



RESEARCH NOTE

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COVID-19 AND PROTECTING THE ORPHANED CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE POPULATION/GROUPS

At a Glance

- Covid-19 has claimed lives of around 4 lakh people in India.
- To protect and empower Covid-affected children, PM CARES for Children announced by Prime Minister to ensure their free education, health insurance, a corpus of 10 lakhs for future and also financial support.
- For vulnerable sections, benefits under the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana* that provides free foodgrains, cooking gas, etc. has been extended till 12 November 2020.
- The Supreme Court has directed the National Disaster Management Authority to recommend guidelines for *ex-gratia* assistance to the kin/family of Covid victims on account of loss of life.
- Such other measures to protect the vulnerables include '*One Nation One Ration Card*' for migrant workers, contribution of 30% of salaries and allowances of MPs, prioritising senior citizens for Covid vaccination, etc.

Introduction

The world has been grappling with multiple crises since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Emerged as the biggest tragedy of the Century, the Covid-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on humanity: with more than 4 million deaths globally, and about 4 lakh people losing their lives in India.¹

As the second wave of the pandemic unleashed its wrath, devastating India in early 2021, there were heart-rending stories of orphan children, who have lost one or both of their parents or guardians. On the other hand, lock-downs, shutting down of economy, job-loss, etc. have aggravated the already debilitating conditions of the poor, daily-wage labourers, migrant workers, domestic help, disabled, women, elderlies and other marginalised sections due to the loss of their livelihoods. These necessitated immediate relief and intervention. Rightly so, PM-

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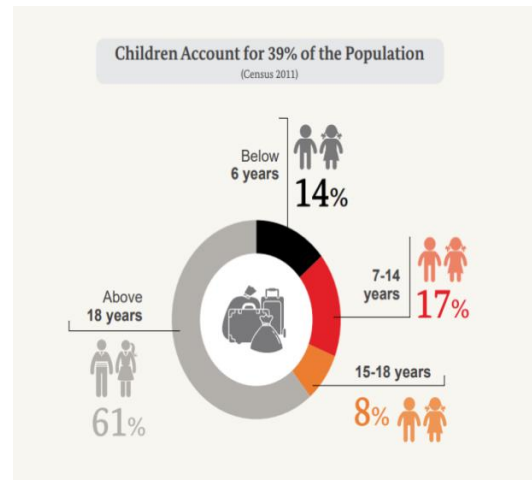
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¹. World Health Organisation, Death toll till 7 July 2021. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Death toll till 12 July 2021.

CARES for Children Scheme was announced, benefits under the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana* were also extended. Supplementing these efforts, many States have also taken appropriate welfare measures to tide over these challenging times.

Orphan Children in India

As per the *Census 2011*, children constitute about 39% of India's total population. Orphan children fall within the category of “Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP) as described in *the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015*. The *Model Rules, 2016* framed (under the Act) provide for monitoring, inspection, standards of care and measures to be taken by State Governments/UTs. In fact, execution of the Act and implementation of related Schemes rest with the States and UTs.



- The *Ministry of Women and Child Development*, being the nodal agency, also implements centrally sponsored Child Protection Services (CPS) Scheme (erstwhile Integrated Child Protection Scheme).² Details of many schemes targeting the protection of children and orphans are given in *Annexure*.
- The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 provides for 'institutionalisation as a measure of last resort' for the orphan children. As soon as a child is identified, who has lost his/her parents, the child has to be ensured of food, shelter and safety under the Indian law.
- In addition to government run institutions, many open shelters, child care centres, etc. are also operational, primarily run by non-government organisations such as *Bachpan Bachao Andolan*, Childline, Smile Foundation, CRY, Pratham, etc.
- Under the provisions of *the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005*, *National and State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights* have also been established to monitor the action taken for welfare of children.

As of 22 March 2021, 1191 Children Homes and 366 Specialised Adoption Agencies working for the welfare of children, have accommodated more than 58,000 beneficiaries during the Financial Year. 2020-21.¹

Covid-19 and Orphan Children

Covid-19 has snatched smiles from thousands of children in India. Hidden behind the numbers of death due to the pandemic, particularly after the second wave are the survivors,

² CPS is, in fact, one of the sub-schemes under the umbrella Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) implemented by the government.

