

# Intersections Between Western and Indian Childhoods

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**Abstract:** This article explores the intersections between discourses on children from the North and South (India as a case in point). Some similarities can be seen between Western and Indian conceptualizations with the child occupying subaltern spaces. Both in the North and South children are marginalized in sociological discourses; there is a perceived emergent decrease in patriarchal control of children by adults, with adult-child relations becoming more democratic and participatory, manifested in greater negotiation of control by children. The New Sociology of Childhood that evolved in the “Century of the Child” notable as childhood has brought children into the arena of International politics and academic debates in both the North and the South.

**Keywords:** Social Construction, Convergence, Divergence, Childhoods, Agency

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## 1. Introduction

Both in the West and in India plurality of childhoods are being acknowledged in discourses on childhood. Indian sociological studies document multiplicity of childhoods which in turn depends on varying factors such as region, religion, caste, social class, gender, family structure, etc. Although childhood in India is located in various domains, identity per se is perceived as a more stable and unified construct, and not yet been deconstructed as provisional or contingent as found in the postmodern discourses located in the West, where the essentialism found in the modernist understanding of the child, and the Universalist construction of ‘childhood’ has recently been deconstructed by social constructionists. Even while childhoods vary in the West and the East, North and the South, there can be found intersections between Western and Indian childhoods which I explore and construct under the following sub-headings: 1) Childhood - a social construction; 2) Convergence and divergence between Western and Indian childhoods; 3) Conceptualizations of childhood; 4) Marginalization of children; 5) The blurring of boundaries between adults and children; 6) Children’s agency; 7) The changing notions of childhood; and 8) The New Sociology of Childhood.

## 2. Methodology

This article is an outcome of my hermeneutical readings of contemporary and historical sociological texts and researches in the area, in order to explore the intersections between Western and Indian childhoods.

Hermeneutics is a branch of knowledge (within theory and practice) that deals with interpretation or critical explanation of texts. Nineteenth and 20th century hermeneutics emerged as a theory of understanding (Verstehen). The interpretation of the text proceeds by framing its content in terms of the overall organization of the work and by relating interpretation to historical objectification. Understanding moves from the outer manifestations of human action and productivity to the exploration of their inner meaning. In interacting with the text, the researcher becomes a dimension of methodology.

This article is a hermeneutical reading of historical and sociological texts and is a spin off and consequence of my Phil. Lic research at Lund University called: *Conceptualizations of Childhood, Pedagogy and Educational Research in the Postmodern – A critical interpretation*

## 3. Results and Discussion

At the onset, I assert that ideation about childhood is a

‘social construction’ just as ideation about other social experiences. Ideas of childhood vary in different societies and cultures and has changed historically over different epochs.

### 3.1. *Childhood: A Social Construction*

Differing and changing ideas about children have led many social scientists to claim that childhood is a ‘social construction’. I construct that contemporary discourses on childhood in India is bound to be influenced by the dominant global discourse on the subject due to center-periphery bias. In this article I try to construct the similarities and differences between Western and Indian discourses in childhood in order to weaken the stronghold of the western middle class notions of childhood, child rearing and child development. In both locations, there are some ontological given and near universal agreement that there are fundamental differences between adults and children. Children are seen as physically and psychologically immature compared to adults and dependent on adults for their biological and emotional needs. Yet in both the Western and Indian children these stages are often understood and constructed differently, giving separate meanings to these biological differences.

### 3.2. *Convergence and Divergence Between Western and Indian Childhoods*

Unlike Western historical accounts as constructed by Ariés [1], Cunningham [2], De Mause [3], Hendrick [4], South Asia still does not have a social or cultural history of family with children as its primary focus [5]. Contemporary investigations of Hindu experience of childhood fall into two predominant categories: the cultural-psychological work of Kakar [6], Borthwick [7], Chakrabarty [8], Forbes [9], Sarkar [10] and the political-economic-legal work of Burra [11] and Weiner. [12]

#### 3.2.1. *Conceptualizations of Childhood*

Historians like Philippe Ariés in *Centuries of childhood* and Lloyd deMause in *The history of childhood* have asserted that in premodern times, current ideas of childhood did not exist. According to this view the idea of childhood was invented between the 16th and 20th century. Prior to this, children were not seen as essentially different from adults like they are known to be today. Children were expected to work at a much earlier age; the law often made no distinction between children and adults; works of art from the period often depicted children as small adults. Parental attitudes to children in the Middle-ages were very different from today. High infant mortality rates encouraged indifference and neglect, especially towards infants [13]. De Mause portrayed the classical childhood as a period where children were frequently killed or abandoned, through medieval indifference and where wet-nursing and the ‘farming out’ of children were common Childhood in medieval times had less significance to their parents.

