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The department of Development Studies has started an academic activity 'DS View' in which students, researchers and faculty will write short academic essays on the Development discourse. The aim of this forum is to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of first DS View is '**Analysis of Child Abductions: An Ever Rising but Overlooked Phenomena in Punjab**' authored by Asif Iqbal.

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Analysis of Child Abductions: An Ever Rising but Overlooked Phenomena in Punjab

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Child abduction is defined as the forceful and offensive separation of a child from the parents mostly for using children in begging rackets, sexual exploitation, forced slavery, human trafficking or organ thefts. The phenomena seem to have become the centre of focus through the print, electronic and social media in the most populous province of Pakistan: Punjab and especially its provincial capital Lahore. Currently, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has taken a Suo Motu notice of these abductions; Punjab government has acknowledged the problem and is running special campaigns while an element of fear has gripped the erstwhile calm and peaceful neighborhoods of the provincial capital Lahore and other parts of Punjab most notably Faisalabad, Bahawalpur and Bahawalnagar. These abductions directly or indirectly imply failures, flaws and factors acting at three levels which are discussed as follows:

State level

The fact that a large number of abductions have been missing from public knowledge do speak volumes about institutional inadequacy at multiple levels of our governance structures. First, policing has not been completely successful to safeguard the life and liberty of the ordinary citizens. This has been accompanied by an indifferent attitude of the judicial and executive branches of government as they could not keep a check on the miserable performance of police force. Second, the attitude of police towards troubled parents who have lost their children had been apathetic. The result has been deteriorating police and community relations which have worked to the benefit of criminal elements carrying out these abductions. Third, due to untimely delivery of justice, people have lost trust in state institutions like police and judiciary to nab criminal elements and punish them. Consequently, people have taken to vigilante or mob justice. Last, institutions like Child Protection Bureau have been unable to highlight plight of so many children and families to the authorities. This further undermines public faith in governance which is deeply problematic because problems like these are the reasons these institutions are created in the first place.

Societal level

The social transformation that our society has undergone over the years in terms of breaking away from the collective and cohesive way of living is quite intriguing. This is made manifest by the fact that in case of Lahore the most cases of abductions have taken place in closely knit localities like Mughul Pura, Anar Kali, Bagh Ban Pura, Badami Bagh, and Shahdra which are densely populated parts of the old Lahore. In these and the areas surrounding these localities, there is a shrinking social space for children because not much is invested in playgrounds or parks. So, children from middle and lower economic strata have been forced to play on the streets which are unsafe for children. Likewise, the structure of schools has changed with most having no playgrounds for children and again the security preferences reign supreme. It is anybody's guess how unsafe and unhealthy these conditions are for a society's children and how insecure they feel relative to the generations of the past. The political and societal preferences have been for mostly mega projects since these are more useful for political gains. This has come at the expense of psycho-social aspects of development and wellbeing of human beings. This narrow construct of development emphasises on infrastructure while humans are sidelined. Resultantly, issues of human development are completely marginalised. Last, the notions of security in our national and societal discourse have come to represent defense expenditure. This notion of security never includes human security and most importantly those of children. This narrow definition of security is what never allows us to pay attention to the abductions that are yet again a grave reminder of the insecurity that our children have to face as part of their young lives.

Family level

It is quite intriguing to note that a number of children that have been recovered by the Punjab police told that they themselves had left their own home out of their free will. The primary reason cited by them is the harsh, unfriendly and strict attitude of their parents which made them leave the safety of their own homes. This is a point that must not be ignored. Children in families have not been able to escape the violent environment that our society is entrapped in, as parents vent their own anger and frustrations at easy and soft victims like children. This is a psychological phenomenon known as “Anger Displacement” in Freudian psychology whereas this displaced aggression is directed away from the real and powerful target and towards a safer target, called a scapegoat. This provides a partial release of the pent up frustration. Moreover, there are certain economic forces involved at the family level that contribute to helping the criminal elements abducting children. A significant one is the way increasing materialistic culture in the media and society imparts desires for goods among young minds. As average incomes have been declining over the years hence parents from middle and lower middle classes have been unable to fulfil these persistently increasing desires in children. These desires are then exploited by criminal elements to their advantage by enticing children through promising or gifting money and goods, so it becomes easy to exploit or abduct children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The elaborated causes of child abductions are complex which cautions us against prescribing simplistic and linear solutions. This means doing multiple things at different levels simultaneously to ensure a coordinated response is more likely to succeed than a quick fix. At the State level there needs to be public disclosures of facts and figures pertaining to child abductions on a regular basis. Moreover, there needs to be oversight of whole police investigation of child abductions process by the judicial branch. The police force needs to mend its image through cooperation with people which may restore long lost people’s confidence in their guardians. Child Protection Bureau and other relevant agencies’ performance need to be monitored by the government through special Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) developed to reflect their performance. Punjab government’s initiative of a digital child abduction alert system maintaining data base of abducted children and disseminating information at multiple government tiers and departments is a welcome step in the right direction. At the societal level, committees need to be formed at the neighborhood level so as to create awareness and monitor activities in a specific area and report to police in case of suspicious activity or individuals. They can also rally political support for investments in children parks and playgrounds. From this, ground support can be built for redefining development and security paradigms at the local level with a paramount attention and focus on humans, particularly children. At the family level, the execution of family planning programmes need to be improved by involving local clerics to give it a sense of religious legitimacy. The practice has been already deployed in KP and Balochistan with success. A supporting narrative needs to be built shedding light on the importance of how having less children translates into their wellbeing and security. Media campaigns emphasising soft and gentle treatment of children in homes currently being run by Punjab Government are a very significant step in changing the way parents treat their children; sometimes in unforgiving and severe ways leading to unintended consequences. Finally, sensitising children to exploitation through material enticements is something where both families and schools need to build a partnership to alert children from befriending strangers and being exposed to abduction and exploitation.

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