Chapter 6

Pluralising Indian Childhood: Children's Experiences and Adult–Child Relations in Urban and Rural Contexts

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Abstract

The present chapter explicates urban and rural childhoods in India. It presents childhood as a dynamic product arising out of an intersection of children's experiences in different familial–socio-cultural contexts, and children's positions within parent–child interactions and relations. These contexts and interactions tend to colour and shape the childhoods that children inhabit. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in urban and rural India, the chapter documents (1) nature of children's engagements and (2) parent–child relations, explicitly observed in parent–child interactions, provisioning warmth and care; parental control and supervision over children and children's participation in the overall fabric of family life and so forth. Forty-eight parents (24 urban and 24 rural) of children aged 7–11 years participated in the study. Qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and home observations revealed distinctions in urban and rural Indian childhoods. Urban childhood is characterised by rights and privileges, and the centrality of academic pursuits, while rural childhood is featured with subtle induction into economic and social fabric of rural life. Although the world of 'Indian childhood' seemed plural, childhood playfulness and learning seemed to be the unifying themes. Geared to the fact that children have to make a living with limited means in the future, both childhoods were accelerated in preparation for future. Dwelling on the complexities in children's lives, this article appreciates diversity and multiplicity in childhoods.

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Introduction

All children across cultures do not grow up in similar environments, despite 'universals' that bind children. The new paradigm of childhood studies (James & Prout, 1990) maintains that children are socially constituted (James & James, 2004; Qvortrup, 1993) and childhood is a culture-specific 'construct' (Misra & Srivastava, 2003). Childhood varies as a function of time period and space (Aries, 1962; James et al., 1998). Each society's separate social conditions, ideologies and beliefs, and correspondingly how they think of their children (Archard, 2004), mediate what it means to be a child. Therefore, notions of childhood need to be situated and understood through a cultural lens, its varying social contexts and processes through which human development takes shape.

Until relatively recently, what is considered normative Indian childhood synchronised closely with Western, middle-class white, urban childhood (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Vasanta, 2004) that is characterised by linear progression in development, objectivity, reasoning and rationality, vulnerability, age-appropriate play-based methods and need for materials. Most research on Indian childhood studied children from the lenses of the West (Balagopalan, 2008), schooling (Sarangpani, 2003) and socialisation. Furthermore, specific conditions and aspects of rural childhood such as father–child relations have not been highlighted adequately. Constricted freedom and inequality in the childhood of girls remained underrepresented (Kumar, 2016). A Hindu childhood predominated; that believed only a boy child can relieve his parents of the debts of gods and ancestors (Kakar, 1981; Kumar, 2019; Walsh, 2003). Burman (2008) urges researchers to take up studies focussed on cultural representations of childhood that question middle-class norms of childhood, such as child-centeredness, sensitive mothering and providing for children's material needs. The lives of working children (Balagopalan, 2011), which cannot be bracketed within the protected childhood that legal framework promises, need to be brought to the mainstream. The tendency to view culture as deterministic makes one assume that people within a given community have common ways of living (Ortner, 2006). Despite shared beliefs about the ways of bringing up children within a community, variations within population must be accounted for in the dynamics between global, collective and local reality (Chaudhary, 2018). The social, economic and political conditions (Anandalakshmy, 2002; Sharma, 2003), as well as the macro structures of the society, interpolate into childhood contexts (Kumar, 2006) and processes (Sharma & Chaudhary, 2009), which influence children's micro-lives. Therefore, children's development needs to be viewed as interactional, located within historicity and socio-cultural specificity.

Against this backdrop, the present chapter investigates urban and rural childhoods in India. It locates the childhoods that children from these socio-cultural contexts are likely to inhabit within parent–child interactions and

relations. It unfolds the conception of childhood, as it appears at the ideological level (engrained in the common psyche of the people) and manifested at the behavioural level (in people's behaviour with children). It emerges out of an intersection of the social contexts and interactions rooted in it. Alanen and Mayall (2001) suggest that positions and relationships of 'parent' and 'child' get defined within these interactions and eventually 'childhood' takes shape. Thus, in this chapter urban and rural childhoods are understood through parent–child interactions mapped against the complex familial–socio-cultural ethos that children grow up with.

