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Child Soldiers Of India's Myriad Mutinies

The latest draft of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Bill, 2014 aims to provide legal protection to children in conflict zones. Moving a step ahead, the draft Bill seeks rigorous punishment for those involved in child recruitment for militant purposes and activities through jail sentencing and monetary fine.

The issue of children engaged in armed conflict has often caught the attention of academics, policy-makers and rights advocacy groups around the world. Ironically, however, it has completely escaped the same attention of the government agencies in terms of formulating legislations or policies which could end or at least control this dangerous phenomenon. India is a case in point.

Definition

Who is a child soldier? The most accepted characterisation of a child soldier (irrespective of gender) is someone who is below 18 years of age, bearing arms, or carrying out both combat and non-combat activities. From firing guns for offensive purpose to acting as a support staff for the militant groups by helping them in various activities, (not limited to) transporting logistics like arms and ammunitions, cash and information, a child soldier carries out different duties for the armed group he / she is enrolled into. It is of little consequence whether they are forcibly recruited or have joined the armed group voluntarily.

While most of the discourses on children in armed conflict fall in the African war zones, Latin American drug and guerrilla wars and Asia's Maoist and Tamil insurgencies, child soldiers of India's myriad mutinies remain either overlooked or ignored. India's neighbouring countries where child soldiering in the past was 'painted' as a voluntary form of service, especially in Nepal and Sri Lanka, in the neighbouring Myanmar, forced conscription of children is prevalent even today.

In 2013, at least two comprehensive reports on the problem of child soldiers in India brought international attention to the widespread problem, even though there were other focused reports on the problem of child soldiers in the past such as Human Rights Watch's (HRW) 2008 report on the Chhattisgarh Conflict. A March 2013 report titled "India's Child Soldiers", released by the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), conservatively observed that at least 3,000 children are members of militant outfits and 500 of them are active in the Northeastern states of India and J&K conflict theatres and rest 2,500 children are engaged in Naxal-affected areas of Central and Eastern India. One



other report was published in July 2013 by the Child Soldiers International on India. Although this report didn't mention the figures or numbers of children engaged in these conflict zones, it was critical of the absence of monitoring mechanism, both domestic and international. According to the report, due to the absence of a monitoring mechanism, it remains difficult to assess the precise numbers or current patterns of recruitment and use of children by armed groups in India, or their physical and moral exploitation in the hands of armed groups. It is noteworthy that these reports also briefly cover the underage military recruitment phenomenon by the state agencies (eg state backed village defence force and government run military schools).

Jammu And Kashmir

The largest militant group of Kashmir, Hizbul Mujahideen's (HM) leader Syed Salahudeen once said that HM prefers "to recruit children at the age of eleven or twelve." Like HM, most of the Pakistan-based Kashmir-centric Islamic militant groups, including Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, have been recruiting children as young as 12 to 15 years since the early 1990s for their subversive activities. The Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan and its Kashmiri branch that spearheaded Kashmir conflict too trained hundreds of young Kashmiri teens at madrasas and at mosques during the height of Kashmir militancy and readied a generation of Islamic militants for a prolonged jihad in Kashmir. The Indian Army has many a times indicated that these Pakistan-based militant groups keep pushing the young recruits onto the Indian side of the border as messengers and as shields for the intruder militants.

Two most violent militant groups have regular publication dedicated to the children often found eulogising martyrhood by young combatants. The magazines are titled *Naneh Mujahid* (Infant fighter), published by Lashkar-e-Toiba, and *Musalman Bachay* (Muslim Children) published by the Jaish-e-Muhammad with the aim to educate and indoctrinate young minds at a very tender age, so that in future there won't be any hassles in recruiting them into full fledged militants or send them to Kashmir as suicide bombers. For example, one editorial in the *Musalman Bachay* depicts the example of a Sahabi (prophet's

companion) illustrating how the Sahabi was only a child when he took up a sword to wage jihad against someone who was blasphemous to the Prophet. The editorial further encourages Muslim children to kill any infidel who commits similar blasphemy. This type of teachings in Pakistan caters to the Taliban movement and other similar militant groups, including Kashmir-centric groups even today.

Even though most of these above mentioned high profile reports on Child Soldiers largely guesstimated the numbers of combatants and their involvements, there is no actual estimation of how many children or underage combatants are engaged in Kashmir conflict zone or anywhere else in India. However, there are some media reports which actually give us the impression on the state of affairs. In August 2004, Indian Army officials claimed to have apprehended at least nine teenaged militants, some as young as 14 years, with sophisticated weapons and highly motivated to wage jihad against Indian Army. In some instances militant groups have employed young boys as 'forced' freelancers. One such recent instance could shed some light on the involvement of these young boys and girls in Kashmir conflict. In August 2012, Lashkar-e-Toiba had reportedly engaged at least two youths to throw grenades at a police post in Sopore in exchange of a meagre INR 1,000. One 2005 investigative report noted that most of the children picked up by Kashmir militant groups were from remote areas of Rajouri, Poonch, Doda, Udhampur and Kupwara districts and belonged to poor families. J&K security forces have been skeptical of this situation of missing children from these remote areas and fear that they might have been abducted and indoctrinated by militant groups.

Northeastern States

In Northeastern states of India Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland based militant separatists groups have employed children as combatants and support staff for their operations. Manipuri groups like the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and People's Liberation Army (PLA), Meghalaya's Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) and Nagaland's NSCN-IM and Khaplang factions have lured young boys and girls to their ranks and file. In June-July 2008, Manipur witnessed mass abduction of children in the age group of 10 to 16 from various parts of the state. Two Manipuri militant groups, the PREPAK and Cobra Task Force, the armed wing of PREPAK (PRO), have claimed that young children have joined their groups voluntarily. Similarly in Meghalaya, cases of children being used as combatants by the GNLA surfaced in mid 2012. The state police estimated that more than a hundred children were stationed at GNLA camps in forest hideouts in Garo Hills.

