

SUFFER THE CHILDREN

Mere laws do not guarantee our youngest citizens a safe and healthy life

THE OTHER DAY, I WATCHED THIS VIDEO of four-year-old Jackson Drew reciting Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 (*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*) and marvelled anew at the infinite capacity of a child's brain. I'm sure you've read that the pace of development, learning, and absorption between birth and the age of five is faster than at any other time in our life-spans. After that, until old age, our synapses decay and die. So, early childhood is very important.

India treats its children poorly, and even cruelly. The government aims to reduce the under-5 mortality rate (U5MR) to 25 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. The World Health Organization says the global U5MR fell to 41 in 2016 from 92 in 1990.

The National Family Health Survey-4 says India's U5MR declined to 50 in 2015-16 from 74 in 2005-06. Africa's U5MR of 76.5 is much higher. Our official data is inconsistent. The Census Office's Sample Registration System says the U5MR fell to 39 in 2016. But the dice are still loaded against girl children: Health Minister J.P. Nadda told Parliament in January that the U5MR was 41 for girls and 37 for boys.

Childhood deaths are just one challenge. India has brought down its child-marriage numbers. The NFHS-4 says the rate of girls under 18 getting married declined to 27 per cent from 47 per cent a decade earlier. A UNICEF official was quoted as saying that still adds up to 1.5 million adolescent brides a year.

The picture is far more depressing if you sift through National Crime Records Bureau data. In 2016, a total of 16,937 girl children were abducted or kidnapped for marriage across India. They included 139 girls **below the age of six**.

National Crime Records Bureau data says 4,911 girls below 18, nearly a quarter of the total, were trafficked in 2016, and 5,484 rescued. You can bet trafficking is grossly under-reported. Overall, crimes against children nationwide shot up 13.6

per cent to 106,958 in 2016.

In February, the Narendra Modi Cabinet approved a draft Anti-Trafficking Bill — the first since Independence — that has been hanging fire for two years. Our lawmakers, whose salaries have just been doubled, were too caught up in their mayhem to allow the Bill to be tabled in the Budget session that ended in chaos on April 6.

The Bill lays down prevention, rescue and rehabilitation of trafficking victims, mostly women and girls, and threatens traffickers with imprisonment of between ten

years and life. The government says it wants to crack down on "trafficking for the purpose of forced labour, begging ... administering chemical substance or hormones on a person for the purpose of early sexual maturity, trafficking of a woman or child for the purpose of marriage or under the pretext of marriage or after marriage etc."

India has statutes to protect children; our first law against child labour dates back to 1986, and the Right to Education Act 2009 promises free education to all children between the ages of six and fourteen.

But India has still not ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, or International Labour Organization conventions against child labour. Our 2011 Census counted more than ten million child workers aged five to fourteen; over eight million were in the countryside, and 4.5 million were girls. **BW**

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