

PARLIAMENT WATCH!

Children's Issues in Parliament 2016-17



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India is home to 472 million children in the age group of 0-18 years constituting almost 39 per cent of the nation's population [1] and yet they received a mere 3.32 per cent of the total financial allocations in budget for 2017-18 [2]. It is significant that 2017 marks 25 years of India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

If budgets reflect the political commitments and priorities of a government, the interest that Parliamentarians take in children, also is a reflection of the same priority. So how much interest did our Parliamentarians take in children and their issues over the last three sessions?

To understand the issues that drew the attention of the Parliamentarians, we looked at the questions (Starred and Unstarred) related to children that were asked in both Houses.

These were selected and categorised under four themes:

Development (early childhood development and welfare areas),

Education (primary and secondary),

Protection (crimes against and exploitation of children along with juvenile justice issues), and

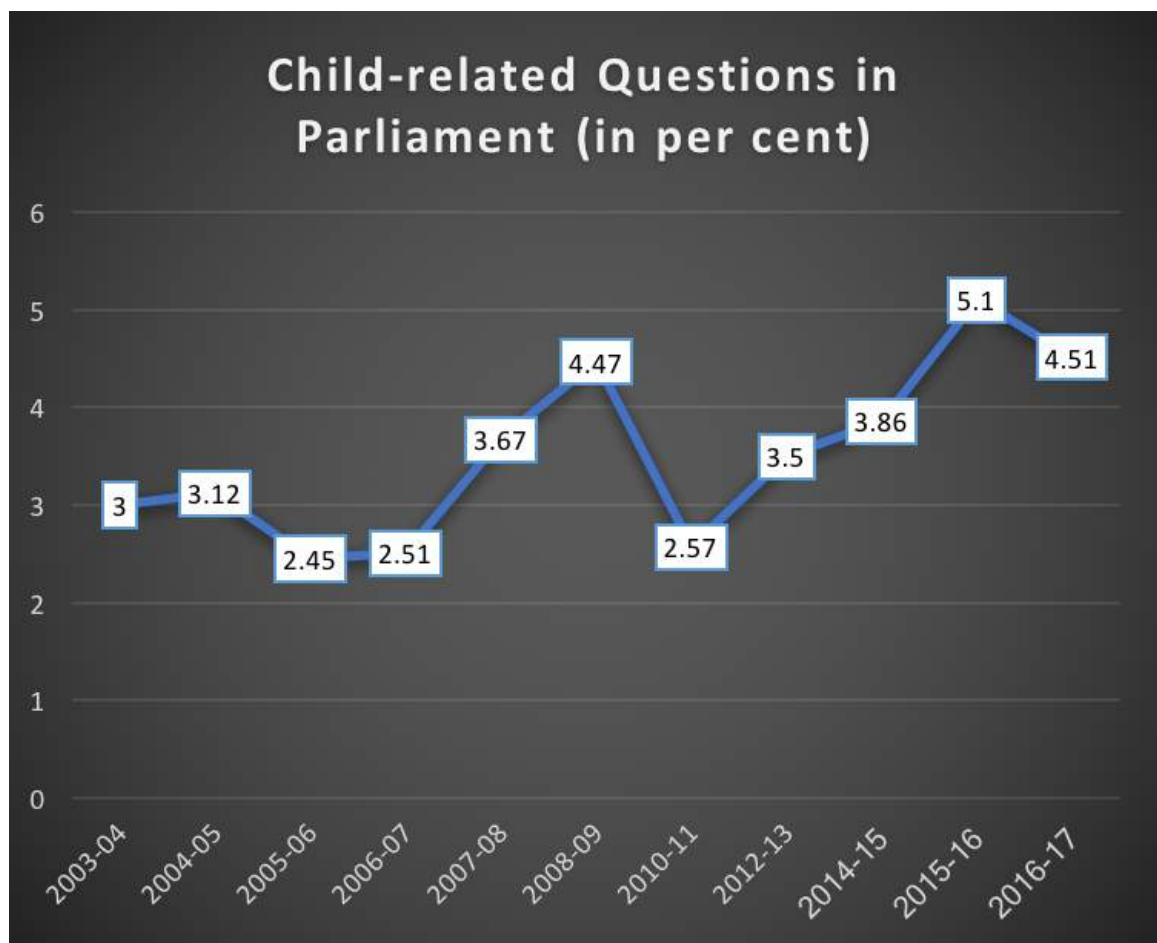
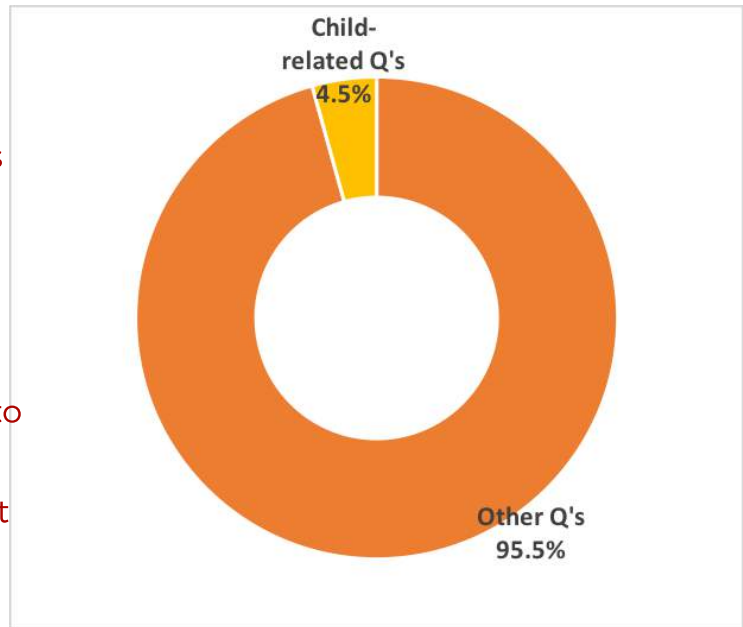
Health (malnutrition, hunger and diseases that affect the health of children).

