

Comments on a Persistent Debate: ‘Child Labour’ versus ‘Talent Display’ in the Indian Television Industry

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Abstract: *The government has moved a proposal for a complete ban on child labour up to 14 years of age with the caveat that ‘employment will be allowed in family enterprises after school hours.’ This could perhaps be a death toll for child performers in the entertainment industry. There is no clarification if the suggested law would apply to child artistes in films and television shows as well.*

While there is no dispute on the fact that the consciousness about child labour is spreading in India, there is no agreement whether child artistes fall into or are excluded from the definition of child labour. Children performing in theatre, films and television is not new to India. But the concern now is the fact that the number of child artistes performing on screen has been continuously increasing in the last few years; be it television serials or reality shows.

This paper explores the arguments for and against child artistes in the television industry; serials and reality shows. The paper is based on newspaper interviews of child artistes and interviews of parents in addition to secondary sources.

Keywords: *India, children, entertainment industry, ban, arguments*

I. Introduction

The Television Revolution of the 1990s saw the rise and growth of various entertainment channels. Many of these channels brought in children of varied age groups and bestowed them the status of artiste; child artiste. Then came the reality shows where children were made to perform on television and now this has actually gone overboard. There is no doubt that children have always been involved in television but that number has increased by leaps and bounds in the last few years, be it serials, reality shows or commercials.

A child below the age of 14 being employed is the problematic.

The government has moved a proposal for a complete ban on child labour up to 14 years of age with the caveat that ‘employment will be allowed in family enterprises after school hours.’ [1]. Child rights activists have opposed the move as an amendment that will only ‘increase the informalization of labour’. This could perhaps be a death toll for child performers in the entertainment industry. There is no clarification however, if the suggested law would apply to child artistes in films and television shows as well.

This paper explores the arguments for and against child artistes in the television industry; serials and reality shows. The paper is based on newspaper interviews of child artistes and their parents in addition to secondary sources.

II. Television Serials and Reality Shows

It began in the 1990s with Quiz shows featuring school children from all over the country, the Bournvita Quiz Contest being the earliest. Among the earliest of the reality shows was a dance competition television series, Boogie Woogie, among the first shows to start special dance championships catering to different age groups. [2]. Chocolates were distributed to winning children as prizes. Reality shows have undoubtedly changed the business of television in India and impacted the Indian television-viewing experience. Reality programming has evolved past delivering content to a niche market of television viewers to receiving mass and even global appeal. Talent shows are being treated as platforms for success in the television industry and even a career in films. With sponsors increasing, the prize money, name and fame associated with the show has also enhanced. Children are also being invited to host some of the shows in-order to earn more attention.

Television has thus created an army of parents eager to push their children into the limelight, to jump onto the fame bandwagon. School and homework are to be thrown on the backburner because that one elusive shot at stardom could lead to instant fame, glory and wealth. A child television star is looked upon as having arrived socially and financially.

III. Constitutional Safeguards

There are official safeguards in India to protect children and look into their welfare. While Fundamental Rights (Articles 23-24) make clear that forced child labour is strictly a punishable offence, Section 17 of the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005 provides against the violation of a child's right to health, psyche, safety, education, recreation, leisure, etc. Section 13 (I) of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, [3] Cable Network Rules, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 are all in favour of letting children enjoy their childhood with all its innocence and protecting them thus ensuring their right to dignity. [4].

According to Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPDR), children will still be able to participate in talent-hunt or reality shows, but only as long as they are not paid for it.[5].

IV. Government of Maharashtra

On 15 December 2008, the government of Maharashtra issued notices to several commercial serials seeking information on children's employment in these serials. [6]. This was, perhaps on the behest of some alert parents. Their familiarity with the strict regulations outside India governing the working conditions for child artistes led them to complain about the stress as a result of the non-stop work schedule on the child actors.

Farida Lambe, former member of the Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (MSCPCR) was of the view that if strict laws for the protection of children in the entertainment industry are to be implemented in India, resistance would be maximum from parents. [7]. The Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Ambika Soni claimed that she had no problems with children featuring in TV serials if they could manage their academics. 'There is no problem with child stars featuring in serials, because after all, parents are the best judge of their children...I don't know why any notice has been served. Parents are the best decision makers...' [8].

While the Minister has put the onus of children's participation in the entertainment sector on their parents, it has led to a huge debate on the merits and disadvantages of the larger, moral issue of terming it as child labour.

Reality shows and serials that feature children as contestants and actors cause the television ratings to go up. Should children participate at all in reality shows? Are participating children old enough to face the pressures and stress of these shows? Will the pressure to perform well lead to frustration? Will children be able to face the stress associated with the lowering popularity of television serials? Does the employment of children amount to commercialization?

These become the most pertinent questions in this debate.

