Section Two – Introduction
Multiplicity and Fundamental Inequality of Childhoods in South Asia

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Abstract

To contextualise the contributions in this section, we present some data on growing up in South Asian societies. It is important to consider the fundamental diversity of conditions in which children and youth live. We suggest some theoretical terms that are helpful in this regard and preview the contributions against this background. The studies on which the contributions are based impressively document the striking inequality in this region.

Keywords: South Asia; childhood; multiple childhoods; unequal childhoods; normative pattern "good childhood"; generational order

More than one fourth of the world's children (under 18 years old) are living in South Asia, in the countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2023). To get to the point: this common regional affiliation does not tell us very much about their childhoods, which can be very different. Internationally, it is above all the often problematic conditions of growing up that are perceived. When reports about children and adolescents in South Asia reach the public beyond the narrow circle of childhood researchers, they usually do so as bad news. For example, the (still) high child mortality rate in South Asian countries or the high rate of child labour is mentioned (ILO, 2014, 2017; UNICEF South Asia, 2021). Reading reports and studies from these countries, one gets the impression that every crisis, every national and international conflict and every national peculiarity is directly reflected in the conditions of growing up: in groups of children with special

vulnerability. One might think here of the child soldiers in Sri Lanka (Gates & Reich, 2010), of illegal international adoptions in the wake of civil war and poverty in this country as well (Loibl, 2021), of children who grow up in the area of border conflicts between India and Pakistan (Malik, 2020), of so-called "street children" in India without families or with parents who themselves had been "street children" (Dutta, 2018), of the enormously high proportion of working children in very agricultural Nepal (ILO, 2014), of children in hazardous work in Bangladesh (Hoque, 2022), of the children of the Rohingiya refugees in Bangladesh (Hoque, 2021) – this list could go on for a long time.

However, it should not be overlooked that the South Asian region has achieved an economic take-off in the past decades (Devarajan, 2007). Compared to other poor regions of the world, considerable progress has been made in an astonishingly short time. The region has achieved "a dramatic shift over the past 5 decades from a region of mainly low-income economies towards one that is largely middle-income" (Estrada et al., 2017, p. v). With the exception of Afghanistan, none of the South Asian countries are still classified as low-income economies (World Bank, 2023). Child-focused policy programmes have been implemented and have been successful, improving some of the key indicators commonly used to characterise growing-up conditions. A new UNICEF report recognises the following achievements: "In the past quarter century, the number of children dying before their fifth birthday in South Asia has more than halved. Since 2000, the number of stunted children under 5 has fallen by over one third. In the past 25 years, the likelihood of a girl under 18 becoming a bride has dropped by a similar percentage. Secondary school enrolment has risen steadily, including for girls. And more than 90% of the population today has access to safe drinking water" (UNICEF South Asia, 2021, p. 6). However, the same report cautions that the consequences of the pandemic and renewed economic crises of recent years are not yet fully apparent. Furthermore, one common root of all these problems remains: social protection systems are still partly inadequate, although many projects and programmes are running (Chanaveer et al., 2019; Devarajan, 2017). This lack of social protection is then also a reason why events such as internal conflicts, environmental disasters and economic difficulties hit children and adolescents – or at least parts of them – hard, and why there are still vulnerable groups of children despite all of the achievements. However, it must be added that there are differences between the South Asian countries in this respect. Sri Lanka, for example, has a child mortality rate that is 10 times lower than that of Pakistan or Afghanistan (Index Mundi, n.d.). It can be assumed that medical care and the position of mothers play a role, possibly also the much lower proportion of children and young people in the total population.[1]

Although some serious problems affecting the situation of children have been somewhat mitigated by positive economic developments and socio-political and humanitarian efforts, this does not mean that there is less variation in the way that

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[1]38% of the population is less than 25 years old in Sri Lanka and 61% in Afghanistan (CIA, 2003).

children grow up in South Asia. The economic rise has also exacerbated the already considerable social inequality. For example, the economic conditions of the already better-off social classes have improved to a very different extent than those of the less affluent and the poor population during the years of the economic upswing (Devarajan, 2007). Inequality is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon in South Asia. A complex structure of caste, social class and ethnicity is rooted in not only the religious tradition but also the colonial past, in the sense of "divide and rule" (Ganguly, 2006; Riser-Kositsky, 2009; Simha, 2015); and all countries in South Asia, except Nepal, were under British colonial rule. Beyond the groups of particularly vulnerable children, of which we have given a far from exhaustive list above, this results in a further diversity of conditions for growing up. Riser-Kositsky (2009), for example, illustrates the complex structure of caste and class in Sri Lanka using the example of the different childhoods that the various groups establish, and describes these differences primarily in terms of the type of schooling that the children receive, whether the children are educated privately or publicly, in the language of the country or in English.

