

# Exercising the right to education: Critical notes from India on reframing ‘participation’ in schooling

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## **Abstract**

At this critical juncture, with several states in the majority world having passed legislation around free and compulsory education and millions of marginal children are enrolling in schools, the question of how we frame children’s participation in their right to education assumes considerable significance. This paper is an attempt to more broadly open-up current thinking on children’s participation through focusing on the specific neoliberal working out of the right to education for marginal populations of children in India. Its focus is a set of court cases in the Delhi High Court (1999-2001) that brought into public focus the plight of poor children within inequitable spaces of learning. While these cases aided in critically opening-up children’s participation in schooling beyond the narrow configuration of “access”, the mediatized images of dilapidated government schools paradoxically also served to further entrench neoliberal assertions around children and schooling. This neoliberal narrative leverages an isolated framing of children’s victimhood and their aspirational futurities and endorses their entrepreneurial participation in exercising their new right within a highly discriminatory, class-segregated, and increasingly privatized landscape of schooling. Through highlighting the paradoxical role played by these mediatized images in court cases focused on equitable schooling, this paper seeks to answer the following questions around the link between mediatized representations of marginal children and their ‘participation’ in their right to education: With most states in the majority world claiming to have scored a victory for children’s rights by passing legislation on free and compulsory education, how might a more robust theorization around children’s participation help foreground the continuing inequalities that underlie the working out of this right? How might we expand existing frameworks around children’s participation to accommodate a much-needed focus on racialized capitalism? I am particularly interested in understanding how neoliberalism’s representational investments in an isolated, ahistorical figure of the child serves to obscure larger structural and historical exclusions that mark children’s participatory exercise of their right to education.

## **Presenter - Bio**

Sarada Balagopalan is an Associate Professor of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University. Her ethnographic research focuses on postcolonial childhoods and particularly on the inequalities and indignities that mark the lives of first-generation school goers. She is the author of *Inhabiting ‘Childhood’: Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India* (Palgrave 2014) and co-edited *Diverse Unfreedoms: The Afterlives and Transformations of Post-Transatlantic Bondages* (Routledge 2020). She serves as an editor of *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* and is an Associate Editor for *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood*

Studies. She recently helped co-organize a virtual seminar series on Reimagining Childhood Studies, more information on which can be found at <https://reimaginingchildhoodstudies.com>.

### **Discussant - Bio**

Victor Prasad Karunan has worked over 16 years with UNICEF, as Regional Advisor on Participation and Partnerships at UNICEF Regional Office in Bangkok; Chief of Adolescent Development and Participation in UNICEF Headquarters in New York; and as Deputy Representative and Senior Social Policy Specialist in UNICEF Malaysia. He has over 35 years of professional experience in over 40 countries in both the Global North and South, with special focus on South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific. He holds a M.A. in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and a Ph.D. in the Social Sciences from the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He currently teaches B.A. Social Policy and Development, Thammasat University; M.A/Ph.D in Development Studies, Chulalongkorn University and the Ph.D Faculty for Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand. He is also an International Consultant and Expert for United Nations agencies in Southeast Asia. Contact: vkarunan2016@gmail.com