Modern notion of childhood was forged during *the Enlightenment* or *The Age of Reason* and *the Industrial*

*revolution*, which spanned from about the 1620s to about the 1780s and challenged the traditional, and irrational ideologies of the middle-ages. Dahlberg et al [14] document that the construction of the child as produced within the project of modernity in the West shares modernity’s belief in autonomous, stable, essentialized subject, whose inherent and ‘preordained human nature’ is revealed through processes of development and maturity and one who can be described in terms of scientific concepts and classifications. Modernist conception atomizes and underestimates the active, innovative capacities of the child (John Locke). Here the child is peripheralized and treated as non-functional, inconsequential and a creature of habits in need of reinforcement and controlled by training. The child is appropriated by society, where the child’s determined function is to be prepared to fit into and contribute to, an ordered, balanced society.

The paradigmatic shift from modernist to postmodernist conception of children in the West, has resulted in no longer viewing the child, determined by its environment as an essentialized subject but as a dynamic subject whose identity is constructed in a plethora of locales, who is a social actor having agency, and who participates in constructing and determining his/her own life, while contributing to learning as an active agent [15]. Postman [16] notes that with the onset of postmodernity, childhood as we know is disappearing and that the distinction between adulthood and childhood is narrowing. The lines that used to distinguish between adulthood and childhood are growing blurred through television and internet/social media. Children are now able to access the ‘adult world’, as a result childhood as we know is fast disappearing in the West [17]. The traditional notions of childhood as a time of innocence and dependency on adults, have been challenged by children’s access to corporate-produced popular culture [18].

Unfortunately, the concepts of childhood that prevailed in India prior to the nineteenth century represent an under-researched area. The early modern Indian concept of childhood appears to have been defined by ignorance as opposed to innocence (the post-Enlightenment European ideal of childhood). Kotalová [19] documents that childhood (*shishukul*) was equated with the state of non-reason (*obuj*). Ali’s [20] study of courtly culture in India from 300 to 1200 C. E. shows that the aim of elite male education was “moral perfection” - *vinaya* (discipline, self-restraint and humility) and filial piety, portraying a picture of the prevailing male ideal of childhood. Early modern Islamic ideas about childhood since the cultivation of scholarly learning was virtue, character and ethical behavior which together made up *adab* (refinement) and was a process by which boys matured into men. Traditionally, parents perceived children on an axis of human – divine and a gift from God. Child development is perceived as an organic process, regulated by nature and God (beyond parental control). Nor is the shaping of a girl’s body ever brought to the level of independent discourse - as gender didactics or apprenticeship of culture

Sen [21] documents that British colonizers defined Indian

children not in terms of innocence, but rather as perverse and prematurely adult. From the nineteenth century, elite Indians imbibed some aspects of the European ideal of childhood as a stage of innocence. Colonial modernity resulted in transformed notions of childhood in India. The nationalist Indian middle-class rejected colonial racialized concepts of perverse Indian childhood and saw Indian children as the future of the Indian nation.

Hindu nationalist conceptualizations see children as malleable future Hindu citizens. [22] Carrin [23] describes how *Santals* (a tribe) regard the “child” as almost a stranger until named and placed among the *bongas* (tribal deities) of the father’s clan. She suggests that the fact *Santal* children are expected to control their speech and use metaphors rather than directly express sadness, pain or anger, indicates that *Santali* young people are conceived of as persons competent to master their emotions. Froerer [24], describes the mechanisms behind two competing Chhattisgarhi rural *adivasi* (a tribe) conceptualizations of how children should ideally be occupied: schooling as the ideal investment of their children’s time *versus* the conviction that children be incorporated into local livelihood roles from an early age.