In the following, we will focus on India and Pakistan, whose children alone account for more than 85% of the children in South Asia. These are also the two countries from which the contributions in our volume originate. Especially as far as India is concerned, research and theoretical reflection on childhood has already progressed far beyond the alarming reports on groups of marginal children. Why such a research scene has developed in India, while for the other countries it has remained rather isolated studies and reports, cannot be clarified at this point.

With 55% of people under 25 years old in Pakistan and 43% in India (CIA, 2003), children and young people make up a huge group of the population in these two countries. However, they can only be called "a group" of the population to a limited extent, for the uniformity of this group is far less striking than the fundamental differences that can be found. This begins with the sheer variety of ethnicities, tribes and cultures in these countries. For example, in an overview chapter on growing up in India, Behera and Nath (2008) mention that people are speaking "1600 languages, grouped somewhat arbitrarily into 114 groups" (p. 190). They then discuss major quality differences of schools according to regions and the language of instruction (p. 193), a different valuation of girls and boys resulting in different percentages of school enrolment, different work and different recognition of the work between girls and boys (p. 195), just to mention some of the heterogeneity. One difference between girls and boys that has not been addressed as such in research so far results from the more frequent very early marriage of girls: almost a fifth of girls in Pakistan and more than a quarter in India are already married by the age of 18 – the figures are four to five times lower for boys (CIA, 2003). This means that the childhood of girls can also be a very short one, and we don't know what this time perspective alone means for girls. There are also large differences in social stratification, i.e. between poor and rich populations, castes and social classes, all of which are also reflected in the conditions of growing up (Barn, 2021). Gulrez and Hafeez (2008) conclude their overview on childhood in Pakistan with the statement of "the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer" (p. 342), with corresponding implications for childhood. In the three contributions, we will present in this section on these two

countries, the differences between the childhoods that they report about could hardly be greater. Recent years have not been conducive to narrowing the differences. Pakistan was among the countries with the longest school closures in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2022), and there were high differences in the learning level between the poorest and wealthiest quartiles, as well as gender gaps in favour of boys for both literacy and numeracy as well before (ASER Pakistan, 2019). Pakistan is also one of the countries hit particularly hard by climate change, and this has devastating effects for many children.

A Conceptual Inventory to Study Multiple Childhoods

One may question to what extent, with such differences, the subsumption of these realities of young and very young people under one term, "childhood," and the application of a uniform conceptual inventory to childhood – and this is the claim of a social scientific study of growing up – is still justified. After all, the scientific use of the term childhood and the theoretical concepts attached to it that have been gained *in* and *for* the study of childhood – Barrie Thorne (1987, p. 103) speaks of a "conceptual autonomy" of childhood studies – presupposes a certain uniformity of the phenomenon and must sensibly do so. However, if one goes back a bit in the still young history of childhood studies, then the idea of a uniform childhood was first sustainably undermined in the best-cited book of childhood studies ever: "Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood" of Allison James and Alan Prout (1990a). Based on historical and culture-comparative studies showing a variety of different ways and ideas of growing up, these social constructivist childhood researchers of the 1990s relativised the idea of a universal childhood, and certainly did well to do so, since – prior to the rise of childhood studies – this claim was based on the argument that biological laws of development would dictate one single and appropriate form of childhood (James & Prout, 1990b). But what should now take the place of this deconstructed uniformity if one wants to preserve the conceptual autonomy of childhood research? In any case, the concept of children as "independent social actors" (James & James, 2012, p. 3), which was offered and often used after this deconstruction of uniformity, does not lend itself to studies in countries of the Majority World. These countries must be understood in their strong intergenerational relations, as we have also underlined in the introduction to Central Asia and Caucasus countries (Kim & Bühler-Niederberger, in this volume).

A social structural approach to childhood research offers the notion of a *structural* commonality that characterises children as a group. Qvortrup (2009), for example, bases his claim to a conceptualisation of children and childhood as a social phenomenon on the fact that they all inhabit the "segment childhood" and thus occupy a particular position in the generational structure (2009, p. 24). This, he argues, is a segment that is always distinct from the segment of adulthood and old age. Qvortrup admits that this "structural form" (p. 25) of childhood varies because it is influenced by political, social, economic, cultural and technological parameters. He illustrates this variation in time and uses the example of France in 1920, 1940, 1960 etc. However, it is unclear to what extent he is informed about this, but he chooses a country where centuries of efforts to standardise this early

phase of life preceded the period that he uses for his argumentation – on the part of the Church, the State, moralists and gradually emerging experts (Ariès, 1962; Donzelot, 1979; Snyder, 1965). The goal of these efforts was a disciplined population. These efforts were, therefore, not motivated by the attempt to give children a happy childhood, nor by the attempt to give *all* children an *equally happy* one. This interest was not even there for the children of their own country. This is an important point when talking about the "uniform" childhood, which was in any case based on a government claim and corresponding efforts, which involved a lot of coercion – we will take this up again later on.