Data Collection and Analysis

Empirical data for this research were gathered from urban and rural parts of India, which were identified as per the Census of Government of India (2011) definitions.[1] To appreciate the context better, it is notable to mention that 68.84% of the Indian population lives in rural areas, while 31.16% live in urban areas (GoI, 2011). Data on selected indicators point to gaps in urban and rural contexts. While 87.7% of urban and 73.5% of rural population aged 7 years and above was literate, only 5.7% were graduates or above in rural areas while the percentage was 21.7% in urban areas. Only 38% of rural households had secondary schools within 1 km of their residence as compared to 70% for urban households. Nearly 4% of rural households and 23% of urban households possessed computers, and nearly 24% persons in rural areas and 56% in urban areas were able to operate computers (GoI, 2014). Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 1.7 in urban and 2.3 in rural areas (GoI, 2019).

The urban population has witnessed a gradual increase between two Censuses from 2001 to 2011. The People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) survey which focussed on India's 63 biggest cities with a population of more than 1 million in 2021 revealed that these cities generate 29% of the country's household disposable income (27% of the total spending and 38% of total savings) that drives demand for goods and services. These million-plus cities are home to more

[1]The definition of an urban unit at the 2011 Census of Government of India (2011) was as follows:

(1) all administrative units that have been defined by statute as urban, such as Municipal Corporation, Municipality, Cantonment Board, Notified Town Area Committee, Town Panchayat, Nagar Palika etc., are known as Statutory Town. Furthermore, Statutory Towns with populations of 100,000 and above are categorised as cities.

(2) All other places satisfied the following criteria:

- A minimum population of 5,000 persons;
- 75% and above of the male main working population being engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and
- A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km (1,000 per sq. mile).

Based on these criteria, rural areas are distinguished by saying what is not urban is rural.

than a quarter of its middle class (27%) and almost half of its rich (43%) population. Nearly 55% of households are middle class in the nine metro cities of India. Urban families in this study were sampled from such a metropolitan city – Delhi. Most could be counted as upper-middle and middle-middle social class in society. By the standard of PRICE, households with an annual income of 0.5–1 million INR (USD 6,033–12,067) belong to the middle class. It is notable that although the middle class has largely been understood as an income/economic category, it also has psycho-social political relevance. Identification of oneself as belonging to middle class appears to have experiential effects (consumption levels, choice of products and experiences etc.) and gears social attitudes (roles, future aspirations etc.). The set of rural families were selected from rural parts of the district Wardha, from the state of Maharashtra, India. In 2011, nearly 60% of the total population of Wardha district lived in rural areas (GOI, 2011).

A sample of 24 family units (12 urban and 12 rural) were selected through convenience sampling. Each family had a child (either boy or girl) in the age range of 7–11 years, residing with both parents. Thematic semi-structured interviews and home observations were conducted. Although interviews were conducted with both parents and children, this chapter foregrounds the views of parents. For interviews, a list of facilitative themes was drawn up based on the initial scouting and through consultation with experts. The themes included the meaning of childhood, continuity–discontinuity between childhood–adulthood, parent–child interactions and relations, parent–child dialogues and communication as well as parental control, supervision, monitoring and disciplining over children. Each interview spanned over an hour. Home observations revolved around daily routines and rhythms of children and families, including the children's participation in daily activities such as studies, domestic chores, sibling care and context-specific activities and parent–child interactions and relations. Each child and their family were observed in their home for more than 4 hours per day, which lasted for one week. Detailed descriptions of family processes and practices were gathered. Embedded in the qualitative tradition (Ponterotto, 2006), these thick descriptions were subjected to descriptive content analysis. Knowledge gained from interviews and observations were interpreted with meanings inherent in them and interspersed with the researcher's in-depth knowledge of the background context. These interpretations were informed by the researcher's cultural continuity with the field. Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989) consider the researcher as part of the data collection instrument, wherein their ability to extract the correct information from the context adds to accurate portrayal of the phenomena.

