

At home

Governments must protect the interests of children orphaned by COVID-19

Disasters may bring out the innate generosity of people, but sometimes even well-intentioned initiatives may go wrong. Many believe that children orphaned by calamities are free for adoption and that growing with well-off adoptive parents will give them a shot at a better life than they can get from impoverished surviving relatives. However, adoption can be an option only when the children's safety and welfare can be ensured. **By ordering that no adoption of children orphaned since last year should be permitted contrary to the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, the Supreme Court has made one more benign intervention to mitigate the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.** It had earlier passed various orders on the economic and health aspects of the pandemic, including those aimed at the protection of migrant workers, prisoners and jail staff and the people at large. **When its attention was drawn to advertisements and messages inviting people to adopt children who have lost one or both parents to COVID-19, the court warned that no such adoption could be permitted without the involvement of the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA).** It is important that the order is adhered to, as past experience shows that the danger of children falling victim to traffickers under the guise of adoption is ever-present. Even when they reach the hands of genuine adoptive parents, there is a possibility that they will be uprooted out of their social and cultural milieu through inter-country adoptions without the option of growing up with a relative or adoptive parents closer home being explored.

Many may recall that following the December 2004 tsunami, there were ill-advised campaigns calling upon the people to adopt children rendered orphans in several Asian countries. It took a while for some affected countries to wake up to the reality **that lax enforcement of adoption rules may have led to child trafficking in some cases.** In the present situation, it appears that the Union government and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights are quite alive to the problem. **The NCPCR is collecting details of children affected by the pandemic from all State governments and the administration of Union Territories.** It has drawn the Supreme Court's attention to public announcements by some unscrupulous agencies inviting interested people to adopt the children and also disclosing the children's identities. The court's order asking all authorities to prevent illegal adoptions and fund-collection in the names of the affected children came in response to this. The court has also passed orders for the continuance of the children's education and other steps to coordinate the implementation of schemes in their favour. **These orders are a necessary reminder to the authorities that they have a special responsibility to protect the interests and welfare of children in times like this.**