Share of Child-related Questions in Parliament, 2016-17

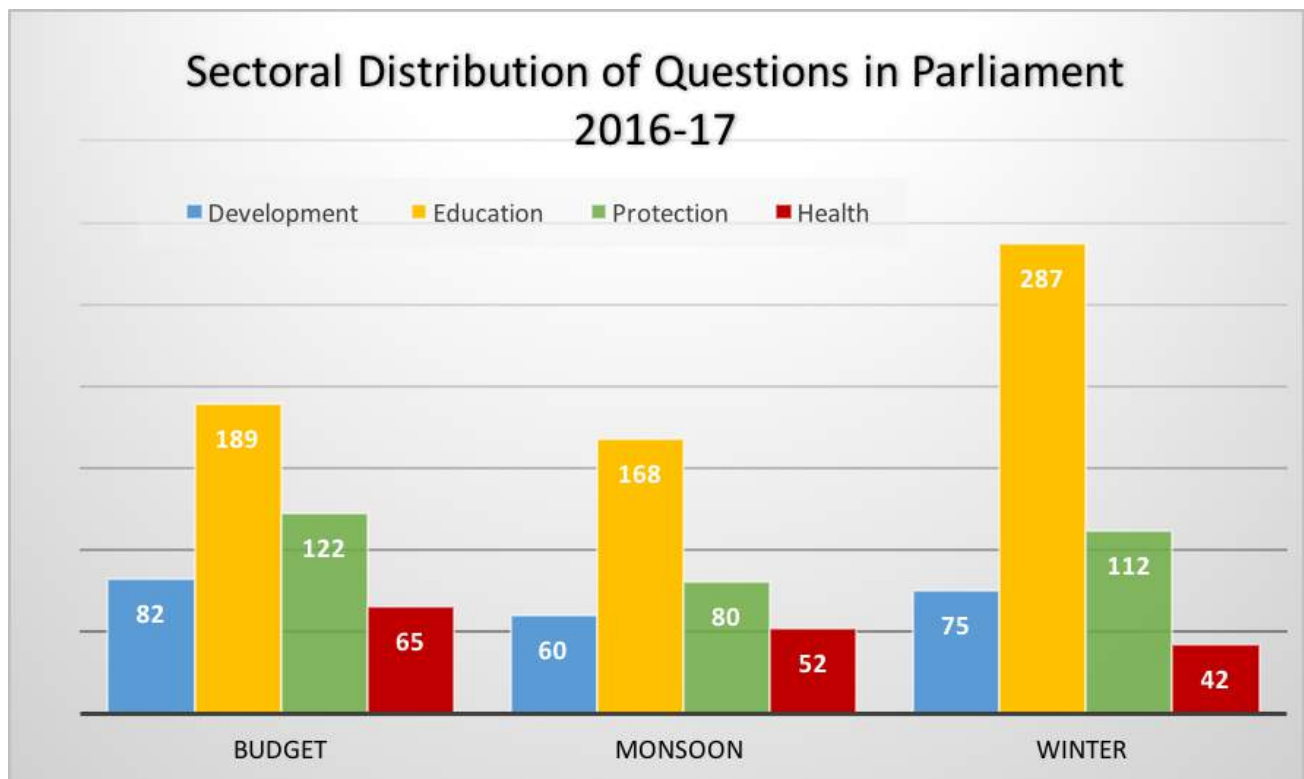
Of the 29,549 questions that were asked in Parliament, 1,334 questions or a mere 4.5 per cent focused on children's issues - a slight decline from 5.1 per cent in 2015-16.

