

Tracing the Evolutionary Journey of the Concept of Child

Raneesh C¹ and Mohan. A K²

Abstract

The notion of the child in present society entitled to several rights and privileges provided by the government, International agencies and society in great extent. These rights and privileges, the child acquired through centuries of continuous reformation on the very idea of child, childhood and human rights. Aries (1962) pointed out that the very notion of the child is historically and culturally conditioned and it has different meaning through centuries. It is essential to have an in-depth idea of childhood only after assessing the evolutionary journey of the child both in its meaning and different kind of explications.

In this paper the researcher trying to trace the evolutionary journey of the child from the ancient period to the present situation. In ancient time child is considered as a chattel of parents and they have full right on them. The existence of the child is minuscule manner and their individual agency is negated by the parents as well as society. The transformation on the idea of child and childhood is influenced by the different socio-political movement as well as renaissance movement in the West. It envisages child have equal rights in a society like all others and it is the duty of government and society to provide special assistance to them in relation to their dependent nature. In modern society child policies and programs beyond that, the child itself has an un-

1. Mr.Raneesh C, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Social Work, Central University of Kerala, Kasargod, e-Mail- raneesh.tirur@gmail.com

2. Dr.Mohan A.K, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Kerala, Kasargod

equivocal space. This retrospection helps to understand different dimensions of the concept of Child.

Key Words: Child, childhood, Evolution.

Introduction

In 1874 Mary Ellen Wilson case in America was an impeccable example and became an anecdote to the future generations of children to their existence and life. This was the first case of child protection in the history of America while a philanthropist Mrs. Etta Angell approached the authorities because of the abuse and ill-treatment of little Mary by her foster parents but they denied the request because they said that they don't have authority to intervene into it. Finally, Mrs. Etta Angell approached Mr. Henry Bergh, President of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NYSPCA) with his help they approached the court and removed Mary Ellen from the custody of foster parents. This case invoked the conscience of American society and led to the establishment of New York Society for Prevention of Cruelty against Children (NYSPCC) in 1874. Watkins, (1990) observed that the system did not look Mary Ellen as animal instead system considered as her as a child who needs care and protection and it proved the cardinal disparity among the care and protection of children laws and policies. Myers, (2011) pointed out that the formation of NYSPC spread all over the country and by 1922 around 300 non-governmental societies were established in America only. Another important event happened is the first juvenile court was established in 1899 in Chicago. This era marked in the history of child protection of the West as the emergence of Organized Child protection period.

In this paper, the researcher demarcated the Mary Ellison case as a milestone which demarcated the evolutionary changes of the definition of the child from Plato's concept to the present modern universal definition of UNCRC. It's obvious that between these time period the centuries passed and the civilizations and the Kings, state everything will change and a new world order

also established. So it would be an impractical attempt to narrate the evolution the concept of the child within a paper. So the researcher traces the evolution of the concept of child from an ancient viewpoint to the UNCRC definition which is largely adopted by all over the world. From ancient to UNCRC the time span spread out into centuries of expansion. Between the time period the civilizations, state, cultures and in large extent life of the child itself change a lot. (Aries, 1962)) pointed out that the very notion of the child is historically and culturally conditioned and it has different meaning through centuries. It is essential to have an in-depth idea of childhood only after assessing the evolutionary journey of the child both in its meaning and different kind of explications.

So in this conceptual paper, the researcher only documented the definitional change or alteration happened in the concept of the notion of child. In this paper the researcher analysed the secondary resources related with the child and child hood. One of the major limitations of the analysis is the researcher only focussed on the Western theoretical knowledge and philosophical base of child.

Ancient view on child and childhood

The western idea of child is rooted in Greek philosophy, especially the stalwarts like Plato and Aristotle. Mathews & Amy (2018) observed it as “at least in Western conceptions of childhood—arises from the fact that, even today, the dominant view of children embodies what we might call a broadly “Aristotelian conception” of childhood. According to Aristotle, there are four sorts of causality, one of which is Final causality and another is Formal Causality. Aristotle thinks of the Final Cause of a living organism as the function that organism normally performs when it reaches maturity. He thinks of the Formal Cause of the organism as the form or structure it normally has in maturity, where that form or structure is thought to enable the organism to perform its functions well. According to this conception, a human child is an immature specimen of the organism type, human, which, by nature, has the potentiality to develop into a mature specimen with the structure, form, and function of

a normal or standard adult". The concept of education, special training and the obligation of developing a mature and moral child lies under the responsibility of Adult persons. This idea of child negates the existence of child instead it focuses more on attributing into the mere his/her existence then only they became the perfect being otherwise they considered as mere "children" or "little chaps". Aries (1962)observed this fact in his remarkable study on childhood as "The idea of childhood was bound up with the idea of dependence: the words 'sons', 'varlets' and 'boys' were also words in the vocabulary of feudal subordination"(Burroughs, 2010). In his conceptual paper examined the work of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and Emmanuel Kant and argued that western philosophy addressed children as "irrational, appetitive and emotional" so these qualities are prohibited children from the concept of complete men or philosopher. So being an incapable one children need suggestion and training from the Adults. This ideological perspective molded the pragmatic ways associated with all affairs related to children(McGowan, 2014) made a significant comment on childhood on American society in this period as "the concept of childhood, as it is currently understood, was unknown except for very young children". The author argues that the ultimate aim of the children is when they acquiring physical dependency help the family in economic and householdactivities. Up to the middle of Eighteenth century this concet is largely prevailed in Western societies. The idea of child is considered as only for very young children, below the age of six only and they considered as immature and dependent nature, other children considered as the miniature of adult people and need differernt kind of training and the duty of society to harness them into adulthood.