Each family was contacted through a contact person known to the family. To maintain the standards of research, the objectives and time required to be invested for the study were made clear to the parents and children. Furthermore, it was ensured that none of the other family members had any objection to be observed. After clarifying any queries and questions, permission and consent were sought. No one was compelled to participate in the study. Aligning with the demand of the local social dynamics, the researcher at times addressed participants in relational terms, such as agreeing to the participants' suggestion for interviewing right outside of their home as well as accepting to drink tea/coffee and eat with

participants to sustain conversations. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. For data triangulation, the study relied both on interviews and observations. A conscious effort was made to safeguard against researcher bias and subjectivity. Researcher effect was minimised by a relatively long presence in the field.

Results

Urban and Rural Familial Contexts in India

Urban families lived in one to three bedroom-set houses. In some families, grandparents, paternal married and unmarried uncle, aunt and cousins stayed together as one family unit. At times, the extended joint family owned more than a floor in the same building. The children went to moderate fee-paying private schools. The fathers were either salaried or owned their business. Nearly two-thirds of the mothers were homemakers and the rest were employed outside of homes. Most grandfathers had retired from paid work, and some continued to remain involved in family business, though peripherally. Most grandmothers were homemakers. Household chores were shared by women of the family and important decisions were made by men of the family, who were the primary income generators.

The lives of rural people at Wardha are based on the Gandhian principle of simplicity. Some participant families lived in houses made of mud and wood and the rest had houses made of brick and cement. The families consisted of children, parents and grandparents, paternal married and unmarried uncles, aunts and cousins residing under the same roof, all with a common kitchen. Rural children went to government schools. The families were agrarian in nature, with most family members including fathers engaged in farming. The traditional occupation of people in Wardha was cotton farming and soybean cultivation and trade. All mothers were homemakers and also contributed in farming.

Daily Lives of Children in the Urban Socio-Cultural Context

The Nature of Engagements

Urban children's daily lives seemed rather structured, tightly packed and regimented, in sync with schooling and everyday family rhythms and routines. Their day primarily revolved around attending school, for which they woke up early in the morning. Most children travelled to school either by school bus or van which usually carried more children than the sanctioned seating capacity. Despite encouragement for 'neighbourhood schooling' by the government, many families send their children to 'good' schools that are reasonably far from their homes. Therefore, children spent more than 2 hours travelling back and forth to school besides the usual 6 hours at school. Most activities at school were geared to accelerate academic performance, coupled with some co-curricular activities such as music, sports and fine and performative arts.

Children returned home from school in the late afternoon, escorted by an adult from their bus point. They had freshly prepared lunch. Some children watched television along with lunch, and others discussed their day at school with their parents. They informed their parents if any learning material was to be taken to school the next day, so that it could be arranged. Some children took a quick nap, and others rushed for the lined-up evening activities.

Children's evenings were packed with activities including tuitions, hobby classes, homework, playing, having dinner, watching television and some family time. The majority of tuitions were taken with unskilled or semi-skilled para-teachers in the vicinity of children's homes. The purpose of tuitions, as stated by the parents, was to provide extra academic inputs and support, and to bring regularity in children's academic work. After tuitions, children often played outdoor games with neighbourhood children, either in one of the children's verandah or in the street or nearby community parks. Short of space, the urban landscape offered minimal dedicated spaces for children's play. While unplanned localities had few parks, government and private housing societies had some. High-rise buildings and gated housing societies had planned spaces for children's free and organised games, such as table tennis, swimming, badminton and so forth. Children also engaged in indoor play that mainly involved playing with electronic gadgets such as playing games on the phone, laptop and tablet, as well as watching television. Indoor games were either played alone or with one or more children or adults.

For after-school engagements, many children attended hobby classes such as Western and Indian dance, drawing and painting, instrumental and vocal music, Taekwondo, judo, yoga and so forth. These classes, available within the housing societies or in the vicinity, were taken with semi-trained instructors. The purpose of these, as opined by the parents, were to polish children's personalities, boost creativity and keep them meaningfully occupied and under adult supervision until the parents returned home from work.

Children spent the rest of the evenings finishing homework. On a day-to-day basis, they were not expected to do any household chores, but they sometimes assisted adults in small errands, such as picking up one's stuff, filling water bottles, laying mats and utensils for dinner, picking up and passing on stuff such as the remote control, glass and spectacles, answering the doorbell and so on. At times, they engaged younger siblings in play to give their mothers some time off. Children were considered too young to do 'serious' household work. Only some token responsibilities were given to them with the purpose of building initiative and independence.

