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Interview

*Recently appointed Chairperson of the National Commission for the Protection of Children's Rights, **Shantha Sinha** brings to her new office decades of experience of working at the grassroots level. As founder secretary trustee of the Mamidipudi Venkatrangiya Foundation (MVF) in Hyderabad, her work has centred on reducing the gap between poor children and mainstream education. Honoured with the Padmashri in 1999 and the Ramon Magsasay Award for Community Leadership in 2003, she spoke to **Mannika Chopra** on the imperative to create a national thinking that believes in all children enjoying their childhood.*

What was the provocation to set up the commission and what are its priorities?

The commission has been set up to recognize the fact that something very unfair is happening to children in this country and that there are many issues that need to be addressed if India has to stand up with pride on the world stage as a big democracy. Having said this, the commission has four tasks that it must address. The first is to create a moral indignation in the country that child rights are not being protected. A kind of national conscience has to be created that pricks everyone to work for children. Armed with this kind of a mood the commission will look at the gaps in the policy and legal framework. The commission's brief is to make recommendations to see that a rights based perspective is adhered to by the government while it makes its policies. Third, it will take up specific cases that come up before it for redressal of grievances. At times it should not even wait for the complaints to come but take up *suo motu* cases, summon the violators before the commission and recommend to the government action based on an inquiry.

Finally, the role of the commission is to arm itself with proper research and documentation. The legitimacy and credibility of what we say and do will come from solid research and data. Though everyone in the country knows that children are not being treated well, this has to be substantiated by information and cannot just be an emotional argument. Today there is no dynamic data available. The census does report once every ten years, but that is too long to wait to find out what is happening to children.

How grim are the existing statistics?

Very. If one talks about nutrition, there is today is no guarantee that one in ten children will survive till it is five years old. We have still not made any progress from the last National Family Health Survey, with 46.8 per cent children still malnourished, that is half our country's children. Infant mortality has crossed the 63.8 per thousand births mark. It's a kind of tsunami that has hit young babies in our country. If one looks at the number of children going to school, one finds that 58 per cent do not even complete five years of education and only 22 per cent complete tenth class. There are reports showing that even on completing class five, many children are still unable to read and write.

And what happens to children when they are pushed out of school or drop out? When they drop out of school, millions of children end up working; in fact our country boasts the largest number of child labour in the world today which according to the 2001 census is 5.4 million.

Is there a linkage between child labour and education and is that the biggest challenge before the commission?

I think you have hit the nail on the head – there is a link between child labour and guaranteeing children a right to education. One would think that if children are not in school they must be doing some kind of work. This could be either for their own family on a non-wage basis or wage-based where children are trafficked, when they are sent long distances to work. Food, clothing and shelter that most of us depend on to live with dignity are all produced with child work.

Granted, but how do you counter the argument that children from poor families necessarily need to work to enhance incomes?

When one looks at the fact that the poorest of the poor are sending their children to school, I think the proper question to ask is, Why are they doing that in spite of their obvious poverty? Many poor people who don't send their children to school do so not because of poverty but because they lack a social environment that gives them the confidence to choose schooling.

The myth that children do not go to school because they are poor is false and has to be exposed. It comforts all of us to think so for it makes us feel that we can do nothing about it. When I say we, I mean the enlightened sections, the middle class, the policy-makers, the intellectuals. It is we who manufacture ideas. It's such a huge responsibility on us to think the right things.

How can you combat intangibles like thinking?

It is easy to combat it with the poor because there is an explosive demand for education among them. In fact, the poor spend more than 50 per cent of their earnings to see that their children go to school and continue there. They spend on fees, uniforms and tuitions. They see education as the only way to break the cycle of poverty. The demand is such that schools are overcrowded. Despite the lack of infrastructure they have immense faith in the system. They face systemic insults when there are no classrooms, no teachers, and no books. Then they face other kinds of insults when children are physically abused, scolded or humiliated. How much more do the poor need to do to show that they want their children to study?

Specifically, what will be your strategy?

The strategy is to create a mood in trying to expand the base of child rights protagonists. We will need to talk to as many sections of people as possible – from the corporate world to political players to media, the intellectuals and employers. One has to widen the constituency of those who think it is important for the country to have its children enjoy their childhood. So the strategy is to expand the terrain of discourse on children and their rights. The media has a vital role to play in this. And I think there needs to be a collective strategy where the media speaks with one voice. The regional media has as much of a role to play as the national media.

You have said that the role of NGOs as a bridge is crucial. Did your experience with MV Foundation help you significantly?

The reason why I feel so positive is because one has worked at the grassroots level, one has seen things change. There is a huge volunteer base cutting across NGOs who are working hard for the rights of the poor, child rights and their entitlement. Sometime I feel that the youth volunteers who don't get even Rs 1,000 per month, are active because they see there is a kind of space in India where one can organize protests, question policies and change things. The role of the NGO is really to stand by the poor in their battle for entitlements, guide them with information and ensure access to institutions. The NGO's role is for putting people forward and empower them. They are here to push and give the community confidence to take action.

How easy or difficult has it been for you to shift from the independently run MV Foundation to the establishment?

From the beginning, when I was with the MV Foundation, I knew that one has to bargain and negotiate with the system. We have worked to see that there is a community interface between institutions with local bodies or communities. So the transition was not difficult.

But the task is not easy. We have the experience of working in 6000 villages and bringing 400,000 children from work into school. It is still much too small an effort when we think about what needs to be done in the country. What gives us strength and confidence is the principle on which we work – that we have to engage with the system; that one has to have faith in the democratic traditions of the country and that our actions strengthen these traditions rather than weaken them. These principles are non-negotiable whether one works in a village or in the country as a whole.

Was there any apprehension when you came to Delhi?

I don't know what you would call it, maybe madness, but no, there was no apprehension.

Excitement then?

No, a lot of humility.