Universalization of the idea of child

During the Renaissance period, that challenged the all existing ideas and structures and shook the pillars of Western society. The poet (Shelley, 1820) beautifully curved this concept in his poem as

"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,

Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing”.

The philosophical and scientific development experienced this period changed the very essence of the concept of the child. The founding philosopher of English liberalism John Locke(1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) concepts on Education and childhood predominantly shaped the concept of child in the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century ideas on children. Hanita, Ben-Arieh, & Hendelsman, (2016) observed that “Changes in the status of children cannot be attributed solely to the social and economic changes in the 19th century. Some streams of philosophical thinking emerging in the 17th and the 18th century also contributed to generating the notion of children’s rights. This new wave ideals metamorphic the concept of child and childhood in all streams of society such as academic, judiciary, state, welfare schemes and in large extent society as whole. Key, (1909) in her influential book argued “Up to now we have only heard in academic speeches and in pedagogical essays that the training of youth is the highest function of a nation. In reality, in the family, in the school and in the state, quite other standards are put in the foreground”. In the gradual process the beginning of twentieth century the West witnessed private philanthropic agencies and legislations enacted by the concerned government for protecting the children from the vulnerabilities. In these period one of the remarkable thing happened is the universalisation of child into the international arena. In 1924 the League of Nation’s adopted the first international child rights drafts and it known as ‘Geneva declaration of the rights of the child’. First time in the world history an International agency recommended its member countries to “men and women of all nations, recognizing that mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty that, beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed”. After this recognition of child in an international agency following that several international covenant came into existence among it. United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 marked an influential space in the notion of child. It attributed

irrespective of all entitlements everyone is eligible for rights. (United Nations, 1948) in the article 27 and it says “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance”. Then in the Year 1989 the United Nations Conventions of Rights of the Child, it is considered as most widely ratified international document. Philips (2015) observed that the universalization or globalisation of childcare and protection through the CRC due to which several traditional constructs of children or childhood existing in various cultures, nations, and religions are challenged. United Nations (1989) reiterated in the preamble itself as “that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity”. The time span up to the enactment of UNCRC the notion of child and the very idea itself changed. The new world considered child a political entity which enjoyed the privileges and power existing in the society as like every other individual.

Findings, Implications and Conclusion

The paradigm shifts from the ancient society to the modern world the concept of child shaped with several philosophies and scientific knowledge. This changes played a vital role in the recognition of child in the public arena. The major findings of this paper are;

- From dependent, immature, emotional being into an individual with dignity.
- The meaning of the word child became more comprehensive and right based.
- Recognized child as political character with privileges and rights

This recognition is not the ending point instead it's a beginning from the behind curtain now the child enters into the public space now onwards it is the duty of international agencies and government to ensure the development and wellbeing of each child. The recognition of child as a political entity influ-

ences the policies, programmes and protective mechanisms of child.

References

Aries, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Random House, INC

Assembly, U. G. (1924). Geneva Declaration of the Right of the Child. UN General Assembly. Retrieved from <http://www.un-documents.net/gdrc1924.htm>

Burroughs, M. D. (2010). *Reconsidering the Examined Life: Philosophy and Children*. In L. Hopkins, M. Macleod, & W. C. Turgeon (Eds.), *Negotiating Childhoods*. United Kingdom: Inter Disciplinary Press. doi:<https://www.michaeldeanburroughs.com/books-and-articles/>

Hanita, K., Ben-Arieh, A., & Hendelsman, Y. (2016). <http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-43918-1>. Retrieved from [www.springer.com: https://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloaddocument/9783319439181-c2.pdf?SGWID=0-0-45-1604382-p180186271](https://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloaddocument/9783319439181-c2.pdf?SGWID=0-0-45-1604382-p180186271).

Key, E. (1909). *The Century of the Child*. New York: G P Putnam's Sons.

Mathews, G., & Amy, M. (2018). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/childhood/>

McGowan, B. G. (2014). Historical Evolution of Child Welfare Services. In G. P. Mallon, & P. M. Hess, *Child Welfare for the 21st Century A Handbook of Practices, Policies and Programmes* (II ed., pp. 11-50). Columbia University Press. doi:https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1-oYBQAAQ-BAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA11&dq=welfare+of+destitute+children&ots=W9vTKk-dCQL&sig=Ul7650rQZ7TFRMVz4DCxvN_vJvo#v=onepage&q&f=true

Myers, J. E. (2011). *A Short History of Child Protection in America*. In J. E. Myers (Ed.), *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* (3 ed., pp. 3-15). United States of America: SAGE Publications.

Philips, J. P. (2015). "Everybody's Child but Nobody's Child": An Interro-

gation into the Contestations on Rights of the Child in India: Family, Church and State. Retrieved 2019, from https://www.academia.edu/23512547/_Everybodys_Child_but_Nobodys_Child_An_Interrogation_into_the_Contestations_on_Rights_of_the_Child_in_India_Family_Church_and_State

Shelley, P. B. (1820). Ode to the West Wind. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45134/ode-to-the-west-wind>

United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

United Nations. (1989). Conventions on the Rights of the Child. United Nations General Assembly. Retrieved from https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.261684173.1739443698.1549361304-172226703.1545374058

Watkins, S. A. (1990). The Mary Ellen Myth: Correcting Child Welfare History. *Social Work*, 35(6), 500-503. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23715954>