There are a range of interacting dynamics by which social conceptualizations of childhood in India today are shaped: the postcolonial social pluralism, which proliferates a diverse range of marginal identities - each with their own expectations of children’s roles; the globalized mass-media imagery; the development expectations of children’s economic and social roles; the political ideologies such as nationalism and ethnic identifications. Late-capitalism characterizes young people as target consumers [25]. McCarthy [26] illustrates the ways that development discourses about desirable childhood practices compete with advertising messages from the mass media.

### 3.2.2. Marginalization of Children

Both in the West and in India children have been marginalized in sociological theory. Marginalization is a process that leads to sidelining of a certain category - group or individual to the periphery of the social spaces that eventually constrain their life choices in social negotiation. It is a complex and contested umbrella term that is inextricably linked with the concept of inequality. Both - marginalization and inequality - interact and reinforce each other. Bisht [27] problematizes the naturally occurring power dynamics within adult-child relationships and suggests that while in the West, the feminist gender-relations theory have been in currency the last three decades, the power relations in adult-child relations are being systematically explored only recently. Educational literature in India shows similar concerns about marginalizations and subordination of the child.

### 3.2.3. Blurring of Boundaries Between Adults and Children

In the previous paragraphs, childhood as a fairly new concept in the West has been established. The historians of childhood have asserted that in premodern times, children were not seen as essentially different from adults like they are known to be today. Children were expected to work at a

much earlier age; the law often made no distinction between children and adults; works of art from the period often depicted children as small adults – they wore the same clothes and appeared to work and play together. ‘Childhood’ grew into existence in the upper classes in the 16th and 17th centuries, solidified itself somewhat more fully in the 18th century in the upper classes, and finally mushroomed on the scene of the 20th century in both upper and lower classes.

Corbet [28] documents that Childhood did not really penetrate the great masses of the lower and middle classes until the very late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Ariès sees the progressive separation of children and adults as a part of more general cultural changes due to the transformation of the extended family to the isolated nuclear family that has resulted in the separations by social class and race in modern society. The acceptance of childhood as a privileged and protected period was simultaneous to the rise of modern welfare state.

Contemporary Indian discourses note that in the Indian context, the boundaries are not so rigid. In both rural and urban educated middle classes in India, weak adult-child differentiation has been documented. Kakar notes that in the fourth or the fifth year, Indian childhood widens suddenly for the male child - from the intimate cocoon of maternal protection to the unfamiliar masculine network woven by demands and tension. The liberty the male child is allowed during earlier childhood becomes increasingly curtailed. [36] Boys are prepared for work outside the home and work on the farm alongside the male adult while the girls are prepared for work inside the home besides their mother and trained for their future roles as care-takers of household.

However Kumar [29] notices a change in the life of the Indian child (who lived earlier embedded in the world of adult activity) due to macro-processes and economic changes like immigration, breaking up of joint families and scholarization and compulsory schooling. It may be added here that only some of the rural and urban, middle and upper class child enjoy the privileged and protected world of schooling in India. My recent article *Children without Childhood – Proletarianization of Children and its Implication* [30] documents poverty and destitution as the major cause of child-labour which in turn results in lower school attendance and higher dropout rates and exists into the 21st century. The 1998 national census of India estimated the total number of child labourers between the ages 4 to 15, to be at 12.6 million, out of a total child population of 253 million [31].

### 3.2.4. Children’s Agency

Human agency is both a collective historical dynamic, as well as refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices, while structure refer to factors such as social class as well as religion, gender, ethnicity, sub-culture etc. that limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have. Liberal humanism sees the individual or subject as unified and self-determining. It therefore ascribes agency to this subject as a

more or less unrestricted actor shaping her/his own life and a more general social destiny. Non-humanist positions developed by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, appear to deny agency. For Foucault, 'power' is omnipresent. Poststructuralist arguments have challenged traditional Marxist emphasis upon class as agencies of radical change, and have proved relevant to feminists and other oppositional theories interested in the strategies which render women and other subjugated peoples as 'subjects' (or agents) of their own rather than the 'objects' of an imposed history.

