

**BOSCO Bengaluru**

THE CRIES OF CHANGELINGS

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THE CRIES OF CHANGELINGS

Rather than starting the essay by explaining the myth of changelings, it feels more appropriate to give you, the reader, an insight into two encounters I had with children at care homes in two different parts of the same country. I asked these children what they do when they have a sad day. The responses opened doors for questions manifold.

*“Akka, last day I was a bit sad since I got only 2 marks out of 15 for English test. I tried very hard all day before exam, but I got wrong. I came home and showed Amma ( house mother) my marks and she said no worry. I talk to Amma when I am sad. Amma told to go play wth Anna’s and in evening, Akka teached me English. Next time I will get star Akka!!”*

*“I go to the rock behind the well and I cry for a while. Teacher ma’am will get angry if she hears we make noise at night. So if I want to cry at night, I bite my bedsheet and cry. I don’t want the sir to stop giving us biriyani every Thursday. Only happy video will make him happy (the sponsors who donate food to care homes will ask for the videos of children enjoying their meal).”*

The emotion built behind the voices of these children, both 7 years of age, holds the history of the trauma they carry in their minds. The first child is brought up in a unique care home facility, where the child is assigned to a hut, with a mother and siblings to grow together with. Along with making sure the child’s primary needs are being taken care of, the care home ensures the holistic development of the child by ensuring proper regulation of the child’s emotions and growth milestones. The child is given the space to be vulnerable and given a chance to develop under normal and healthy conditions.

The second child had taught himself defense mechanisms against his feelings. Unfortunately, he had learned that for his primary needs to be met, he had to compromise his genuine feelings and

felt threatened when he had to express them. This emotional restraint became a shield to avoid conflict or punishment and to ensure that his weekly treat like biriyani didn’t get disrupted. Over time, this constant suppression of feelings might make him unable to process his feelings in a healthy manner, which could leave him vulnerable to long-term psychological struggles. The contrast between the two children illustrates how the quality of care can shape not just a child’s immediate well-being but also their lifelong emotional resilience and self-worth.

When it comes to the topic of child welfare, the rights of children in alternate care is a much- overlooked topic, as we tend to think our role in child welfare ends once the child’s primary and secondary needs are met. The major reasons why a child might be displaced from their biological homes could range from domestic abuse, neglect, and poverty to adverse family situations and natural calamities and loss of the family in the said calamities. Children as we know are delicate beings who are a blank slate that absorbs every inch of perceived information and soaks it into their personality. While dealing with children, who are especially displaced from their natural setting, one of the most important aspects of welfare, is ensuring their holistic rehabilitation.

Speaking of displaced children, it brings it home the reason I chose the title “The Cries of Changelings”. A Changeling is a mythical creature from the European folklore. It is believed that when a mother births her child in vain, sometimes the fairies interfere and replace her human baby with a Changeling. Over the centuries, Changelings has been used as a metaphor for the uncertainties and fear surrounding the care and well-being of vulnerable children.

I believe that these creatures are much like children in alternative care settings, as they too are uprooted from their natural homes and placed in unfamiliar environments, often leaving behind the comfort of their familial identities.

In positive care settings, the myth finds its resolution. In a positive care setting, the “changeling” finds love, safety, and nurturing. The child, once struggling to belong, grows confident as they are cherished for who they are. This care serves as a warm hearth, where fears dissolve and identity is reclaimed, allowing the child to thrive.

In a negative setting, however, the child remains like the changeling in sorrowful tales— misunderstood, neglected, and unheard. They may suppress their feelings and lose their sense of self, yearning for love and acceptance that remain distant. The changeling myth mirrors the experience of children in care. It highlights how love and empathy can transform lives, while neglect deepens the pain of being “other.” It reminds us that every child needs belonging and care to heal, grow, and rediscover themselves.

Children's rights, as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are a landmark document that forms global standards for the protection and well-being of children. Among its provisions, Article 20 specifically addresses children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment. Under this article, states have to ensure appropriate alternative care arrangements, which may take the form of foster care, adoption, or a suitable institution. Article 3 should be followed by the best interests of the

child to be a primary consideration in every action towards children

including any care arrangement.(“The Rights of Children in Alternative Care,” n.d.)