For the countries we are talking about in this section, the argumentation of a structural commonality is only partly convincing, since, for example, the variation between childhoods that take place at one and the same time is already much larger than the one Qvortrup refers to in his example. The heterogeneity mentioned here at the beginning of the text should have made this recognisable. But how are we to approach this first phase of life scientifically if this notion of a structural commonality of childhood – across times and societies – also breaks away? The explosive nature of the question of whether childhood is a phenomenon for which a uniform interpretative framework should be chosen also arises from the fact that it is not only a question of scientific analysis. It is equally a question of normative settings, which gains in explosiveness around the issue of children's rights as a governmental claim that has worldwide validity (Barn, 2021). The answers in both areas are in principle given independently, once on an analytical basis and once on a normative basis. However, childhood studies have understood their concepts, especially their concept of a strongly individualistically conceived agency, as not only analytical but also advocatory (Mayall, 2000).

Sarada Balagopalan has become visible in a debate about uniform versus "multiple" childhoods as a representative of a standpoint from which borrowings from a common conceptual inventory are rejected. In a study of Indian children involved in the informal labour market, she sets herself very clearly apart from the notion of a uniform childhood (Balagopalan, 2014). These children do not inhabit a somehow (globally or even regionally) uniformly shaped segment of society; rather, her study shows how principally different the reality of daily life is for these children and what other notions of childhood apply. This is measured against the contemporary notion and reality of Western childhood but also, for example, Indian middle-class childhood (Barn et al., 2022). From this, she also derives a reproach to childhood research: a Western bias is inherent in its theoretical conceptual vocabulary and thus this vocabulary remains inappropriate because it is gained from a fundamentally differently structured phase of life. She recognises in this conceptual approach, in postcolonial critique, a cultural paternalism (Balagopalan, 2019).

Therefore, it requires argumentation if we approach the situation of young people in South Asia, despite this heterogeneity, with the notion of childhood, which thus implicates a certain uniformity and a distinction from the programmes of other age groups. And the follow-up question arises: which further theoretical concepts are suitable for the analysis of a reality of growing up, which is

characterised by such heterogeneity? There are three concepts in particular that we would like to propose, and with some reflections on what these three concepts can contribute to approaching childhoods in South Asia, we also justify why – despite the multiplicity of the first phase of life – it makes sense to analyse them as childhoods, hence with a certain conceptual autonomy. The three concepts are able – despite or even because of the multiplicity of situations and conditions of growing up – to span an overarching theoretical grid.

It is, first, the concept of a *generational order* (Alanen, 2009), of relations between age groups, in the sense of the structured and continuing reciprocal attribution of scopes of action, valuations, obligations and rights. The concept guides the whole volume and will not be elaborated here, as we did that in the introduction to the whole volume and we will only recall that we start from the in-principle diversity of these intergenerational relations (cf. Cole & Durham, 2007). As Alanen states, we have to leave it "to empirical study to find out what actually is the constitutive principle in the social ordering, an organizing, of adult-child relation in each (e.g. national) case and in different social fields" (2009, p. 167). One of these constitutive principles – as all our contributions in this section show – is that South Asian childhoods are very much involved in *inter-generational commitments* that will last a lifetime and in which the younger generation in particular will have to assume responsibilities.