At dinner time, family members chatted and also enquired from the children about their everyday concerns regarding schooling, siblings, friends and so forth. Some families had dinner with the television switched on. While in the afternoon children could choose programmes to watch, evening television hours were more about watching programmes that the entire family could watch together, like family soap operas, dance and singing based reality shows, informative programmes, news etc. The night discourse revolved around packing the school bag for the next day and sleeping 'timely' as the hectic life at school awaits children.

Weekends seemed relaxed with children being allowed to 'treat themselves' by waking up later than usual, playing for longer and engaging in recreational and leisure activities with their parents. Nevertheless, they completed school-related projects and homework and prepared for upcoming tests at school.

Parent–Child Relations

The lives of urban families were ordered with fixed routines and rhythms, which were strictly adhered to by all family members. As a result, the time spent by each parent with the children was also decreed. Mothers were the children's constant companions, who *devoted* themselves to fulfilling the needs of the children throughout the day. They aligned their routines with their children's and prioritised as per children's wishes. The companionship of fathers was dependent on their availability after office hours. Although fathers expressed a desire to spend more quality time with their children, they were unable to do so due to the paucity of time.

The parents played the significant role of providers of food, shelter, clothing, education, toys and play materials, recreational activities, companionship and care. They also acted as moralising and socialising agents. As childhood was considered the time for building one's physical and mental prowess, parents tried to provide children with healthy and nutritious food. Mothers packed a sumptuous meal to school and kept lunch ready for the children's consumption upon their return from school. On special occasions like birthdays and festivals, children were provided with new clothes. Parents often prioritised buying items for children rather than themselves when facing budget constraints. At times, children were passed down the clothes of elder siblings and cousins which they worn without any apprehensions. Many children slept either with their parents or with other adult family members. As children 'grow up', families would make arrangements to either provide a separate room or cover up balcony area to provide for a separate space for children to study and sleep.

Education was considered the only means for ensuring upward mobility and a better future. Therefore, parents invested judiciously into their children's education and geared them from the very beginning to be high achievers. Regardless of how much input the parents were able to make, they wished their children would do well in academics. They made it clear to the children from early on that they do not possess financial funds in abundance either to invest and establish business or pay the capitation fee for different professional courses, so the children must study hard to make a future for themselves. Education was seen to have an emancipatory role for boys. Education of girls was valued by all families, but many did not link it to preparation for a livelihood. Some families with traditional outlooks believed that a certain level of education was necessary for girls so that they can get educated grooms. They favoured women having jobs that were compatible with their homemaking duties.

Parents enrolled children into 'good' private schools with adequate basic infrastructure. They were provided with all of the required course books and inexpensive toys. To inculcate values of hard work and inspire children to do well in life, some parents bought the biographies and autobiographies of eminent

people like APJ Kalam and Sachin Tendulkar, along with general knowledge and story books for children. To encourage sharing, parents often bought only one set of colours, toys and other play materials for all children. Some families had internet facilities at home and others made sure that children could access it whenever needed for any educational purposes. Parents opined that providing access to technology-oriented learning assured a better future for the children. Apart from tuitions, mothers helped children complete their school homework. Fathers also took outtime to help children in academic activities, such as completing projects and downloading things from the internet, buying stationery and study-related arts and craft materials.

Apart from investing time in education-related tasks, 'playing together' emerged as one of the dominant forms of interaction between children and parents. Mothers usually played indoor games like carom, ludo, snakes and ladders and online games or games on mobile phones. And fathers, mostly during weekends, played outdoor games like cricket and badminton, in colony parks and on streets outside homes, with the children. Parents acknowledged the need for recreation in children and took outtime to take them to relatives' places, local markets and malls, cinema halls, parks, play-zones, family dinners and get-togethers with friends, museums, book fairs, holiday trips within and outside of the country and so forth. These activities, like hobby classes, were planned not just for children's entertainment but also to give them a variety of exposure.