Children in alternative care situations have rights. Some of these rights include, but not limited to, are:

Right to Safety and Protection: The child must be protected against abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Right to Development: This refers to having access to education, healthcare, emotional support, among other personal growth opportunities.

Right to Participation: To be heard on matters that affect their lives.

Right to Identity: Preserving cultural, linguistic, and familial ties whenever possible.

Despite these extensive rights, for many children in alternative care, the reality often lags behind, as demonstrated earlier by two contrasting examples of care homes. Nationally, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, serves as the cornerstone for child welfare, focusing on children in need of care and protection. This legislation emphasizes the best interests of the child and provides for foster care, adoption, and institutional care as alternative care options. There are many challenges when it comes to rights of children at alternate care settings. (*Tracing the Evolution of Alternative Care for Children in India in the Last Decade and the Way Forward - Maninder Kaur, Nilima Mehta, Subhadeep Adhikary, Anamika Viswanath, 2023*, n.d.)

Lack of Emotional Support

In most care institutions in India, the focus remains on the children's basic needs, such as food, shelter, and education. Emotional and psychological support is sometimes left behind.

Overstretched caregivers, with numerous children to care for, cannot give each child individualized attention. This leads to emotional neglect, causing children to feel isolated and disconnected. For example, during a research study conducted in a residential care home in Tamil Nadu, many of the children complained of loneliness as there was no one whom they could confide in and share their problems. In such a scenario, without emotional support, these children are on the verge of long-term mental health problems.

Too Much Dependence on Institutional Care

Despite global evidence in favor of family-based care models, India remains too much dependent on institutional care. Large residential care facilities, though they can deliver the most basic needs to children, are far removed from a family's warmth. This results in developmental lags and attachment disorders among kids. For instance, social skills and emotional resilience were found to be less present in children who are put up in government-run orphanages than those who experience foster care or family-like settings. The challenge is further extended by a lack of

effort in integrating these children into society or exploring alternative models of foster care or community-based care.

Lack of Adequate Training for Caregivers

Alternative care providers, those with a significant role in reshaping the lives of these children, remain inadequate because most in India have a lack of proper training about trauma-informed care, child psychology, and the rights of children. This often results in inappropriate disciplinary practices or an inability to recognize and address the emotional needs of children. For example, in some facilities, caregivers use punitive measures such as scolding or physical punishment, which can exacerbate a child's trauma. Moreover, there are few structured programs to equip caregivers with the skills needed to nurture and support children effectively, leaving significant gaps in the quality of care.

Resource Constraints

Resource constraints have been an ongoing challenge in alternative care settings, especially in rural India. Many care homes are not adequately supported in terms of finances, which has an impact on the quality of services they can provide. For instance, in some tribal areas of Odisha, care homes have been reporting problems with nutritious meals, regular health check-ups, and educational resources for children. Such an environment has very minimal, if any, recreation facilities as the costs to implement and sustain them may not be within the range for many, leaving the child out of other developmental skills altogether. Such children do not have an opportunity to express their imagination or have avenues of growth.

Social Apartheid

Alternative care in India is socially marginalized and ostracized from the community. Children labeled orphaned or abandoned are rejected, stereotyped, and stigmatized. This stigma is especially pronounced when children attend schools or social gatherings, where peers may treat them differently. For example, in urban slum areas of Mumbai, children from care homes have reported being teased or ostracized by classmates. Such experiences can erode their self-esteem and sense of belonging, making it harder for them to integrate into mainstream society.(*Children in Alternative Care | UNICEF*, n.d.)

Lack of Monitoring and Oversight

The alternative care regulation system in India tends to be weak, along with insufficient monitoring mechanisms which, at times, help incidents of neglect, abuse, or exploitation go unnoticed. It is observed that some states have reports of children getting physical and sexual abuse due to a lack of appropriate supervision within the care home itself, such as instances found in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. These serious lapses in monitoring need regular audits, transparent grievance mechanisms, and stricter accountability measures.