Second, it is the concept of a *normative pattern of good childhood* (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021, p. 57; Donzelot, 1979). This is a substantive idea of how childhood should be, namely the idea of children embedded into and pro-tected by families that are coming up to their public duty of contributing to an industrious population. These families have to conceive of their children as "economically useless and emotionally priceless" (Zelizer, 1985, p. x). The idea of this childhood is not mere ideal, as there is always a claim of the enforcement of such a childhood, which comes along with some pressure and manifold ways to exert this pressure. In this way, the normative pattern of the "good childhood" has the double content of a moral devaluation of the cultures and social classes that do not practice it and the promised (future) valorisation through the con-version to the "right" education of their children. The real growing up in the countries which are under discussion here corresponds to this pattern partly more, partly less and partly not at all. Just from this, paradoxically, the pattern gets its relevance – in the measuring of the distance and proximity to it which happens constantly – by the participants themselves, by the policy but also not least by many researchers who regard the deviation depending upon their point of view as deficit or as cultural inherent value and necessity or as both (see, for example, the various chapters in Behera, 2007, and Maithreyi et al., 2022). Whether the pattern is rejected or adopted, it dominates scholarly debates on childhoods in these countries and the childhood programmes of international and national organi-sations, where they are launched. Therefore, it is useful to describe what pressures it exerts on which populations and growing up in them, through what processes and with what results. In India, interesting studies have emerged on how – in the publicly organised attempt to approximate the normative pattern of good child-hood – poorly equipped and corrupt institutions can also significantly reduce the

quality of growing up, especially for marginal groups and tribal students (Behera, 2009), how relevant knowledge stocks other than those imparted at school may be lost in formal education (Behera, 2017) as well as how children and adults may consider education as a risky investment as they face severe obstacles when transforming education into a decent livelihood (Froerer, 2015). It is urgent to study these dynamics in more detail. The changing nature of the multifaceted reality of growing up could thus be better captured (cf. Graner, 2020). Insights should be gained into how these processes can be better governed, more appropriately governed for these children living in colonial legacies and nevertheless and because of that in very different concrete life situations (Balagopalan, 2011).

As long as very different ways of growing up take place in different and largely socially and regionally isolated groups, we may speak of a *multiplicity* of ways of growing up. However, multiplicity becomes *inequality* as well if the offspring of groups with different modes of raising their children aspire to the same positions in the society, as different childhoods implicate different chances to get access to good positions: based on acquired skills, manners and "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977) as well as certificates. This content of childhood becomes more important with the growing middle class in South Asia and thus the growing segment of the labour market, whose positions are also awarded through a (tough) competition in the educational sector. Inequality, then, is the third concept we would like to propose for analysing childhood in South Asia. It would be an illusion to believe that this inequality and injustice could be decisively reduced by aligning childhoods with the normative pattern of "good childhood." For it is precisely childhood, oriented around this ideal of the economically useless and emotionally unaffordable child, that is fundamentally unequal. This childhood prevails in social classes and strata – via corresponding parenting patterns – that distinguish themselves from other social strata. Offering one's offspring a "good childhood" allows distinction per se (Barn et al., 2022), but it allows distinction also in the future via the hoped-for head start for the children in the competitive education system and later on the labour market. "Good childhood" consists essentially of the investment of financial, cultural and social capital in the child (Bourdieu, 1986), and this investment can be constantly increased, in principle almost indefinitely, as evidenced by today's development in the upwardly mobile middle class worldwide (Barn et al., 2022; Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

Contextualising the Contributions in This Section

This basic inequality of a "good childhood" is not only a problem of social justice but also produces, especially under precarious economic conditions, childhoods that are strongly committed to social advancement or at least to status preservation. This is shown by the contribution of *Adrienne Atterberry*. Adrienne impressively shows that Indian parents do not simply copy the childhoods of Western countries when they prepare their children for demanding careers. It is precisely in this group of parents that had been successful in a profession in the United States and where the financial and social resources are available to plan

childhoods in a maximally thoughtful way that parents move back to India. In order to optimally prepare their children for the future in a globalised world, they are not relying on an education according to the American model and in this environment. The parents want to achieve something that Western pedagogy would consider incompatible to some extent; Adrienne speaks of "high achieving, hardworking and empathetic children." To that end, the parents are developing careful plans. And they very openly confided in Adrienne their deliberations, implementation of plans and successes and disappointments in implementation. Their stories show that – once back in India – they rely on various means to achieve their goals. One of these is private schools, where it is known that their students subsequently go on to prestigious colleges at home and abroad. But they also rely on contacts with members of the extended family, which the parents assume are important in fostering not only their children's aspirations but also their social ties. Contacts with the grandparent generation then also play an important role. Finally, they rely on a third means that may be particularly surprising: parents also value exposing their children to the lives of those from less affluent backgrounds, whether it is domestic staff whose daily concerns the children learn about or whether it is through volunteer activities in which the children participate. We don't yet know whether this careful and complex planning by the parents will bear the desired fruit in the end. And, of course, the pressure for success and the threat that exposure to the lives of poor people also poses are unmistakable. But what we see very clearly is that this is a very particular pattern of education, against the background of the economic conditions of the country and the ideals of social relations and embedding that apply to these parents. In contrast, there is little evidence of democratic parenting as propagated in the advice books of Western middle classes (Cleverly & Phillips, 1986); the parents clearly set the plan, and the children in the studied group were by no means only enthusiastic about returning to India.

