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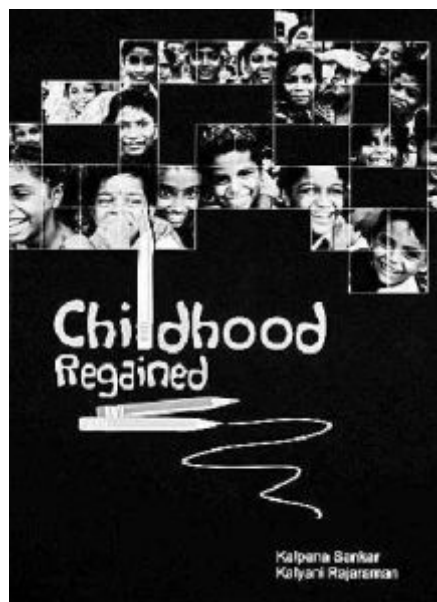
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[Book Review](#)

Eliminating child labour

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CHILDHOOD REGAINED: Kalpana Sankar, Kalyani Rajaraman; Hand in Hand, 270 Vandavasi Road, Chinna Kancheepuram, Periyar Nagar, Kancheepuram-631503. Rs. 250.

Technically speaking, this book could be about the growth of an NGO, one of the many in progressive Tamil Nadu. But essentially, it is about the children the organisation, Hand in Hand, serves and their compulsions to work for a living.

The slim, well-produced book is rich with the experiences its two authors have gained working at the grass roots with children. Kalpana Sankar, once involved in the women's self-help group movement in Tamil Nadu, is currently the CEO of Hand in Hand. Her colleague, Kalyani Rajaraman, was responsible for conceptualising, designing, and establishing schools for special children in Kancheepuram and Tuticorin and now heads the Child Labour Elimination and School Programme in Kancheepuram.

It is significant that this project, and thereby the book, begins with the handlooms of Kancheepuram, the southern temple town famous for its silk saris. Children traditionally have been a source of cheap labour for the weavers and the demand for them is bolstered by the poverty of the children's parents. With the enactment of laws banning the employment of children in the looms, camps shifted base to the homes, since children are allowed to "help at home".

This is roughly where Hand in Hand entered the picture. The organisation soon realised that the focus must be, not only on the child, but on the entire community. A series of interventions followed, adapting to the requirements of the community, while some principles remained non-negotiable. The commandments included: All children must attend fulltime, formal day-schools; any child out of school is engaged in labour; and child labour should be abolished completely.

Humane approach

The strength of the book is not only in its setting out an elaborate model that could be replicated elsewhere in India, but also in its humane approach — outlining the stories of children with real problems. Be it 13-year-old Mariyamma from Amaravathy Patnam whose family had been bonded to a quarry owner, or Raja who was 'supposedly' possessed by the local deity, the stories are fresh, almost as if they have come right out of the dusty Kancheepuram villages right into the pages of the book. What is also commendable is the attempt not to romanticise a success story or gloss over the difficulties of setting in motion the process of social transformation.

Elaborate studies to assess the number of people out of school and in employment and the causes behind them, lend weight to the work. The studies show 22 per cent of children in the 5-18 age group dropped out of school due to poverty. They also reveal that, despite the high enrolment ratio the state claims it has achieved, the drop out rate remains high. These seem to be some basic facts that guided Hand in Hand in its intervention strategy.

There is much that colleagues, especially NGOs, can learn from 'Childhood Regained'. The most important lesson relates to documentation. Realising that doing good work is not sufficient, the organisation has gone on to document its experiences in a remarkable manner, something that is worthy of emulation.

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