To enhance the quality care of children, especially in alternative settings in an Indian context, is to further the quality of overall well-being and development of the child. The best practice for this is holistic, and child-centered, and includes the areas of emotional support, social, and cultural support.

A critical part of quality care is also supporting family-based models such as foster care and adoption. This model is actively supported by the Ministry of Women and Child Development through policies like CARA, under which the central adoption authority will facilitate adoption and the use of alternatives to institutional care. There are also small group homes that function on the "house parent" model and are successful in creating even more intimate, nurturing environments with personal attention and care for a child, fostering a feeling of belonging and stability in life. For example, SOS Village Bangalore, an NGO committed to child welfare, has

adopted family-based care models that enable children to grow up in emotionally supportive, stable, and family-like environments. They create a home-like environment, where there is a house mother who takes care of a group of nine kids and ensures to give them the most homelike environment to grow up in. (*Alternative Care - Children’s Rights*, n.d.)

Another best practice is implementing trauma-informed care. Many children who enter care in India have been exposed to considerable trauma, which can express itself through emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems. Training caregivers in trauma-informed approaches enables them to create a safer and supportive environment that is sensitive and responsive to the emotional scars with which children are carrying. Hence, by making sure the caregivers understand patience, empathy, and the creation of security, children get a chance to heal and grow in a support setting.

Another way to make children have a sense of agency and respect for their rights is by empowering them to make decisions about their care, education, and future. Bal Panchayats, which are children's councils, provide platforms for children to be heard, give suggestions, and be part of decisions that are made about them. This approach builds self-esteem, responsibility, and ensures that children are not just passive recipients of care but active participants in their lives. For instance, BOSCO Bangalore empowers children to take decisions regarding their education and care, and this way, they get an opportunity to voice their needs and concerns.

Maintaining the cultural and family connections is an important aspect of their emotional and psychological development. Alternative care settings should work to maintain children's cultural identities, provide for frequent contact with biological families when it is safe to do so, and keep children in touch with their roots. For example, children from tribal communities, who often face additional challenges in care settings, should be provided with opportunities to engage with their traditions, languages, and practices.

Caregiver training is crucial in ensuring that those entrusted with children's care are well- equipped to meet the needs of children. Training on child development, rights-based approaches, and conflict resolution helps a caregiver be more compassionate, informative, and effective in delivering care. In the case of BOSCO Bangalore, regular training in such areas enables staff to better respond to the individual needs and challenges of children with sensitivity and understanding.

Finally, holistic development must be provided to children before they are ready to go out and live independently, which means access to education, extracurricular activities, mental health services, and vocational training. BOSCO Bangalore provides shelter but also equips children with education, therapy, and skill-building that helps them gain self-confidence and skills to be able to lead their lives. One memorable example is that of a young boy who, after undergoing vocational training in carpentry, found a sense of purpose and self-worth. His journey from uncertainty to independence illustrates the importance of comprehensive care that goes beyond meeting basic needs.

In a nutshell, the cries of changelings are not just the echoes of mythical creatures from folklore, but the cries of children who have been displaced from their natural homes and thrust into unfamiliar worlds. Like changelings, these children yearn for love, belonging, and security— basic human needs that are often neglected in the institutional care systems meant to nurture them. While the myth of the changeling finds its resolution in a nurturing, safe environment, the reality for many children in alternative care is far from ideal. Their cries go unheard, their emotional needs suppressed, and their sense of self undermined by the very systems meant to protect them. However, this story does not have to end in despair. By prioritizing holistic care, fostering family-based models, training caregivers, and empowering children to participate in their own futures, we can transform the lives of these changelings into stories of hope, resilience, and triumph. It is time to listen to their cries—not with pity, but with a resolve to build a future in which every child, irrespective of their background, grows, heals, and thrives in the warmth of

love and care. The changelings are not lost; they are waiting for us to guide them back to themselves.

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