Historically both human and children's agency has been short (minimal) and weak where action was perceived as being constrained within societal structures. However with the advent of industrial capitalism, human agency has been extended in the realm of human activity. During Enlightenment, modern science was represented by rationality and freedom, which were limited to the use of theory and to design society. Structural theories emphasize external circumstances such as economic forces, institutional arrangements, systems of belief that shape the lives of children in particular times and places. Like socialization theories these assumptions imply that their lives are moulded from outside and project passivity on the part of children. In order to modify this image, the New Social Studies of Childhood emphasize children's agency – their capacity to help shape the circumstances in which they live [32].

According to Dahlberg et al, within the earlier childhood pedagogy – the construction of the child produced from within the project of modernity, the child is a knowledge, identity and culture reproducer (Locke's child) – the empty vessel that needs to be filled with knowledge, skills and cultural values. The child as innocent, in the golden age of life (Rousseau's child) – childhood reflected as the innocent period, in need of protection and security. The latter modernist child is a labour-market supply factor – the child is seen instrumentally and childhood is seen as the stage where future human resource is produced. Investments in child-care are seen in terms of cost-effective approach for maintaining a stable, well prepared workforce.

There are similarities between Western and Indian understandings of agency in the child, with children in both communities being seen largely as immature, incompetent, dependent and passive, occupying a subordinate position with respect to the adults. The dominant culture in India is that born of Hinduism into which the minorities have got acculturated and assimilated to various degrees. Ideologically children in general, were being perceived as dependent and incompetent and were marginalized within adult-child relationship. The child is attributed ignorance and passivity by the teacher. Despite the fact that there is a growing concern for children's rights, Indian children occupy a subordinate position in adult-child relationship and family.

### 3.2.5. *Changing Notions About Childhood*

The earlier notion of perceived indifference to children by adults, and a widespread mistreatment and abuse of children in Western discourses has shifted since *The Enlightenment*

and *Industrial revolution* with the growth of the bourgeoisie and middle classes. It was in the early 1900s that childhood was conceptualized as universal - when the middle class communities determined an identity for children, thus constructing a 'modern view of childhood'. Wage-earning labour got transformed into a period of 'childhood', a 'child study' movement was founded, 'children of the nation' was conceived as a public phrase, and finally 'children of the welfare state' was invented. Kincheloe argues that along with the institutionalization of childhood came a way for describing children in universal terms. In the current Western conception, children have become precious and emotionally valuable. This has led to increased adult surveillance of children. There is a simultaneous growth of parental duties, obligations and responsibilities towards children. In the West absolute parental authority is no longer the basis on which generational and gender relations are organized in domestic institutions. Children's vulnerability and need for protection co-exist along with discourses of children's rights to empowerment and self-determination. The new construction of childhood has led to a lessening in parental patriarchal rights over children.

This trend is also seen in recent Indian discourses. Kurian and Gosh [33] observe that the Indian family is changing from traditional authoritarian to more liberal patterns. Modern education seems to be mainly responsible for this change. This transformation can be observed both in urban and rural areas. Middle and upper middle class families who have access to modern education seem to be the vanguard of this new trend. Bisht also documents, that compared to earlier times, children of today were seen as maturing faster and that there is a lessening of patriarchal control of parents over children and growing democratic tendencies in the adult-child relationship, in her study located in India.

Recent discourses in both West and India, childhood experiences have been problematized. In Indian discourses, children are simultaneously perceived to be indulged as well as controlled and supervised by adults and parents. Some studies associate early childhood with divinity and purity and goodness.

### 3.2.6. *The New Sociology of Childhood*

It is now accepted within the New Sociology of Childhood that there exists no single universal childhood but many widely different childhoods [34]. Twentieth century- the 'Century of the Child'- witnessed the revolutionary United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 'New Social Studies' of Childhood, which brought childhood to the forefront of International political and academic debate. Childhood is also an extremely visible entity in the policies and programmes of Government of India. A signatory to the UNCRC, India presently has more than 120 schemes for welfare and development of women and children.

