

After Care for Aging out Inmates from Care Homes : Odisha Experiment and Experience

Prof. Navaneeta Rath

Aftercare for the aging out young adults of care institutions is a recent policy pronouncement in India. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act 2000 amended in 2006 reflects the need of aftercare to ensure a smooth transition of children from institutional care to independent life. Children's Rights ⁽¹⁾ sees children who age out from care homes without family or any other dependable adults to rely on for assistance are at high risk of homelessness, joblessness, illness, incarceration, welfare dependency, early child bearing and sexual and physical victimization. The number of such children is on steady rise. The multiple challenges faced by them derail their successful transition to adulthood. All these demand concerted efforts to provide support and services to the young adults to overcome the extremely difficult circumstances faced by them. So, the UN initiated attempts to emancipate, enable and empower the care leaving young adults to lead a descent and dignified life with identity and independence through after care supports.

Thus, aftercare is the provision of care for all children with special needs after they have reached the age of 18 years and are discharged from Children's Homes/Special Homes ⁽²⁾. It is a preparatory stage where young adults are trained and infused with skill, competence and confidence to sustain them during the transition from

institutional to independent life. It basically aims at enabling young adults to adapt themselves to the larger society and win themselves away from institutional care. Aftercare is an important final stage in the continuum of care as it ensures smooth rehabilitation and reintegration of a child in need of care and protection/conflict with law as he/she steps into adulthood.

The Aftercare organization shall provide certain essential services for the child under the guidelines. These services include housing facility, professional and emotional counselling, health care services, vocational training, assistance for opening bank accounts, getting identification such as 'Aadhar' number, ration cards, voting cards, life skill education etc.

In the state of Odisha, after care is just launched on a pilot basis by the Task Force and is at its infancy. Keeping this development in view, the present study was launched to take note of the perception of the children leaving institutional care home and getting admitted in the aftercare centres, the progress of aftercare venture and prospects of aftercare services.

Objectives of the Study: The study was fashioned by the following objectives:

- To make a short documentation of the available literature on "aftercare" services for children leaving institutional care.

- To make an assessment of the process in which aftercare pilot programme has been initiated and operated.
- To evaluate the impact of aftercare campaign and practice on children transiting from care homes.
- To trace out the perception of various role players involved in the process at different levels.
- To make a gap analysis between the promises and actual performances of aftercare undertaken by Task Force.
- To solicit recommendations that can make after care programme an enabling and empowering programme for the destitute children leaving institutional care and contribute towards their independent living and better mainstreaming in the society.

Scope of the Study:

The intellectual scope of the present study aimed at identifying the needs of aftercare for children moving to become young adults, institutionalizing good practices, innovating various mechanisms and ideas for better policy formulation on after care services. The geographical scope of the study was confined to Utkal Balashram, Berhampur from where six girls taken on experimental basis for after care services.

Methods and samples of the study:

The study has adopted both exploratory and explanatory research design and resorted to qualitative methods of data collection relying on close personal interaction, in depth interviews, observations and focus group discussion methods. The study covered three groups of functionaries involved in aftercare process like the Counsellor appointed by the Task Force, Member, CWC, Superintendent of Care Institution and the beneficiaries i.e. Children under aftercare.

STUDY OUTCOMES:

One of the major objectives of the study was to make an overview of the researches conducted on “aftercare” to pick up some good practices, to gain knowledge about policies and to detect the common challenges faced by aftercare programme. In this context, the survey noted that:

- Aftercare services are available in European countries and United States of America since three decades, but it is a new experiment in India as the policy came at the end of the 20th century and as such the aftercare policy in India is just a decade old and the practice is just in the initial stage.
- Studies on aftercare services in India are scanty and research studies on aftercare services in the State of Odisha is yet to be taken up.

