ABSTRACT

Life in a Conflict Zone: An Ethnographic Study of Children in Chhattisgarh

The present study is based in backdrop of the ongoing State- Maoist conflict in the state of Chhattisgarh. In milieu of this prolonged conflict in the country, Chhattisgarh has emerged as its epicentre and is known to be one of the most turbulent states in the current times. A large number of debates have been centring around this conflict and have dominated the field of study. However, in the midst of it, Chhattisgarh has been narrowed down to a discourse and has emerged as an entity characterised by presence of conflict and violent confrontations. These overarching debates and discourses have often shifted the focus from the native population of the region, the tribal who, in present day context, stand at the crossroads. Focussing further, one finds a category of population who has not been accorded voice and have been silently bearing the brunt of this conflict for decades, children. Drawing from here, this study is an attempt to bring the focus back onto this hitherto ignored and less represented population of the region and highlight the everyday life of children in a conflict zone.

Children in Chhattisgarh have been living amidst conflict for decades now. They have all experienced conflict in some form or the other. Many have witnessed violent incidences like that of killing of parents, siblings, near ones at very close quarters, rest have been exposed to conflict through its varied manifestations in the form of conflict-induced displacement, separation from family, leading a restricted camp life, omnipresent security force personnel and a continued sense of fear and uncertainty. Children had been worst affected after the dramatic escalation of the conflict since the launch of the counter- insurgency campaign Salwa Judum in the year 2005. It not only led to a widespread displacement but also led to breaking up of family ties and gradual uprooting of children from their traditional and socio- culture practices. The everyday life of children in the present times continues to be embroiled in the larger gamut of conflict.

The lived experiences of the past and the everyday living experiences of the present have shaped children’s subjective interpretation of the context within which they live.
However, amidst this on-going conflict and its varied manifestations in their everyday lives, children have created their own social world wherein they interact, assume newer roles, interpret and create newer meanings in their lives. They have emerged as social actors and active agents in their own right and have been capable of internalising, give meaning to and resist adult discourse, reconcile their everyday experiences and exhibit their agency in situations of adversity. A close look at children in the context of their everyday has highlighted the socio-cultural and political structures that are playing an integral role in the lives of these children. It also has brought out how children use their own strategies and perspectives and produce and reproduce their own understanding while navigating daily between different spaces and social structures within their social world. Children’s understanding about their environment, their ability to counterbalance ruptures and rebuild a new meaningful life has also been highlighted.

In the process, the study has explored in totality the changes that have been wrought by the existing conflict and also the ways in which newer socio-cultural forms have emerged and helped in the process of meaning making in the lives of the people and children in particular affected by this adverse situation. It has laid focus on the ruptured experiences of past and present and drawn relation between the disruptions and the everyday lives of children in this conflict zone. The various processes taking place in the lives of children have been closely looked at and thus, attempt is made to further explore and analyse the existing fissures alongwith the continuity that accompanies their everyday lives.