Therefore, while aspects of the normative pattern of "good childhood" have found expression in this upbringing by parents of an internationally mobile elite group, it is clearly not a mere adaptation of a Western childhood pattern, despite, or perhaps because of, the resources available in this group. And such specific adaptations of the idea of a "good childhood" we also recognise in the contributions of *Ravneet Kaur*. The urban middle-class groups in which Ravneet conducted her ethnographic research have significantly fewer resources to prepare their children to compete in the education sector and the job market. But even here, parents clearly place their children's upbringing under this demand. They send the children to moderate fee-paying private schools. Long bus rides to school take up children's time. After school, the children attend additional tuition and hobby classes – many designed to boost academic performance as well. For these children, the extended family also plays an important role: it is the household context in which one grows up. Childhoods in the rural area differ very markedly, if one disregards embeddedness in extended or joint families, which is also the rule here. While urban children are only minimally involved in household chores, and are considered – as Ravneet writes – "too young" for that, these rural children are heavily involved in the household's activities once they have finished school.

Children in urban and rural contexts are being prepared for completely different social futures, and the circles do not seem to overlap. However, if one considers the rapid urbanisation in India (World Bank, 2011), the children from the rural context could nevertheless push into an urban labour market in the future, where they would then – we can assume – probably have significantly worse chances. So, from that point of view, we have to talk about unequal childhoods, and that's probably also true when you look at the access to social resources like health care, education and especially higher education that they have while they're growing up. Ravneet highlights that in both contexts, parents play with children and make an effort to take good care of them. Occasionally, her descriptions of rural childhood evoke the idea of an idyll, such as when we imagine rural children in extended families, when the older ones help the smaller ones with their home-work, while the mothers – themselves mostly still illiterate – do their chores, take care of the animals and keep an eye on the children. As with growing up in the middle classes of the city, however, clear hierarchies apply by generation and gender. In both contexts, children are clearly expected to keep a low profile with adults and to stay out of serious discussions. Corporal punishment is also mentioned for rural childhood. Different goals apply to girls than to boys: respectable marriage and not a successful future career. Also, mothers play a very different role in education than fathers.

On the other hand, the childhood of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan, presented by *Asma Khalid*, takes place far away from a globally propagated normative pattern of childhood. Using an ethnographic approach, Asma gained access to a group of children who fled Afghanistan with their parents and now work in the markets and streets of the cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Having gained the trust of these boys, Asma could observe them at work but also visit them at home and talk to the family. These boys confidently perceive themselves as supporting their families. They can only count on their family and the wider network of relatives and other refugees. In this network, a strict code of honour applies, called *"Pakhtoonwali,"* and it also regulates generational and gender relations in a strictly hierarchical way. Young people – although important for the family's livelihood – have no voice in it. This is doubly true for girls, who are confined to the home and thus do not speak the language of the country of immigration. The boys fit into this hierarchy, even if not unconditionally. They also have dreams for their future; after all, they argue, there are also rich Afghans in the country. However, they are largely without rights in the immigration country. And they also realise that under the conditions in which they grow up, they acquire little in the way of knowledge and skills that could help them out of their position on the margins of society, and – some argue – they also experience little respect in this society. So they know about how the childhood experience can disadvantage. This is an important contribution to childhood research in Pakistan, which is rudimentary. Asma points out the few studies that have been conducted. Childhood research has not taken much of a foothold in Pakistan. Recently, the child well-being of children in Pakistan has also been recorded, but only on school children (Haider & Zaman, 2021) and so the results obtained require some relativisation, because Pakistan is the country with the world's

second highest percentage of children who do not attend school (ASER, 2019; Shabbir & Jalal, 2021). For a group that is not even registered by the authorities, like these boys who fled Afghanistan with their families, to have a voice, only ethnographic research like Asma's can help.

The difference between the upbringing of Afghan refugee children and the organised and planned childhood that Adrienne shows for the children of a successful middle class could hardly be greater. By showing the principled variety of childhoods, on this side and beyond the normative notions imposed by the West, research on childhoods in South Asia can contribute decisively to childhood studies. It can also show how childhood can be used as a "framework for the analysis of broader political, social, economic and cultural dynamics," as Bowen and Hinchy suggest (2015, p. 317). Insights into multiple pathways of modernisation (Eisenstadt, 2002) become possible, as well as insights into the dislocations, and disadvantages, that can occur in these processes, especially with a vulnerable and, what is more, extremely heterogeneous group such as children.

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