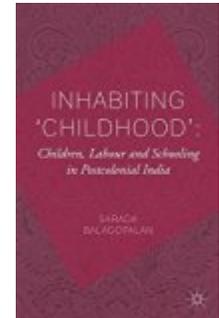




Sarada Balagopalan. *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xi + 237 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-29642-8.



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Published on H-Childhood (January, 2016)

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While popular media and literature have focused on the plight of the street child in the non-West, there are very few scholarly works devoted to the subject, at least in India. Indian childhood studies is a relatively new field, and the few volumes available are mostly about the history of a pedagogic childhood discourse, and thus devoted to a school-going population. Sarada Balagopalan's *Inhabiting Childhood* is a very welcome contribution, since it reconstitutes the debate on childhood from the standpoint of subaltern children. It brings both a theoretical sophistication as well as ethnographic finesse to a topic that has mostly been relegated to dry policy works.

Its main argument is framed by an opposition between *khatni* (hard manual labor) and *manush* (becoming truly human/read bourgeois) as articulated by the NGO workers and the street children, the main protagonists of the book. Balagopalan argues that this imbrication of children in labor is the enduring gift of the colonial state, which not only preserved the greater logic of caste segrega-

tion through a rigid distinction between manual (object lessons) and mental (subject lessons) education, but also created further segmentations within the different populations of children for purposes of administration and accumulation.

While the colonial discourse set up a disciplinary logic, the postcolonial state was more invested in a developmental one. The book documents children's lives through what it calls the interplay of "the imaginary waiting room of history"[1] and the present moment of arrival. This means that for the developmental state, universal formal schooling was a *telos*, which it hoped would be eventually reached via non-formal and more scattered provisions for laboring children. For Balagopalan, the RTI or the Right to Education Act of 2009 actualizes that *telos* of full immersion in schooling with disastrous consequences, through its imperative of a complete separation of children from labor.

The book critiques this imperative of full immersion both because the act fails to take cog-

nizance of the concrete realities in which children actually perform labor, and because the immersion is in any case a class-based immersion, intended to rule out any exit from manual labor. Balagopalan contends counterintuitively that the apprenticeship on the street and the *karkhana* may be healthier options to the poor schooling on offer. Thus, far from facilitating the possibilities of becoming *manush*, the bogey of full immersion creates a false anxiety around a subaltern childhood marked by passivity, abjection, and loss. Furthermore, the project of full immersion takes no account of subaltern childhood's real origins in the violence of colonial modernity.

In 2015 (after the book was published), a new amendment to the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986) was proposed, allowing children to work in home-based enterprises such as *beedi* rolling, carpet weaving, lock and match-box making, etc., after school hours. The amendment, even though motivated by a neoliberal logic, would seem to restore what the book deems right—that the prospects for subaltern children are better in this dual system than one in which the bogey of full immersion in schooling completely ruins any economic chances the children may have, along with the resourcefulness and confidence they learn from being members of the informal proletariat. This gives the lie to the moral panic in the popular media about reversing the spectacular school enrollments achieved via the RTI. However, the amendment (whether passed or not) makes us rethink the neoliberal moment as a kind of common sense different from the one posited in the book—one whose *telos* is not just separation of children from labor, but the full immersion of childhood in the abstract structures of labor that schooling in any case signifies. So the difference between *khatni* and *manush* is not an opposition of labor and schooling, but the contradictory unity of concrete and abstract forms of labor. The book then provokes the question of whether the neoliberal moment simply abolishes the contradiction leading

to a one-dimensional society ruled by either *manush* or *khatni*, or whether it merely reveals the contradictory forms of labor as constitutive of a single unity.

By looking at childhood as a historically embedded practice, Balagopalan intends to force childhood out of its cultural framing—“its non-modern and autonomous vectors” (p. 50). Her approach is based on an understanding of postcolonial modernity that “‘differs’ from rather than reproduces with a historical lag the same coordinates of a western modernity” (p. 50). The space of postcoloniality is a heterogeneous one, marked by different thresholds of biological age across class, caste, and gender. In deference to the upper-caste native elites, the British allowed personal law to function outside the uniform civil code. The realm of childhood was mediated by voluntary and religious charity organizations, guided by ideas of service to the poor rather than any normative discourse of childhood. These indigenous actors were unable to conceive of the child in separation from the thick networks of sociality and kinship. According to Balagopalan, the present conjuncture of global arrival stands to threaten this flexible relation between formal structures and the informal networks. In other words, there is real danger of domination becoming hegemonic.

“Domination without hegemony” of course refers to a key concept in subaltern studies, specifically the title of its founder Ranajit Guha's 1997 book in which the colonial state is characterized by relations of domination, in contrast to the hegemonic or persuasive techniques of the liberal Western state. Domination in this view frees the masses to have their independent standpoint less ideologically incorporated than hegemony might require. *Inhabiting Childhood* then expresses the encroachment of the liberal logic in the periphery as a danger that could erode this independence, and possibly the postcolonial theory according to which subalterns are still preserved from the

structures of abstract domination. For instance, as we move into the last chapter of the book, the hegemonic idea of *manush* begins to undermine the pride the children felt in their *khatni*, making their labor the very source of their tyranny.

In the bulk of Balagopalan's study however, the children retain their freewheeling subaltern standpoint. They negotiate with state networks which promise the goal of *manush*, and yet they identify with the counterpublic immersed in *khatni* as a means of augmenting the subsistence income of their families. Subaltern subjecthood is thus neither grounded in critique nor fully accepting of global structures such as the stipulations of the UNCRC. This uneasy inhabitation is read as a disruption of the hegemonic structures of rights-based childhood. Additionally, the kids' attunement to the streets makes them open to dynamic opportunities in an economy characterized by informalization and precarity. In a way, their training on the streets is ideal for a future oriented to risk and speculation.