Interestingly, in the Rajya Sabha 5.96 per cent of the questions pertained to children, whereas Lok Sabha members merely raised 3.48 per cent of the questions related to the 0-18 age group.

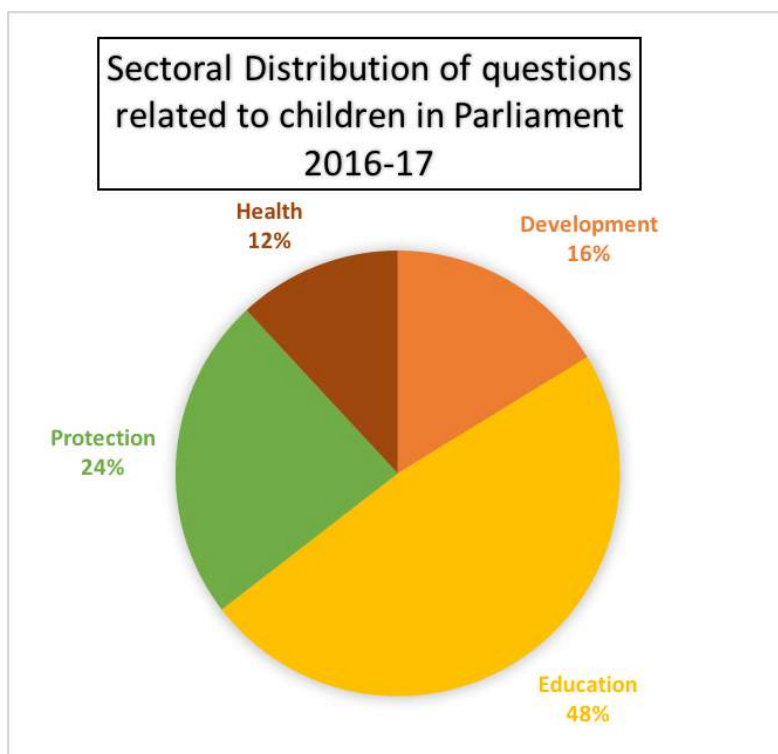
In terms of questions asked by political parties, Indian National Congress asked maximum questions in the Rajya Sabha while Bharatiya Janata Party had the most number in Lok Sabha.



What were the issues that caught our MPs' attention?



Continuing the trend of the previous years, education drew the maximum attention from our MPs. Unlike the Budget for Children, where protection received the least consideration, in the Parliament issues related to violence against children, trafficking, child labour etc. were of interest to the lawmakers.



While PRS Session Track mentioned that 2016-17 Budget and Monsoon sessions were most productive sessions in the recent past because of the number of bills and amendments passed [3], there was not much progress on needs and rights of children. Instead, an amendment to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Bill 2012, passed on 26th July, 2016, has brought forth the lack of importance of child protection issues.

