

Kolkata street kids get birth certificates - and identity

For about 50,000 poor children, it was a celebration of their birth. Their gift was the birth registration certificate (BRC) - something they had struggled to get for years because they did not have the money to pay for it.

The function organised at Town Hall last month - only 750-odd children could actually be accommodated to take the BRCs on the occasion - was perhaps the first of its kind. All those who had assembled there were in a jubilant mood with their favourite celebrity, magician P.C. Sorcar, gracing the event, reports Grassroots Features.

'Every child has a right to identity, life and happiness,' said Eimar Barr, deputy director, programmes, Unicef, India Country Office, speaking on the occasion.

For Sikha Mandal, a Class 8 student of the Deshbandhu Balika Vidyalaya, this meant a lot more. 'When I got admitted to school, the teacher asked for my birth certificate which I did not have.

'A local NGO helped me file an affidavit but I still fear that the teacher might ask me to go out of the class some day because I do not have a valid Birth Certificate,' said Sikha, whose joys knew no bounds when she received the certificate from the mayor of Kolkata.

Ayesha Parveen could not be included in the function but knows well that she is also part of the new movement. 'My teacher says I will be able to get admission in a high school with this certificate,' said she happily.

Last year, Ayesha tried to get admission to Class 5 in a mainstream school but she did not have a BRC. 'This frustrated me as I have had to repeat Class 4,' she said. 'Some people suggested that we get a BRC from a doctor but we failed to obtain the same,' said her mother Jubeida Begum.

Poonam Khatun, who studies in Class 3, is also going to receive the BRC soon. 'I have heard that this will help me in getting higher education, a ration card for the family and Voter ID cards,' said Poonam.

Kolkata municipality has at least about 75,000 children who do not have a BRC, according to a survey conducted by the City Level Programme of Action (CLPOA), a networking body of about 300 NGOs.

'A joint initiative by [Kolkata](#) Municipal Corporation (KMC), Unicef and a group of 74 NGOs led by CLPOA was launched in 2005 to identify children who don't have a BRC. This survey helped us identify children like Ayesha,' said Achintya Bhattacharya, secretary of CLPOA.

According to Bhattacharya, birth registration is a fundamental right of every child as it confers a legal identity on the child and facilitates easy access to health and education delivery systems.

'Now they cannot be kept out of development schemes,' said Mousumi Dutta of Tangra Moyitri Society, a partner of CLPOA for this project.

'We want to give these slum children a dream,' she said. 'Until now, getting a child admitted to Class

5 depended solely on our ability to convince the principal of that school, who could demand the certificate from the child at any time, even after getting the child admitted,' she adds.

'A birth certificate is a necessity and symbol of modernity,' said Alapan Bandyopadhyay, municipal commissioner of Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

'We don't want these children to be deprived further and hence this drive was initiated,' he added. But this, however, has not been an easy task.

'It was a huge operation to survey the entire city and despite the strong presence and rapport of our partner NGOs, we had to verify many records thrice over because we didn't want to take any chance,' says Bhattacharya.

This has come as a vindication of the efforts of NGO workers like Mousumi, who have to run from pillar to post to get a certificate from a doctor or file an affidavit in court. Since poverty was a hindrance for poor people, the NGOs convinced the government to reduce the registration fee.

'The state Department of Health and Family Welfare reduced the fee for late registration from the existing Rs.100 to a negligible 50 paise,' said Bandyopadhyay.

Another hurdle was the individual affidavit system. 'We were allowed to do group affidavits and so, instead of 50,000 affidavits, we had to file only 150,' said Bhattacharya.

Kolkata Mayor Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya is obviously proud of the achievement. 'West Bengal is already highly placed in the national scenario with 97 percent birth registrations. However, the fact that we are not 100 percent needs our attention and concerted action,' he added.

'Even though West Bengal can boast of 97 percent birth registrations, the fact is that the other three percent is a huge chunk of the child population,' said Unicef officer Barr.

About 9.4 million births are not yet registered in India. Just a day before the function, Sikha and others were part of that statistics. However, this is just the beginning. As Bhattacharya puts it rightly: 'This is just the beginning. We should build on this and register each birth in Kolkata and the nation.'

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