The study noted that aftercare venture is a very recent one in the State of Odisha launched by the Task Force. On a pilot basis, 6 girls from Utkal Balashram are earmarked for aftercare services and are placed in painting trade at Government ITI, Berhampur. A total financial deposit of Rs.56,000/- has been made by Task Force. The Task Force took the initiative in launching a sensitization drive for Balashram members and CWC members about aftercare. Identifying children, preparing their care plans, counselling them, identifying the area of their specialization, the institution to be involved in aftercare process, producing children before the CWC were some of the tasks undertaken by the Task Force authorities before they placed the children under aftercare. However, the responsibilities of the Task Force did not end with this. After putting the children under aftercare, the Task Force is making a serious effort to mobilize Government support for regular sponsorship, stipend, monitoring the programme, mentoring the

children and is trying to respond to their immediate needs and challenges. No doubt, the role and responsibilities of the Task Force is tremendous and the sincere devotion of the members to bring it a success is praiseworthy.

Among the individual role players, the Counsellor appointed by the Task Force to counsel the children under aftercare, a member of the CWC and the Superintendent of Utkal Balashram were interviewed. The Counsellor, Ms. Ranjita has a keen association with the girls who are put into aftercare. She feels from preparatory to transit period, from care institution to aftercare placement and till continuation in aftercare services, the role of the counsellor is tremendous. Providing a moral boost, identifying potentials, mentoring the teenagers, satiating their inquisitiveness, solving their problems, fulfilling their needs and desires call forth a highly professional counsellor's regular intervention. Creating a strong conviction to achieve the goals among the children who are leaving institutional care, creating confidence among them and encouraging them to aim at competence building are the regular responsibilities of the counsellor. The study noted, the counsellor's role, attitude, participation with the young adults and perception have really given a good shape to the programme and the progress of the programme can be attributed to the sincere devotion and careful discharging of responsibilities by Task Force personnel and its Counsellor.

The study noted that CWC which has to play a significant role in the aftercare venture is to be regularly sensitized and its observations are to be taken note of, to shape the aftercare policies and programmes. CWCs are to be vitalized with information and authority to play a more proactive role for the progress of aftercare programme. The aftercare programme should also demand the

CWC members to float their innovations which may be significant resource for programme designing. The role of the CWC can be elaborated and extended under aftercare statutory documents. But, till the date the knowledge, role of the CWC is very limited on after care and the attitude for after care services is not well strengthened.

The Superintendent of Utkal Balashram was found to be over optimistic about the aftercare pilot programme. To her it was a long cherished dream of her as a care giver which came true with the pilot programme launched by Task Force. She clearly reported that the aftercare programme has brought attitudinal changes, confidence, leadership qualities among the children and a strong desire and determination to become self standing in life.

The girls reported that care homes failed to generate self-sufficiency in them and equip them for an independent living. When they were progressing in age, complacency, diffidence were clouding their thoughts. They were locating their deficiencies and were sure they would be pushed into perils once they would leave the care homes.

Assessing the impact of the aftercare programme on the children was one of the important objectives of the present study. In this context, the study noted that all the six girls under aftercare unanimously expressed their over enthusiasm to be a part of the programme. To them the programme has brought much optimism among them and their induction to painting trade is a God sent blessing to enable them to lead an independent and self sufficient life. They report skill development programme through aftercare was a need for their rehabilitation, identity formation and was a timely intervention.

STORY: 1**Changing Roles, Adopting New Responsibilities and Asserting Rights due to Aftercare Initiatives:**

[Roopa Sahoo, a stakeholder of the aftercare services reports - she finds herself in a completely new role which has compelled her to take up new responsibilities and asserting her rights. After leaving the care home, with no immediate guardian for them to guide and govern, she has been selected as the children's representative. In this new role, she finds herself with new responsibilities to look after her friends, to report their needs and necessities to their counsellor and Balashram caretakers and to sort out the problems cropping up for the girls under aftercare on an immediate basis. She becomes the via media between the Task Force personnel and the children, between the ITI teachers, hostel superintendents and the children. She tries to assert their rights by voicing their disgusts and claiming solutions to them which was never found with her before. So, she feels after care has brought her new role, responsibilities and rights which are needs to lead an independent life.]