Companionship and care played out hand-in-hand. Parents played the role of playmates as well as knowledgeable others in various activities. Care got reflected in many everyday acts that mothers did for children, including getting them ready for school, cooking and serving food, escorting them to school, tuition, hobby classes and park, organising recreation activities, buying what children desire, helping in studies and so forth. Care was also manifested in spending 'quality time' with children, discussing sensitive matters, socialising and moralising and listening to children's experiences at school, with friends, their engagement in games and sports and so forth.

Care was intermeshed with adult supervision and control over what children can and cannot do without adult permission, especially the mother. On account of children's susceptibility and vulnerability, parents kept a strict vigil on children's movement outside of home; monitored the duration and content of television that children watch and do on the tablet, computer and internet; controlled the children's speech and communication urging them to practice restraint when talking to adults; rationed eating junk food and so forth. While family issues were being discussed, children sat around and heard adult conversations, but they were seldom allowed to make an intuitive comment. Nevertheless, children and parents were of the opinion that they have an open channel of communication where children can freely voice their emotions, needs and wishes.

Daily Lives of Children in the Rural Socio-Cultural Context

The Nature of Engagements

Rural children's daily lives were much less centred on academic engagements, though schooling took substantial time of their day. Their daily routines were

intermeshed with everyday family rhythms and routines. They woke up at dawn, got fresh either at home or in open fields and bathed in the nearest water body. Nearly all children travelled on foot to schools, located either in their own or neighbouring villages. School–home continuity could be witnessed in parents' free interaction with teachers upon casual meetings. Education at school aimed at equipping children with life skills for rural living. The prescribed syllabus was rooted through the everyday activities of farming and dovetailed with the rural lifestyle. School schedules allowed for free play and engagements with natural surroundings.

Children walked back home in the company of other children of their village in the afternoon. Usually mothers were in the fields at this hour. Children were served food by any female member, or they put out food for themselves. After lunch, they either played at home or went to their parents in the fields or shops. There they assisted in farm activities, such as pulling out grass, plucking vegetables, watering plants and cleaning and preparing grains, as well as helped in milking and grazing cows, goats and so forth.

At dusk, on their way back home with their parents, children carried farm products and often stopped at the local market to buy essential home items. Children who did not go to the fields, instead played, took care of younger siblings and contributed to household chores. Evenings meant time to play with other children of the family and neighbourhood, either in the courtyard or at any other open space of the village. In comparison to the urban sites, rural sites had open spaces to play in and children engaged much more in outdoor play. Everyday objects like clay pots, sticks and household items were used as play materials. Children played with many children as playmates. Furthermore, children of the extended family often sat together to study and finish school-related work. Older children explained concepts and helped younger children complete homework. Mothers were unable to help children actively in academics but sat around to oversee homework. They continued to do their household tasks like chopping vegetables, feeding cows etc., while keeping an eye on the children completing their homework.

It is noteworthy that, unlike their urban peers, rural children did not engage in after-school organised hobby classes or with technological gadgets, but their time at home was still very engaging. Many children independently cooked simple food by the time their mother returned from the fields or finished other household tasks. Even when mothers were available, children took on the tasks of cutting, chopping and washing vegetables while mother cooked meals. They fetched water, washed clothes, got flour milled, painted pots and smeared walls with cow dung or mud, cleaned the house, hemmed garments that their mothers bought from local shops to do at home to earn an extra penny and so forth. The families opined that children must start contributing as soon as they can contribute to household chores. It was seen as their responsibility, and parents expected children to take on adult roles and responsibilities as early in life as possible. Although parents never forced children to make time for household chores at the cost of education, children's daily lives were ordered in a way that contributing to household chores flowed rather naturally.

At dinner, children and male members sat around the hearth while female members served freshly cooked food. Usually, women ate after children and men finished their meal. Children picked up dishes and mothers washed them. Girls helped dry and stack these in the kitchen and the boys laid beds. Weekends gave children much more time to play and engage in unplanned recreational and leisure activities with their parents. They also finished pending school tasks and prepared for upcoming tests during weekends.