One crucial way in which "difference" (or the informal structure of postcolonial modernity) is preserved in the book is through the logic of governmentality. The rural dispossessed or surplus population—victims of globalization—are captured by the projects of the postcolonial state. This is akin to pulling them back into the folds of direct domination even as capitalist development sweeps across the countryside. In this move, the surplus population is identified as members of a need economy, rather than being determined by the abstract logic of capital. The book tries to nuance this position by showing the children as equally part of the double rationales of economy and politics. While this evokes the socially dense and complicated narrative of subaltern lives, it fails to show the mutual constitution of planning in accumulation and vice versa. This is not simply about demonstrating how the state is in cahoots with capital, but grasping the grounding of the po-

litical in economic categories of value and commodity.

Balagopalan is eager to correct the view of a postcolonial reading simplistically identified with cultural incommensurability or precapitalist remnants, by showing how the standpoint of child labor in the non-West has valuable lessons for the advanced centers of capital, also mired in conditions of precarity and poverty. The problem, however, is the irreconcilability of the privileged analytic of "difference," grounded in the language of an uneasy inhabitation, with one that rigorously thinks through the concrete mediations of children's lives. In the former analytic, the children's sense of responsibility ("the call of the other") towards their biological and fictive families is dubbed a sensibility, prior to intent or reason, and located outside the realm of sovereign subjectivity. However within a social critique adequate to the totality of capitalism, the subject is far from sovereign. Instead, it is a function of its fractious sociality, and hence able to grasp itself within its limiting social context. This opens up the possibility of solidarity as a critical relation with fellow human beings rather than affirming their collective brotherhood. The sobering aspect of a postcolonial critique lies in its rejection of any unmediated standpoint. But the fact of the relations being mediated is held up as an object of desire, rather than a possibility for overcoming. The uneasiness is to be preserved, almost to the point of fetishization. This paradoxically echoes the managerial logic epitomized in the neoliberal moment where the actual immersion in the ideal of *manush* or mass schooling never comes to pass. It is always aborted.

All over the world, the neoliberal state's austerity measures, its refusal to pay the costs of reproduction have effectively pushed workers to fall back on their own resources, and on the labor of women and children. This might have the default happy consequence of creating bonds of solidarity and reciprocity, but can we really make a

virtue out of this default sociality? Unless the forces of sociality are mobilized for a transformative goal, we have to be very careful about celebrating what is really an enforced state of self-subsistence. While the so-called platform children's relations of responsibility "reduce the precarity" (p. 145), they are able to do so by agreeing to remain permanently within the structures of precarity. The book is, at times, too appreciative of the children's canny acceptance of police beatings and exploitation within a benevolent familial idiom.

While there is camaraderie and cooperation between the different inhabitants of the street, this "responsibility" or "call of the other" (contra duty) is translated into a familial idiom. Surely, this has an ideological underpinning since the nation marks the familial as a way of controlling and privatizing common resources, thwarting the development of a proletarian consciousness. Despite Balagopalan's admirably nonsentimental tone, her theory pushes her paradoxically in the direction of romanticizing the street child's pragmatic mastery of the street. Although this grasp of the street child's combination of "the mimetic with the market value" (p. 95) is perhaps the strongest part of the book, it does not go beyond an affirmation of this logic. For instance, noting the children's admiration for those among them confident enough to spend money, she says "small signs of consumption provided a crucial foothold to continue believing" (p. 97). This is very perceptive, and yet it keeps us at an intellectual standstill.

The concluding chapter on the RTI Act finishes with a plea to keep alive the liberal promise of a common education instead of settling on training to produce second-tier citizens. This is highly welcome, but slightly at odds with the postcolonial provenance of the rest of the book in which "common" (with its invariably false promise of universal equality) is suspect, and needs to be negotiated via a more communitarian understand-

ing. Despite Balagopalan's disavowal, the reciprocal relations produced within a matrix of accommodation and critique is akin to the moral economy of the peasant who would rather live below subsistence than push contradictions to their logical conclusion. What matters is surviving creatively and with dignity, which it appears, they manage to do anyway.

Since in postcolonial theory, the children are already practicing an everyday communism by "crafting alternate networks of economic and emotional sustenance" (p. 21), there is no need of a transformative agenda. While Balagopalan's assessment of the children's complex navigation between consent and coercion is astute, her chosen theoretical model betrays the radical, emancipatory possibilities of where her observations might have gone.

Despite its failure to recognize the unity of the abstract and concrete aspects of the children's labor, Balagopalan's ethnography is tremendously rich for allowing the normative understanding of childhood to be questioned in terms of these broad categories. The material circumstances of the street kids, their conditions of labor, and their expectations from education and life are evoked through textured networks of reciprocity and friendship, at odds with the formal orthodoxies within which their lives are framed, namely the ethical imperative to be at school. The book is a testimony to the resourcefulness and resilience of street children in the postcolony, the tactile pleasures of scavenging and communing—the "thrill of finding an unexpected object" (p. 94) or "being alive to any lucky break" (p. 96)—and at the same time, the location of these micro-worlds within abstract and oppressive dynamics. Readers will find it a very satisfying and evocative contribution to South Asian childhood studies.

Note

[1]. A concept introduced by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolo-*

nial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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Citation: Nandini Chandra. Review of Balagopalan, Sarada. *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

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