According to Dahlberg et al, The New Sociology of Childhood is organized around the following central discussions: a) The child as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture – emerging from social constructionist and postmodernist perspectives. There is problematizing of

developmental psychology, increased rethinking of children and childhood. Children are simultaneously part of, and separate from family. Children are recognized as having independent agency, their own rights as human beings and members of society. b) Children are social actors - a social construct, constructed both for and by children. The idea of childhood as a social construction contextualized in relation to time, place, culture, and varies according to class, gender and other socio-economic conditions. Children being worthy of study in their own right, having their own voices. There is an increased recognition of children's resilience and resistance to power in adult-child relationship.

There is a fairly large body of research on children's everyday lives in the West that emphasize their capacity as experiencing subjects who are capable of autonomous action and cultural creation. Corsaro [35] coined the term *interpretative reproduction* that emphasizes children's participation in cultural production and change. That children have agency in the sense of the capacity to experience, interact and make "meaning" is no longer questioned.

Depiction of children in Indian media is telling. Banaji [36] in her book *Children and media in India: Narratives of class, agency and social change* addresses the status of child representation in India. She notes that there is still a resilient sense of "otherness", difference and absence in the representation of the working class and the rural childhoods and a resolute avoidance of extreme poverty, religious intolerance, adult violence, caste discrimination, caste violence, sexuality, sexual harassment, child labour, romantic relationships and political choices in children's lives. While pluralities of childhoods is well documented in India, discourses on childhood in India underscore the fact that family was envisaged as a realm that played the most valuable task of shaping the individual's life. Seniority was continued to be respected, fathers were the disciplinarians, and assumed to be the supreme authority. Sacrifice and duty was expected of all children and women, with girl children confined to domestic spheres and boys associated with the nation and its place in the world.

Children continue to be marginalized but the nature of their marginality has changed. The anxiety experienced by the economic precariousness by neo-liberal adult is embodied in the unbalanced, traumatized and neglected children. [37]

Bula Bhadra [38] in her edited book *Readings in Indian Sociology Vol III: Sociology of Childhood and Youth*, observes that due to sociological literature being in English, there is a global and a hegemonic shaping of childhood research all over the world and in India. There is also a fracturing of the field of childhood with different agendas, different paths and thinking afresh of the nature of childhood studies and its reconstruction. According to Qvortrup [39], the increasing emphasis on plurality is obscuring the importance of childhood as a social category and its structural significance in terms of generational and intergenerational relations. The global cultural politics of childhood has become a terrain of contention as well as a focus of interdisciplinary research.

The new discourses of childhood understand child as a being. Any analysis of childhood must rigorously attempt to open up the boundaries that have been placed around the experience of being a child. Few Scholarships have arisen in India, one notable is Sarada Balagopalan's *Childrens lives and the Indian context* [40] that has highlighted multiple childhoods.

## 4. Conclusion

With the onset of The New Sociology of Childhood there is a growing understanding in the West that childhood is not a monolithic concept but plural and located in various domains. Indian sociological studies have for some time documented multiplicity of childhoods constructed by an intersection of religion, caste, social class, gender, family structure etc. While Indian childhood is located in different domains. Identity or agency is perceived as stable and a unified construct and has not yet been deconstructed as in the postmodern Western discourses. In both Western and Indian discourses children are located in subaltern spaces and marginalized in sociological discourses till now.

Conceptualizations of childhood in the West has shifted from the lack of differentiation between the adult and the child as in the medieval times to Modern notion of childhood and child-centeredness that was forged during *the Enlightenment* or *The Age of Reason*. It brought about a shift from indifference or neutrality to high valuation. In India child is perceived as a gift from God, despite being ignorant, immature, incompetent, dependent and passive. Modern colonizers brought in schooling and transformed the notion of childhood to India. Today there is a perceived decrease of patriarchal control of children by adults both in the West and India. The simultaneous advent of The New Sociology of Childhood and the *Convention for the Rights of the Child* (CRC) in 1989 have consolidated the notion of pluralities of childhoods, children as social actors with dynamic agencies and as co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture.

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