Who were the most child-friendly MPs?

Rajya Sabha: **Shri Baishnab Parida** asked 18 questions.

Lok Sabha: **Shri Maulana Badruddin Ajmal** asked 16 questions.

Among the women Parliamentarians, **Smt. Rajani Patil** asked 16 questions on child issues in the Rajya Sabha.

1,334

child-related
questions in
Parliament in
2016-17

Issues...

Budget session: Questions were asked regarding the falling child sex ratio, dropout of girls from schools due to lack of toilets, increasing crimes and exploitation of children as well as infant mortality rate.

Monsoon session: Issues of violence and its impact on children in the Kashmir valley, along with questions on digitising Anganwadi centres, arrangements made in schools to deal with emergencies, adolescent dropout rates, polio eradication and progress of Mission Indradhanush.

Winter session: Demonetisation and its impact on children, along with questions on burning of schools in Jammu & Kashmir, online reporting of child sexual abuse, review and implementation of Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao

DEVELOPMENT



“Development” is growth and welfare of children through access to nourishing food, care and fulfilment of other needs that allow a child to grow holistically. Overall 16 per cent of the questions raised in both Houses were on some of the key schemes like Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao.

DEVELOPMENT

POOR QUALITY FOOD IN MID-DAY MEALS



Many MPs were interested in the number of complaints received and action taken against carelessness in the Mid-Day Meal Scheme that resulted in children falling ill or death. According to the response provided, 280 such cases were registered since 2013, of which at least 150 cases were pending inquiry [4].

TOILETS IN SCHOOLS

4,17,796
toilets constructed in only 35% primary and secondary schools

Availability of drinking water and access to toilets in schools was raised over 10 times in both the Houses. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), under whom the Swachh Vidyalaya initiative was launched, informed that 4,17,796 toilets in 2,61,400 elementary and secondary schools [5] were repaired or constructed (as part of public and corporate sector undertaking). Safe drinking water was still not available in 56,532 schools. (Ministry doesn't provide details whether this number is for storage or direct source of water). However, of the total 10,80,757 elementary and 999,02 secondary schools in India [6], the Swachh Vidyalaya initiative has only reached out to 35 per cent schools. For every child to have access to clean drinking water and toilets, especially girls to have access to gendered, hygienic toilets to continue their education, we have to see how the initiative rolls out in the coming years.

ANGANWADI CENTRES

Though Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the flagship scheme of the government, the situation of Anganwadi workers has been a matter of concern for some years now. Not surprisingly, delay in disbursement of honorarium of Anganwadi workers and regularisation of their services remains an issue raised by several MPs. Digitisation of Anganwadi centres to monitor and improve service delivery, track beneficiaries and employ interventions to address specific nutritional needs [7] had also interested our MPs.

DEVELOPMENT

MID-DAY MEALS DURING DROUGHT

Twelve states were affected by drought and the Supreme Court of India regarded government's attitude "ostrich-like" and ordered in 2016 to release additional funds to extend the Mid-Day Meal Scheme to children in these states during summer vacations (Swaraj Abhiyan vs Union Of India And Ors, 13 May, 2016) [8]. When the MPs raised questions on this issue, the MHRD replied that the central government in addition to its regular funding, had released Rs. 480.91 crores to these states, for provision of Mid-Day Meals in schools during summer vacations [9]. Odisha, which had an unprecedented heat wave was the only exception, while all other states served meals to children during vacations (45-50 days).



Other questions in this sector, were the Memorandum of Understanding between Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation signed at national and state levels to deliver nutrition outcomes for children below two and pregnant women [10], decline in India's position on the Global Hunger Index from 80th to 97th (out of 118 countries) displaying its inability to fight the hunger crisis leading to stunting and wasting in children [11]. The question relating to the request to extend Mid-Day Meal scheme to children in secondary schools was addressed by the MHRD stating that it was upto the state governments to do the needful. In this context, the Ministry cited examples of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana which were already providing mid-day meals upto class 10th and Puducherry till class 12th in government schools [12].

