always had such low investment in health, and you know that.

The healthcare system has been so fragile because of the increasing privatization of health in this country and now it is back to the government health system that we are looking to for succor because the private healthcare system will not even absorb us. How many of us can even afford it, I cannot afford it today if today I were to be sick. If I need a ventilator, it's like a lakh a day, 14 days, 14 lakhs. I don't have that kind of money, how many people have that kind of money, how many people have that kind of insurance? So, the overload is on the government healthcare system. So, really, now I think all of us need to go back into empowering and strengthening the government healthcare system and it's a long haul but this is the time to take a call and say the right to health is a fundamental right.

On the one hand, it's about, of course, recognizing what are the systems that we need to strengthen now, take this as a wakeup call. Take this moment as a wakeup call and invest where we need to most, into education systems, into teachers' salaries, into health, into these ANMs, Asha workers, on whose shoulders the recovery phase for Covid will be for the next few years.

Sachit Balsari: Arundhati Roy makes an interesting observation in the article she wrote several months ago, where she talks about the pandemic as a portal and asks, whether we as a society will come out of it without baggage or leave it behind to new beginnings. As I listen to you, it strikes me that what you are calling for is with you and several serious examinations about our healthcare delivery systems but especially the systems that deliver these vital services of health, of education, of food, to hundreds and millions of Indians that are heavily dependent on these, who are still dependent on public services just to survive, not even to flourish.

The pandemic has brought to light again, at a time when Indian society has to come together to rethink how it will rebuild or build back better, reimagine what these frontline delivery services look like, supporting essential workers and in this case, Anganwadi workers and school teachers better. You have expressed a serious concern about the role of civil society not being at the drafting table, so as to speak in imagining what needs to be done for India now. But in the short past couple of decades, we have seen in our careers several advances in fundamental rights in India. The right to education, more recently the right to food, and of course the right of privacy, and each of these, right to information, and civil society played a very large role in fighting for and getting the realization of these rights. Implementation, of course, always remains a challenge but the big battle of having these rights acknowledged came from society. And fleetingly, you mentioned maybe this is a moment where we have a discussion about the right to health. Can you help us understand how the right to food came about? How is it that India feeds tens of millions of children every day and continues to give out these ration cards that hundreds of millions of families are dependent upon. What was the right to food movement like?

Enakshi Ganguly: So, the right to food movement continues and it's one of the strongest movements. Even now as we speak, they monitor the food distribution, they monitor Anganwadis, they monitor midday meals, and this is what they did when the right to food petition was in the Supreme Court of India. The People's Union for Civil Liberties, who filed the case on right to food in Supreme Court of India, this went on for several years but what was interesting was that there were these two right to food commissioners who were appointed who were the team of people who would actually monitor the implementation of the order and would come back and report to the court, and the court would give an order accordingly. That was such an important part of the engagement of the court and what was actually happening on the ground along with what was happening with the executive which was implementing it. So, it was almost like a tripod type arrangement. The fact that we have the right to work is because of the huge engagement of the civil society, it's not without that we could have got it and today if there is anything that might just save the poor in this country will actually be the work MNREGA can give them where they are. That's the only glimmer of hope that we have that it will enable them to do some work wherever

they are and they will get some money and they will be able to feed their family.

So, all of these are engagements that happened because of civil society involvement. The fact that today there are village level child protection committees in our country is because of the engagement of civil society and the formulation of the integrated child protection scheme. So, we have, over the last two decades, the civil society has played a very important role in informing government and it is not just the UPA government, the one that was preceding the current one, but the version of this government that we have in the earlier in the early 2000s, which is the NDA government, that too was a time when there was a huge amount of engagement with the government and the role of civil society was acknowledged and it was acknowledged with appreciation in the role that they played. That doesn't mean civil society must not be monitored, of course, they must be, but the civil society's role is not to replace the government. It is to inform, to sometimes disagree, sometimes create possibilities for the government, create models which the government can upscale.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi, going forward, given the vastness of the challenges that lie before us, you have more unemployment, and this is not particular to India but certainly around the world than before because of interruption in the economy that the pandemic has foisted upon everyone, but in India then the particular concerns around food insecurity and interruption of childhood education with a lack of alternatives to continue education because of infrastructural challenges. If there were three policy recommendations you could make to the government, what would those be?

Enakshi Ganguly: I would like to talk of three sectoral areas that I think we need to look at. They may require one policy or may require multiple, but these are the three sectors that need immediate attention as far as I am concerned, I think in my opinion if we want to recover. One is, how do we find a way to get all the people back to work. Without work, families will become more and more indigent. So that means we have to get the small-scale industries and other workspaces that the employment generation sector goes in and they need to be supported, and they need to be made safe.

The second sector would be the education and the childcare sector, which is education and Anganwadis together, which would mean preschool and zero to five and five upwards, if we have to find a way to ensure that children are being taken to these Anganwadi centers, that would mean that women can go to work and children are in school, that means women can go to work because it's the hardest for women and most of the women are in the informal sector anyway. It also would mean that children can continue with their education because otherwise if there is a break in education now, many children will drop out of school and there will be a huge setback in the education of this country. So, we need to find a way to get the education systems going in a safe way.

And the final one is the health sector; it definitely needs much more attention than it ever did. And clearly, privatization of health is not the answer, it is the health sector which must be seen as the government health system which needs to be supported and given much better support, infrastructure, money, all of that because that's where majority of the poor and even the now new poor will have to be dependent on.

Satchit Balsari: Enakshi Ganguly, always a pleasure to speak with you. Thank you so much.

Enakshi Ganguly: Thank you Satchit for giving me this opportunity, it was wonderful.