V. Participation in television serials and reality shows

Parents argue that participation of their children in television serials is but an extension of the extra and co-curricular activities in their schools. Also, acting in the serials, pays them as much as Rs. 7000- Rs. 25,000 a day, depending on the popularity of the show, the sponsorship as well as role they portray in the show. Parents vouch that reality and talent shows and commercials create opportunities for skill enhancement and further career development. The director of the show, Ballika Vadhu (Colors) Purnendu Shekhar, is of the view that enforcing strict rules for the benefit of child artistes makes a lot of sense but banning them from acting will take away a valid platform for gifted children. [9].

VI. The Argument

It is apparent that parents, on whom the onus of involving children in the entertainment industry lies, wish their children to continue in the entertainment industry with beneficial conditions. While parents argue that they only wish their children to take up acting, dancing and music as a hobby, those who watch the reality shows would agree that parents are often pushy. They not only wish the children to participate, but perform well/compete and win.

Critics look upon reality shows and serials as a nuisance that offers no message or useful content. [10]. Children are kept waiting for hours before they get their turn to be in front of the camera and have to practice for endless hours, which gets them physically and mentally exhausted and leaves them with no motivation for academics..Exposure to lights, make-up and the glamour attached is detrimental for their health There is

exposure to adult content and their innocence is killed in the world of entertainment. Children are abused and this goes against the Child Labour Act which bans the employment of children below 14 in occupations considered as unsafe and harmful.

There is some truth in this. The little television stars miss playing with their friends and are bored with the games they play on the sets but talk positively about handling their academic careers. Children are torn between the academic world and expectation of parents. They are too young to make career choices and often misled by parents who are carried away by the status symbol, fame and money attached to the opulence. Reality show winners become celebrities overnight and suddenly stop acting their age. Television serials as well as reality shows have girls who are heavily made-up, wearing outfits heavier than their own weight that do not suit their age, delivering long emotional dialogues that they themselves do not understand, and below teenaged boys dedicating songs to their girlfriends often at the behest of the program host.

With fame, children become arrogant and even lose their innocence and humility. Problems arise when the fame fades. Coping issues and frustration are the consequences. The safety of child participants in shows like *India's Got Talent* is also another worry. Reality show competitions, unlike school competitions are extremely intense and put pressure on the participants. The fear of rejection is an associated concern. Reactions from some of the judges have also come in for severe criticism. [11].

Kasber Augustine, of Kasber's Dance Academy in Mumbai, who has been teaching dance to children and adults for the last 25 years, finds competition fever building up over the last few years. While he is in agreement with parents and children that television shows have their own charm, he does talk of ambitious parents who push their children too far. [12]. Academies to teach and train the children to perform in reality shows are a lucrative business today.

How much are we as a viewer to be blamed is also another question. We watch them, enjoy their screen-role playing and do not give a care to the conditions they labour.

If parents are to be blamed for pushing their children, talent academies for training them and infusing a spirit of competition in them and viewers for watching them, equally to be blamed are children who also bask in the fame and glory they achieve.

'I love acting'....'I want to make money'....'Even if the judges say something negative, it is only to help me perform better...I do not feel bad'...'I do not think I am being exploited' 'I am sure someone will notice me and give me a chance', 'Look at Sreya Ghosal and Sunidhi Chauhan...they have also come from reality shows' [13]. This is what the children have to say.

Akin to these arguments of children are the contestations by those who do not accept the moralistic arguments against child artistes in the entertainment industry. [14]. They are of the view that performing on small screen is very safe. There is no infringement of natural rights or encouragement to incorrect behaviour. This career path has money and if children are able to assist their parents financially, there exists no debate. The physical pain and stress at the sets are nothing short of the conditions in factories. A shy and introvert child may undergo a change in personality with the attention he gets and socialize better. Participating and competing only enhances the talents of the child. Also, children need children specific channels. Most such channels are cartoons and action thrillers. Serials that are interesting to children have to have child artistes.

It is thus obvious that channels need the kids and kids need the channel for their mutual benefit.

This is show business. [15].

VII. Conclusion

The issue of child artistes in the television industry and reality shows is undoubtedly a unending one. Despite presenting all arguments in favour and against the issue, reaching an informed conclusion is very challenging.

There is no doubt that the entertainment industry, including television serials and reality shows have provided and continue to provide a stage for showcasing the talents of children in smaller towns and cities where the exposure is limited. Perhaps it is the perceived lack of opportunities that brings in unhealthy competition. However, for every child who makes it big there are scores of others who fade into obscurity once the spotlights are off. Vocational training to handle skill gaps is highly recommended. Institutions like Shrutinandan of Pandit Ajay Chakravarti and Vrindaban of Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, which have brought back the *gurukul* system are some such attempts. [16].

Also, if reality shows is going to be a reality, securing the future of the child becomes mandatory. Sumit Nagpal, a television journalist suggests that children can be paid through scholarships or fixed deposits created in their name. This will ensure that parents do not exploit them as money-making

machines.[17].Organisers of these shows need to sensitize the judges, restrict the hours of shooting, adjust shooting to fit in with schooling, decree upon a minimum age of 16 for participants, specify working conditions and have a counselor on sets to ease the burden of participating children.

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