EDUCATION



Education continues to be an issue that interests the MPs in both Houses of Parliament, with 48 per cent of the questions related to the sector. Their concerns ranged from lack of security arrangements in schools to high dropout rates.

EDUCATION

SCHOOLING OF CHILDREN IN TEA GARDENS

Questions were raised regarding the high dropout rate of children from the schools in tea gardens and what steps had been taken to address it. As expected, the MHRD answered that the Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) doesn't capture such detailed information relating to tea gardens, but for Assam the dropout was 27.06 per cent in 2014-15 [13].

Single teacher schools, a common issue in the tea gardens, was also questioned by our MPs, with the MHRD responding that schools were primarily the responsibility of the tea gardens management. The House was also informed that the Departmental Standing Committee of Development of Assam Legislative Assembly had recently visited tea gardens in Sonitpur district and their report is awaited [14].

IMPACT OF DEMONETISATION

Demonetisation has also caused inconvenience to parents in paying school fees. In Hyderabad, for instance, it took the life of a young child as his parents could not pay his school fees soon after demonetisation [15]. When this issue coupled with the exponential rise in the school fees was raised, the Ministry responded that under RTE, education was free. Jawahar Navodayas (JN) and Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV) had regulated school fees while the State Governments should be monitoring fee hike in other schools [16].

BURNING OF SCHOOLS IN J&K

35 schools
set ablaze in 9 districts of J&K

The only issue debated in depth in the Lok Sabha and related questions raised in both the Houses, was on the burning of schools in the Kashmir valley. The MHRD stated that about 35 schools were set ablaze in nine districts of Jammu & Kashmir, damaging 11 school buildings till 14th November, 2016 and 24 persons were arrested in this connection. The schools were categorised in terms of threat and provided security [17]. To safeguard the academic interests of the children, as an interim measure, these students were enrolled in adjoining schools, along with redeployment of staff. In terms of security arrangements in schools, except for the provision of paramedical staff in JN and KVs, which are under the central government, all other aspects were under the jurisdiction of the state government [18].

EDUCATION

CHILDREN DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

Parliamentarians raised the issue of a large percentage dropouts at the primary level and steps taken to tackle it. The MHRD agreed that there was gap in the progress of children from primary to lower secondary to higher secondary education, with Gross Enrolment Ratio dipping from 19.67 crore to 1.73 crore children [19]. The dropout rate was 56.18 per cent to 36.11 per cent, for primary to secondary to higher secondary education respectively. The reasons stated for such a dropout were lack of transportation, migration and illiteracy of parents.

1.73 crore children in secondary schools

19.67 crore in primary schools

We hope the MPs realise that the dip is not merely due lack of transportation facilities, but other compelling reasons like lack of properly functioning school, growing privatisation of education and prevalence of cultural practices such as child marriage, child labour among others.

OTHER ISSUES

The operationality of special schools under the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) [20], increasing number of out of school children, lack of basic infrastructure facilities such as electricity, play grounds, boundary walls etc [21], dismal performance of students from government schools in Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) [22] and development of a Digital Gender Atlas to address the growing gender gap in student enrolment [23] were some other issues that drew the attention of the MPs.

According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2016, India would achieve universal primary education only by 2050, with universal lower secondary education at 2060 and universal upper secondary education by the year 2085. The MHRD dismissed the report with a response that it was based on past trends, and with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a key vehicle to implement RTE and other programmatic initiatives, the country would achieve these milestones much sooner [24].

PROTECTION



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Every five minutes, a crime is committed against a child in India, thus making protection a very important sector covering plaguing issues like child labour, sexual abuse, missing children and trafficking, juvenile justice etc. A comparatively high 24 per cent of the questions were raised in the Parliament related to Integrated Child Protection Scheme, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act alongside Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.