In Nagaland, the most violent SS Khaplang faction of the NSCN group (National Socialist Council of Nagalim) has recruited young boys as militants. The most newsworthy incident took place in February 2008 when 39 boys from Arunachal Pradesh were abducted and later joined the faction as combatants. However, a spokesman of the group

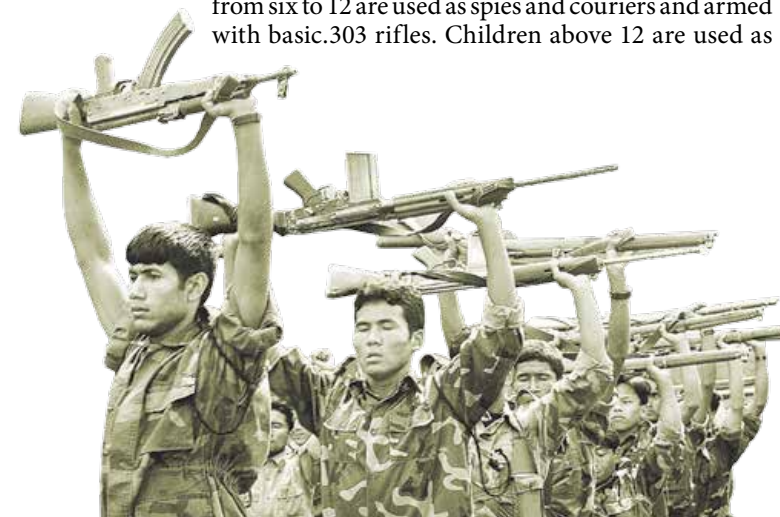
reportedly said that these boys have come into the NSCN-K fold voluntarily to serve the Naga army. Fortunately, very recently, the only non-state armed group in India, the Nagaland based armed group, the Government of the Peoples' Republic of Nagaland / National Socialist Council of Nagaland (GPRN / NSCN)-Khole-Kitovi faction which is observing ceasefire with the government of India, has signed 'Deeds of Commitment' (under the auspices of Geneva Call) that includes protecting children in armed conflict and vowed not to allow children under 18 to be recruited or used in hostilities. Even though some other Northeastern armed groups like Kuki National Organisation and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak Muivah) have signed the deeds of commitment, they skipped the clause that aims to protect children in armed conflict zone.

Central And Eastern India

Besides the above mentioned landmark studies, the other important report was the UN Secretary General's May 2013 Annual Report (2012 as the study year) on Children and Armed Conflict, which highlighted the recruitment and use of children by Naxalite groups in India and mentioned particularly the recruitment of children aged between 6 and 12 years into children's units known as *Bal Sangams* in the Naxal affected / infested states. This is one of the vital arms of the Naxalite organisational structure.

Arguably, Indian Naxalites (also CPI-Maoists) are notorious for employing and exploiting children as combatants in their ongoing armed struggle. Another issue of concern is that of sexual exploitations that exist within Naxal rank and file and mostly the victims are young female recruits.

A 2011 report indicated that the CPI (Maoist) recruited nearly 400 children for its children's wing *Bal Sangam*, that year and they were getting trained in intelligence work and the use of explosives in the Saranda forests along the Jharkhand-Orissa border. Little probe into details revealed that children of different age groups are trained and assigned different tasks: Children aged from six to 12 are used as spies and couriers and armed with basic.303 rifles. Children above 12 are used as




fighters, trained to make and plant landmines and bombs, gather intelligence and carry out sentry duty. Like boys, girls too get combat and guerrilla trainings in their secret camps. Even the Naxalites reportedly established a child battalion by November 2008, called Child Liberation Army (CLA). Available reports suggest that the children inducted into the CLA are between 12 and 18 years. Police sources informed that training camps are located in the bordering jungle areas of Dhanbad and Giridih districts of Jharkhand.

Reports surfaced in mid 2013 that Naxals have been recruiting school children in Chhattisgarh and have constituted 'Baal Action Teams' to deploy school children in different capacities in their attempt to regroup the child cadres and boost their military strength. These 'Baal Action Teams' are already operating in Bastar region, Chhattisgarh. This specialised school children unit would also help the *Baal Sangams* and *Chhatra Sangams* in the Naxal affected zones.

Conclusion

It is imperative to discuss the government's role and effort to curb this rising phenomenon in India. The growing trend of recruiting teenage children as armed fighters in India has faced national and international criticism over the past many years. In its response to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2011, the Indian government dismissed such criticisms by stating that the problem hardly ever existed in the country. India had then categorically stated that the country "does not face either international or non-international armed conflict situation". However, by March 2013, the government's perception changed drastically on the issue when the reports of exploitation of tribal children in the Naxalite camps came to light.

The initial dismissal by the government notwithstanding, India's Union Ministry of Women and Child Development is considering to bring into effect a law to criminalise the act of recruiting children for armed campaign. The latest draft of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Bill, 2014 aims to provide legal protection to children in conflict zones. Moving a step ahead, the draft Bill seeks rigorous punishment for those involved in child recruitment for militant purposes and activities through jail sentencing and monetary fine. The Bill states that "any non-State, self-styled militant group or outfit declared as such by the Central Government, if recruits or uses any child for any purpose, shall be liable for rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine of five lakh rupees."

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