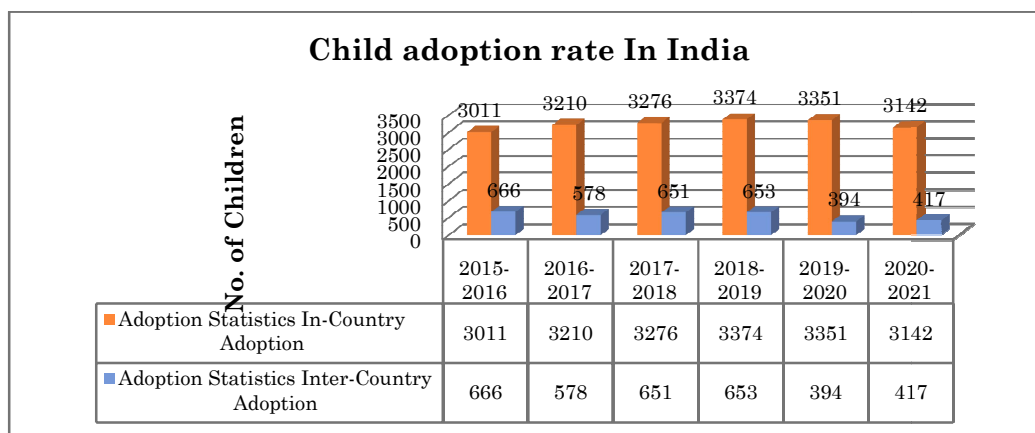
mainly children who are now living in the grip of continuous fear, sadness and uncertainty. For them, the world has changed for ever.

As per the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), as many as 30,071 children are orphaned: those who lost a parent or abandoned, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³

| | | |
|----|----------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. | Children those who lost a parent | 26,176 |
| 2. | Children orphaned | 3,621 |
| 3. | Children abandoned | 274 |
| | Total | 30,071 |

However, several child rights organisations claim that the numbers are far too high than what is admitted by the Government.

Adoption laws in India are also very strict. Accordingly, adoption rates have been also quite low. As per the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), there were only 3,142 in-country adoptions in 2020. These are very low figures for a population as mammoth as India's.



Source: Child Adoption and Resource Authority, Ministry of Women & Child Development

PM-CARES For Children

(For support and empowerment of Covid affected Children)

- Free education for children who lost their parents to Covid:
 - School education for children under 10 years in nearest Kendriya Vidyalayas or Private School (PM Cares wil pay for expenditure)
 - For Children between 11 to 18 years school education in any central government residential schools. If admitted in Private school PM Cares will pay for expenditure)
 - Support for Higher education by way of scholarship equivalent to tuition fees for undergraduate vocational courses. Also facilities of education loan for professional courses.
- Free health insurance of Rs. 5 lakh under Ayushman Bharat till 18 years
- Fixed Deposit in the name of Child: A specially designed scheme to create a Fund of Rs. 10 lakh for each Child. On reaching 23 years of age, can get a lump-sum amount for personal use.
- Such children to get a monthly financial support /stipend once they turn 18 for next five years.

³ The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) informed the Supreme Court on 5 June 2021 (the data received from the States).

Many State governments including Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Delhi, Odisha, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Odisha, etc. have also been supplementing with state-specific initiatives to instill a ray of hope and ensure that no such child is left behind.

Covid-19 and Vulnerable people

The Covid-19 pandemic has no doubt had devastating impacts on poor and the vulnerables. They lost the opportunities to earn a living. Access to healthcare facilities has become a distant dream. The poor, the migrant workers, the disabled, daily-wage workers, women, elderlies, transgender persons, marginalised sections, etc. are now in the dire need of support and protection.

Poor: As per the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of 2019, India had been successful in lifting more than 270 million out of extreme poverty in one decade.⁴ But, millions have further slipped below the poverty line due to the pandemic.

As per the Tendulkar Committee estimates, 21.92 percent of the population were living below the poverty line in 2011-12. According to the OPHI's Global MPI Country Briefing 2020 Report on India, based on NFHS-4 (2015-16), the incidence of multidimensional poverty in India was 27.9 percent.¹

Migrant Workers: Covid-19 has brought to the fore the issues of migrant workers in India. Given the rural-urban divide, the nation witnessed mass exodus just after the announcement of lockdown.

Other Vulnerable Groups: Details of the population belonging to different marginalised section are given in the Table below.

| <u>Sl.no.</u> | <u>Groups</u> | <u>Population</u> | <u>Percentage</u> | <u>Remarks</u> |
|---------------|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---|
| 1. | Scheduled Castes | 20.14 crore | 16.6 % | As per Census 2011 |
| 2. | Scheduled Tribes | 10.45 crore | 8.6% | As per Census 2011 |
| 3. | Other Backward Classes | -- | 41.7% | As per 66 th Round NSSO (2009-10) |
| 4. | Senior Citizens | 10.38 crore | 8.57% | As per Census 2011 |
| 5. | Transgender Persons | 4.87 lakh | -- | Population of 'others' during 2011 |
| 6. | Victims of Substance Abuse | 6.5 crore (approx.) | -- | As per the National Survey on extent and pattern of Substance Abuse |

Towards Protecting Vulnerable Sections

- The **Ministry of Home Affairs (Women Safety Division)** issued an advisory in May 2021 to all States and UTs to review their existing facilities for the protection of vulnerable groups affected by the Covid such as children orphaned after losing their

⁴ The Global MPI was developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) alongside the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report Office.

parents to the virus, women in distress who may be susceptible to trafficking, senior citizens requiring timely assistance and support, scheduled castes and tribes who need guidance to access government facilities.