PROTECTION

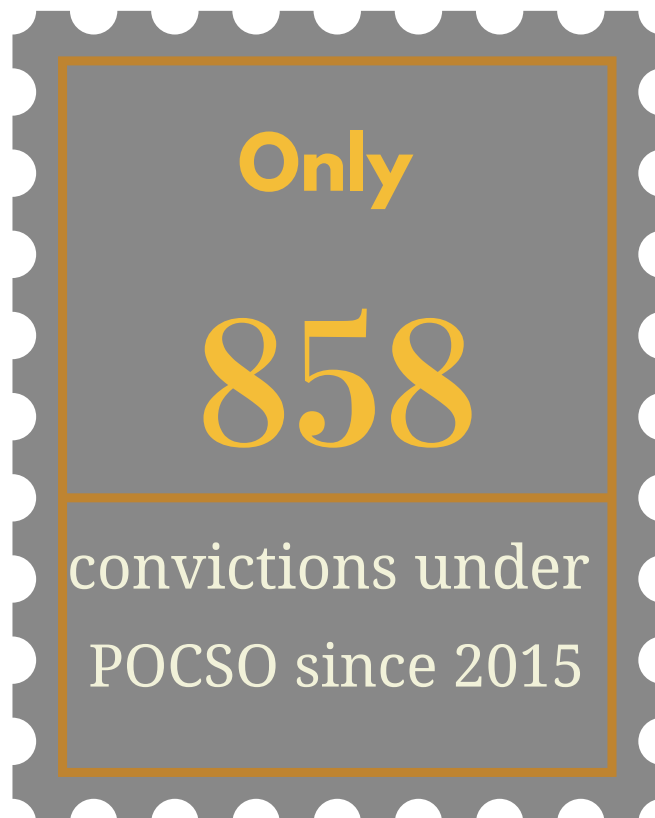
CHILD TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking, including child trafficking is a huge problem with India being a destination and transit country. The trafficking of 28 Nepali girls from the Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi and the subsequent arrest of four accused, caught the attention of the MPs [25]. The matter being sub-judice, the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) did not provide any further details. Unfortunately, with 25 per cent increase in human trafficking, including of 3,000 minor girls [26], it can be said that our “betis” are not safe despite Beti Bachao Beti Padhao.

CHILD MARRIAGE

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act was introduced 10 years ago in 2006, to prohibit marriages of minors around the country. The abysmal decrease of 0.1 per cent from 2.4 per cent in 2001 to 2.3 per cent in 2011, came to light when some MPs raised questions on prohibition of child marriages [27]. Despite legal provisions, the widespread practice of child marriage reveals the socio-cultural support and political patronage it receives across states.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