Parent–Child Relations

Rural families followed their family routines and rhythms, which were not religiously ordered and strictly adhered. There was an element of flexibility based around the season of produce, festivities, local community activities, visitors at home and so forth. As a result, the time spent by each parent with children also varied. Children spent most of their day at home in the company of mothers and other female members. They shared space with mother as she engaged in everyday acts of eating, cleaning, washing and so forth. No exclusive time was given to children in the name of 'quality time'. Mothers provided children with basic food, a clean and healthy family environment, opportunities for education and so forth, but they did not accommodate family routines to make space for children's needs and demands. Likewise, the companionship of fathers was dependent on their occupation. Children whose fathers worked at farms enjoyed the tacit presence of their fathers as they visited them in the fields. On a day-to-day basis, fathers did not directly enquire about school and other issues from the children, but asked mothers about children's academic performance and conduct at home and in the neighbourhood.

Parents sent children to nearby government schools where education was provided free of cost. They wanted the children to do well academically, but they didn't pressure them to excel. Higher education was not seen as the only means for earning a livelihood by rural families. They schooled boys with an aim to attain functional literacy, sufficient enough for farms, rural markets and better livelihood opportunities at nearby towns. For girls, basic education was required to earn a groom from a decent family.

In provisioning, rural parents ensured that their children get whatever they missed out during their childhood. They provided basic necessities including adequate food, shelter, clothing and education to their children. Children ate food cooked for the entire family; no extra food supplements were given to the children. As a matter of routine, they wore clothes passed down from elder siblings and cousins. On special occasions, they were provided with new clothes (depending on the financial condition of the family). Children had no exclusive spaces in the house for them to sleep and study. They slept around other children and adults of the family and studied anywhere. They had no internet facility at home and accessed it only at their fathers' mobile phones. Parents expected them to share books, stationery and toys with siblings. Children made toys for themselves from locally available materials, as parents bought toys only occasionally. Moreover, their games involved less toys and more the company of other

children. Parents let children accompany them to relatives' places, local markets, family functions and weddings, community gatherings like *ram katha, ramlila, bhandara* and so forth for leisure, but these activities were not deliberately planned for children. Care also played out in teaching societal mores, culture and socially approved ways of behaviour to children. The inculcation of values of one's culture was done through everyday acts, religious discourse and stories of *Rama* and *Krishna* from Indian mythology. As companions, parents were not playmates but knowledgeable others in activities such as studies, domestic chores and farming.

Care was interwoven with adult supervision, monitoring and control regarding what children can do and cannot do without permission from adults, especially mother. On account of children's susceptibility and vulnerability, parents kept a vigil on children's company. Children were instructed to make friends with children from good family backgrounds and intermingle largely with children from one's own caste. Girls' interactions with boys were especially monitored from early on. Children's speech and communication were under constant parental scanning. Talking back at adults was not at all tolerated and invited the fury of the parents. Children's complaints by adults were taken in bad taste and invariably children were held guilty for any mischief done. Parents used authoritarian disciplinary techniques which included beating, scolding, denying privileges and being talked down to. Nonetheless, children accepted these as the norm and usually complied with these explicitly. Furthermore, although children witnessed adult conversations over family finance, relations and other dynamics of village life, they were never allowed to comment on adult matters. There was no composite family dialogue that factored in children. Parent–child dialogues were limited to children's needs (such as requirements at school, wishing to eat something, buying a dress/toy etc.) and concerns (such as conflict with peers, issues while travelling home etc.).

Conclusions: Contours of Urban and Rural Childhoods in India

The present study brought to the fore the distinctiveness of urban and rural childhoods in India. Urban childhood stood out as a stage of preparation for adulthood that played out through the centrality of academic pursuits in children's lives. Pushing the child for studies was identified as a common phenomenon for the middle class (Saraswathi, 2003), which Elkind (2001) perceived as a feature of 'hurried childhood', and Viruru (2001) related to 'a sense of insecurity which pervades the Indian middle-class'. Much like Kumar (1999), an expression of adult–child continuity surfaced. Rural childhood witnessed subtle introduction into the economic and social fabric of rural life which laid foundations for adult-life roles and responsibilities. Early introduction into caregiving roles, early marriage and contributions to income-generation and household maintenance feature at a much younger age in rural contexts. Traditional gendered roles of domesticity and breadwinning for girls and boys, respectively, coloured rural childhood. In urban and rural socio-cultural contexts, the childhood–adulthood

binary was reaffirmed as children were viewed as 'not yet adults' and 'in the state of becoming adults'. Furthermore, both childhoods were geared towards the fact that children have to make a living with limited means later on and thus must be trained for that.