- **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana:** Within 48 hours of announcement of the Lockdown in the year 2020, the Scheme was launched to provide free food grain, cooking gas, direct cash transfer to more than 800 million farmers, women, elderly, the poor and marginalized sections of the society.

The Government of India and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) have together provided total fiscal stimulus of Rs 29.87 lakh crore since the Covid-19 pandemic began till 12 November 2020. This amount is 15 % of India's GDP.¹ Given the tragic second wave sweeping the country this year, and post-Covid uncertainties, these facilities of providing free food-grain to 80 crore people till November 2021.

- **'One Nation, One Ration Card':** To address the plight of the migrant workers, those move from one place to another in search of work and daily-wages, 'One Nation, One Ration Card' (ONORC), a welfare measure driven by technology, has been launched to ensure that poor gets his allocated share of free ration wherever he is. Hon'ble Supreme Court has now set a deadline for all States to implement the ONORC by 31 July 2021.⁵

- **Ex-gratia Assistance to kin/families of Covid-19 victims:** During a hearing on 30 June 2021, the Supreme Court held that the National Disaster Management Authority has failed to perform its duty in recommending *ex-gratia* assistance for families who lost their loved ones to Covid-19 pandemic.

Referring to Section 12(iii) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the Supreme Court held that -
"the National Authority shall recommend guidelines for the minimum standards of relief to be provided to persons affected by disaster, which shall include ex-gratia assistance on account of loss of life."

- **Elderlies accorded Priority in the National Covid Vaccination Programme:** The National Covid Vaccination Programme rolled out on 16 January 2021 accorded priority to senior citizens. Initially, it was open only for people above 60 years of age and with co-morbidities, frontline and health workers. Thereafter, it was brought down to people between 45 and 60 years of age. From 21 June 2021, it is for all above 18 years of age.

Besides, a slew of measures have also been initiated by different ministries and departments towards addressing the hardship of vulnerable sections and orphan children in the country such as the Ministries of Social Justice and Empowerment, Health and Family Welfare, Rural Development, Housing and Poverty Alleviation, etc.

Covid-19 and Parliament

More than 500 Questions have been raised on Covid related issues in Parliament (both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) since the outbreak of the virus. In Lok Sabha only more than 60 members raised the matter in the House under Zero Hour and Matters under Rule 377.

⁵. *Indian Express*, New Delhi, 30 June 2021, "SC sets July 31 date for one ration card, calls migrant portal delay unpardonable"

Summing up

As India is home to a significant proportion of world's poor and vulnerable population, the indelible mark left by the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of people cannot be wiped out, particularly of those children who lost their parents. However, with prompt and continuous efforts of all stakeholders - the government, the NGOs, the private sectors, social activists, entrepreneurs and also the general public - in extending physical support, socio-economic, emotional and psychological help, these children can be mainstreamed and assured of a bright future. For other vulnerable sections, this Covid-19 has been a reminder of a need for robust social safety nets.

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- NITI Aayog, *SDG INDIA: Index & Dashboard 2021 - Partnerships in the Decade of Action*, (p.75)
- Lok Sabha Unstarred Question 2807 on Orphanages, answered by the Ministry of Women & Child Development on 12 March 2021
- PIB Press Release on 'PM CARES for Children', 29 May 2021
- *Indian Express*, New Delhi, 30 June 2021, "SC sets July 31 date for One Ration Card, calls Migrant Portal delay Unpardonable"
- World Health Organisation (WHO), <https://www.who.int>

Annexure

Programmes and schemes for empowerment and rehabilitation of children

(as orphans, destitute, victims of drug abuse, sexual exploitation)

| Name of the programme/Scheme | Objective |
|--|--|
| <i>CHILDLINE 1098</i> | India's first 24-hour, toll free, phone outreach service for children. CHILDLINE works for the protection of rights of all children aged from 0 to 18. It is an initiative for rescuing and assisting children in distress |
| <i>Child Protection Services (CPS) Scheme (erstwhile Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS))</i> | Aimed at building a protective environment for children in difficult circumstances, as well as other vulnerable children, through Government-Civil Society Partnership. |
| <i>An Integrated Programme for street children</i> | Provision of shelter, nutrition, health care, sanitation and hygiene, safe drinking water, education and recreational facilities and protection against abuse and exploitation of destitute and neglected street children. |
| <i>Scheme of assistance to voluntary organisations for homes (Shishu Greh) for infants and young children for promoting in-country adoption</i> | To provide homes within the country to children who become destitute at a very early age and to promote In-country adoption. The scheme is supervised by the Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA). |
| <i>Programme of assistance for innovations in child development and welfare - national children's fund</i> | Welfare of children, including rehabilitation of destitute children, particularly pre-school age children |
| <i>Scheme for assistance to voluntary agencies for non formal education for elementary age group children under the programme for universalisation of elementary education</i> | To develop the programme of non-formal education for meeting the educational needs of out of school children. |