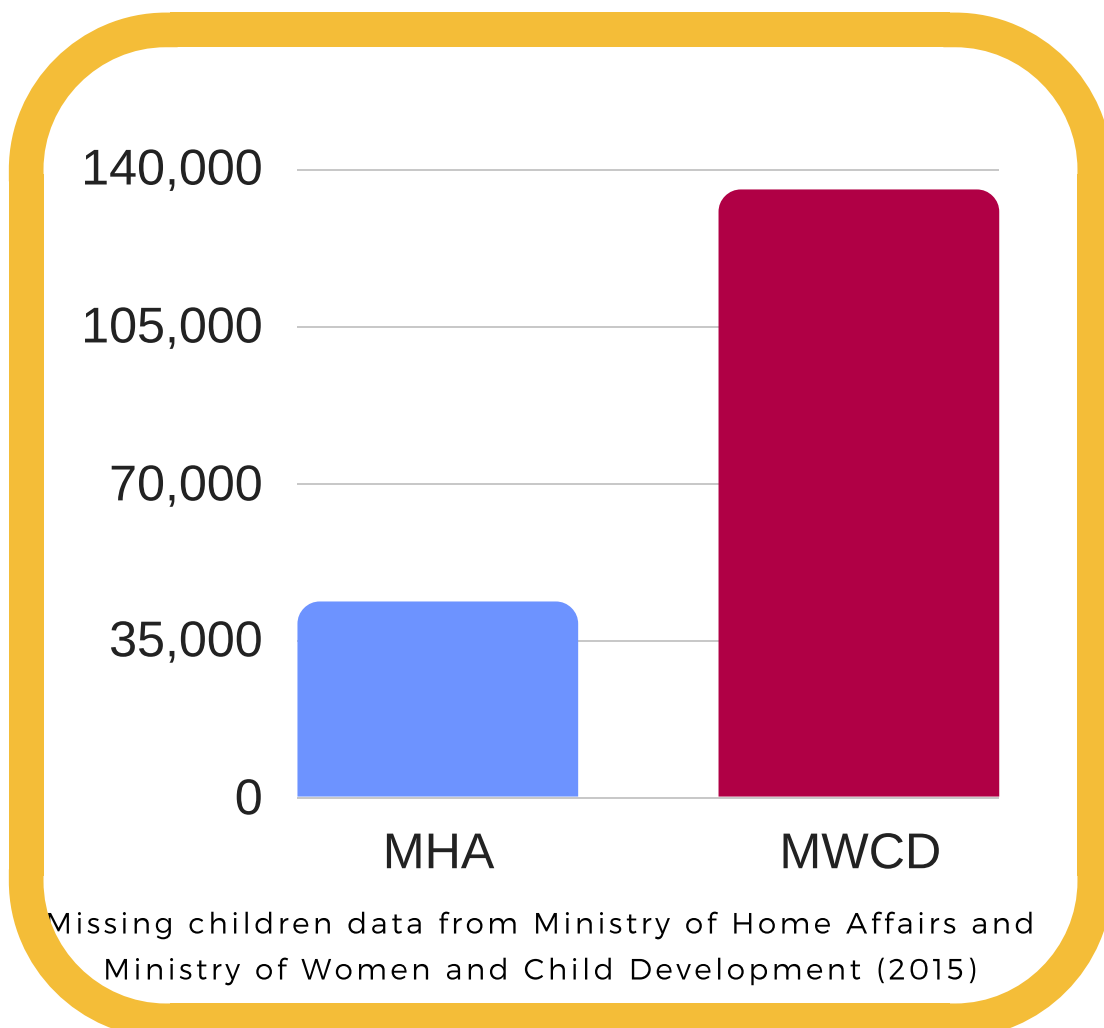


With 18,879 cases registered under POCSO in 2015, the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) initiated an online “e-box” to report child sexual abuse cases in 2016 - a cause of concern for the MPs [28]. A total of 103 cases were reported in less than two months in this e-box, reflecting the gravity of child abuse in the country and the need for a speedy response mechanism. Despite the growing number of complaints, a low conviction of 858 in 2015 [29] raised many eyebrows given that there are children's courts and separate law to deal with child sexual abuse.

PROTECTION

MISSING CHILDREN

Questions regarding missing children, specifically missing girls, were raised. However, it is interesting that the two concerned ministries came up with differential figures - a reflection on the lack of convergence of efforts. The MHA stated that there were 28,545 girls out of a total of 43,537 missing children [30], while Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) put the figure at 1,35,484 missing children in the year 2015 [31]. The data evidently shows the poor state of protection and discrepancies in understanding the problem and reasons behind missing children. The government in a response also stated that they conducted four sustained campaigns called “Operation Muskaan” and “Operation Smile” in which they rescued 60,000 children across India.



PROTECTION

CHILD LABOUR

During this period, MPs have raised questions on child labour but seldom have they taken a strong stand against it. The passing of the **Child Labour Bill** in Parliament, despite strong opposition from several MPs, including from the ruling party [32], shows that collective will to address this issue in a strong and united manner is missing.

Lok Sabha passes child labour Bill despite opposition

Members object to clause that allows children to work in family enterprises; not skilling, akin to slavery, says BJP's Varun Gandhi.

The Lok Sabha on Monday passed the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2016, despite opposition by several MPs.

The Bill, passed by the Rajya Sabha on July 19, was put to a clause-by-clause vote following a five-hour-long discussion in which 37 MPs spoke with several, including BJP MP Varun Gandhi, voicing strong reservation against many of its clauses. "If we pass this Bill, we will be complicit in promoting child labour in India," said Hisar MP Dushyant Singh Chautala (INLD). ..

Lashing out at the family enterprise clause, Varun Gandhi said, "It is not skilling at all; it is done against their will and it is akin to slavery". He criticised the Bill for its dilution of penalties against parents and guardians who "force" children into child labour. "This is not leniency... What is going to happen is, when you give repeat offenders psychological immunity, it allows them to go scot-free," he said, ending his speech with, "We expect a future where a child is holding a book in his hand and not an agricultural implement or a broom."...