With regard to the nature of care and provisioning, urban parents provided what are often referred to as the material culture of childhood (Hunt, 2001), which included books, toys, clothes, eatables, creating specifically demarcated spaces and belongings and so forth. Moreover, building the children's educational base and cultural capital through a facilitative environment featured prominently in urban parental provisioning roles. Parents deliberately invested time, energy and money in providing 'quality' childhood experiences to their children. Perhaps this ties in with the number of children that one has and resource availability. Rural parents envisioned their role both as providers for the children's needs of food, clothing, shelter, safety and socio-emotional support, as well as for disciplining children and equipping them with ways of economising and using resources optimally. They grounded children in cultural heritage and put in efforts to make them 'worldly-wise'. Affirming the needs-based discourse, Woodhead (1997) and Madan et al. (2018) suggest the significance of children's needs in care giving and the nurturance functions of parents that formed the core of provisioning in both urban and rural contexts. Childhood appeared as a stage where children were being 'provided' and adults became their 'providers'. Kaur (2022) found a shift in the sentimental and economic value of children. The position of urban higher and middle-class children has changed from those supplementing family income to those who are in need of protection from the adult world of work and hardship.

Urban parents considered 'serious' participation in domestic tasks to be a hindrance to academic engagements, albeit token tasks that did not stand in opposition with professional pursuits could be undertaken by children. Rural parents considered these engagements as absolutely necessary for preparation for adult-life role responsibilities. Despite parents being relieved of household tasks through the children's participation, parents did not fully acknowledge the children's contribution to overall household functioning. Families organise domestic labour within the constraints of their daily lives (Zeiher, 2001), and dependence and reciprocity in exchange in adult–child relations may be seen as interrelated (Hockey & James, 1993). 'Providing care and shouldering responsibility' seemed bidirectional. Urban parents allowed children access to technological gadgets, and in turn children helped adults, especially grandparents, operate features on phones and tablets, book e-tickets, make e-payments and so forth. Likewise, rural children contributed in the maintenance of family chores and sustenance of the family economy.

Despite authoritarian discipling, an open channel of communication prevailed between urban parents and children. Children exercised the liberty to voice their likings, dislikes, needs, wants and desires. This discernible shift towards valuing selective autonomy in urban contexts seems to be driven by circumstances and domain specificity. Nonetheless, in both urban and rural childhoods, children were expected to practice restraint in speech and communication when in

conversation with adults. Parents refrained children from spontaneous utterances and use of socially undesirable words. Adults usually dismissed these impulsive acts as 'childish'.

Parents opined that urban children's visits to several locations throughout a day, interaction with a number of casual acquaintances and unknown persons and exposure to digital technology and media heighten their susceptibility to abuse and crime against children. Although rural contexts offer more close-knit and personalised community interactions and limited exposure to digital technology and media, rural girls were considered especially vulnerable. Any movement outside of the domain of the house was closely tied to parental fear of children being abused or exploited. Children's movements, especially those of girls, were thus monitored and supervised by parents.

In the nutshell, the urban childhood appeared as a unique stage of life. On the one hand, responsiveness and indulgence by parents through the investing of their time, energy and money in children's lives and educational and occupational outcomes made it special. On the other hand, high degrees of parental control through establishing strict routines of study and restraints on speech and movement were seen as concomitant desirables in urban contexts. The focus in the rural childhood remained on inducting children into adult-life, and teaching them to be 'cultured' enough to live a life integrated with others. Much like the Indian society, Indian childhood appeared to be a melting pot of conglomeration arising out of modernity with a tempering of Indian tradition. Different contours of childhood appeared in urban and rural contexts. These got coloured by specific socio-cultural contexts and children's positions within parent–child interactions and relations. The childhood–adulthood dichotomy, parental expectations and socio-economic opportunities create different niches for the childhoods of urban and rural children in India. Nevertheless, both childhoods were marked by playfulness and learning. The childhoods were oriented towards raising adults who can assert themselves in their respective contexts as well as remain embedded in their social fabric.

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