Apart from the strong opposition on the amendment of the Bill, the MPs raised questions on the reasons for the ban on Indian carpets by the Department of Commerce and the Labour Department of US. In its response, the Ministry of Labour and Employment stated that based on the report "Tainted Carpets - Slavery and Child Labour in India's Handmade Carpet Sector 2014" [33], the US departments had categorised carpets as products of forced child labour. However, with considerable efforts from the Ministry, the ban was lifted but the response doesn't explicitly state if Indian carpet industry employs children [34].

PROTECTION

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Questions relating to the Juvenile Justice Act were brought up - inquiring funding for Special Juvenile Police Units (SJPU) under ICPS [35], registration of children's home [36] and the NCPCR study on children living in juvenile homes [37]. The MWCD stated that under ICPS state governments and UTs are provided assistance to appoint two social workers in the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU), who would depute their services to the SJPU. It also stated that childcare institutions registered under the JJ Act, 2000, would be deemed registered under the JJ Act, 2015, by the states. The NCPCR survey once completed would be shared with state governments.

CHILD SEX RATIO

Both Houses of Parliament were concerned about the falling sex ratio in the 0-6 years age group indicated in Census 2011 to an all-time low of 918 girls, with Haryana being the lowest at 866 girls to 1000 boys [38]. The Central Government responded only in 2015 with the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme to change mindsets and bring societal change, targeting a mere 161 gender critical districts of the total 707 districts in the country.



HEALTH



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Malnourishment, infant mortality and diseases such as anaemia, pneumonia haunt children growing up along with lack of resources and inaccessibility.

Schemes like Mission Indradhanush, Nutritional Rehabilitation centres etc would not reach every child, with a meagre 0.12 per cent share for child health [39] in the Union Budget 2016-17. The lack of concern about the sector is reflected with the lowest share of 12 per cent of questions raised in Parliament.

HEALTH

INFANT MORTALITY

Questions were raised regarding remedial measures by the government to address infant mortality, which is as high as 45 for under-five children. The MWCD replied that under the National Health Mission interventions like promotion of institutional deliveries, Infant and Young Child Feeding programme, Universal Immunisation programme etc had been initiated [40]. Over 10 per cent of infant deaths happened due to diarrhoea and open-defecation, for which the government has started schemes like Intensified Diarrhoea Control Fortnight (IDCF) and Swachh Bharat Mission in 2014.

POLIO ERADICATION

The government in response to a question on polio eradication, answered that India along with 10 other countries had been declared polio-free by the Regional Polio Certification Commission since 27th March, 2014 [41].

However, in response to a question regarding a polio strain found in a sewage drainage in Hyderabad on 7th June, 2016 [42], the Ministry denied it being directly obtained from human beings. Further, the Government of Telangana shipped polio vaccines from Geneva, to start a vaccination drive, showing that state governments were trying their best to ensure India is polio-free.

MALNOURISHMENT

Malnourishment in children, especially in tribal areas, is a major concern for Parliamentarians. Responding to a question on percentage of underweight and stunted children, the MWCD mentioned that the National Family Health Survey revealed that 42.5 per cent children under 5 years of age were underweight and 48 per cent were stunted [43]. With schemes like ICDS, maternity benefit to address the malnutrition needs of women and children, a Rapid Survey on Children was also conducted by the MWCD in 29 states, with the help of UNICEF to understand the trend in stunting, wasting and underweight in children. In comparison to 2005-06, the stunting, wasting and underweight in children below 5 years had reduced by 9.3 per cent, 4.7 per cent and 13.1 per cent, respectively [44].

IMPLEMENTATION OF PCPNDT ACT 1994

Few MPs asked the government regarding 97 cases of female foeticide and 91 cases of infanticide reported by the National Crime Records Bureau in 2015 [45]. In its response, the government stated that under the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994, sex selection and misuse of pre-natal diagnostic techniques had been prohibited [46] and suspended around 100 medical professionals [47].

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