The girls under aftercare reported that there is a lot of transformation in them. In these few days' confidence, competence, consistency have developed among them. They find themselves conscious about their career plan, assertive about their rights and vocal about their needs. Today they are desiring high and dreaming big because of aftercare venture. No longer they feel timid, excluded. The stakeholders of aftercare clearly told no longer they feel they are deficient but they feel they will soon be self sufficient, no longer will they be dependent but they will be independent, no longer will they be passive recipients of charity or assistance, soon they will

be active contributors to their community and society.

STORY : 2**Disabling to Enabling Environment: Optimism Substitutes Permission**

[Yamuna reports that they had never imagined that to their utter good luck they will be placed under aftercare which was never a previous practice. When they were about to leave the care home without any certainty and they knew their social disabilities without family, kin support they were immersed with pessimism. "Aftercare" promises and the subsequent initiation of practices brought them a new ray of hope. Now in the after care service, they realize their future is promising and think and have confidence that "Hum honge kamiyaab ek din".]

Thus, the study recorded aftercare is a vital need for a young adult leaving institutional care to rehabilitate and reintegrate her with the society. Task Force endeavour is a commendable step but it needs further strengthening and sustainability.

In its attempt to make gap analysis between the promises and performances of aftercare, the study made the following salient observations:

- Till now no mapping of destitute children leaving care institutions have been made. So, an adequate data base for aftercare programme is missing in the state. It is only estimated by the Department of WCD that there are about 380 registered and unregistered CCIs operating in the state, but the exact figure about children in need of aftercare is yet to be estimated.
- Provisions for financial assistance have not come into operation. The provisions are yet

to be implemented and stabilize to ensure continuity to the programme.

- Till now organizations have not been identified to carry forward the aftercare programme.
- Aftercare programme under the pilot project is confined to vocational training. Uniform training is given to all children irrespective of their diverse potentials and interests:
- Career planning of children was done when they were on the verge of leaving care institutions which is normally required to be initiated much earlier.
- Children's conscious participation in career planning is still lacking and as such their choice and voice are not adequately echoed.
- Task force has prepared the case history of two girls and preparation of another four case histories still remain pending. This case history documentation is needed for children in other care homes of the state.
- Bank accounts, Aadhar number, voting cards, are yet to be allotted to the children under aftercare.
- Life skill education is lacking for the children which should be given to them on continuous basis.

The following innovations are needed to be introduced in the programme to translate it into a successful venture for children in need of aftercare. The reformations can be introduced in the structural or organizational level, in the functional or operational level and in the designing and development level.

At the designing and development level,

- A statewide mapping of children leaving institutional care and in need of aftercare can be made to prepare a database for budgeting

and designing aftercare support. This can give a coverage to all the 380 CCIs earmarked in the state by the WCD department.

- Participation of multiple partners like people, local community and civil societies is required to spearhead this mission.
- An integrated approach should be adopted to provide support and ease the task of aftercare of children.
- Till now there is no clear cut budget spell out for aftercare programme. Like any other Flagship programme of the Government, special allocation can be made for this.
- Innovative programmes can be formulated to make Aftercare programme concrete and need fulfilling in character. The Government should keep in mind that such children are prone to high risks. So, emergency high risk funds can be created for them to be utilized during challenging circumstances.
- The Corporate houses can be approached to take up aftercare as an ingredient in their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) so that flow of funds for the programme can be better geared.
- Exchange programmes among children under aftercare can be designed to develop their confidence and to broaden their vision and strengthen their voice.
- Provisions of Public contacts can be made for them and resource persons from the community can visit the children under aftercare to increase their conviction that they will be mainstreamed in the society and their independent identity will be recognized.

The present aftercare venture is undertaken on a pilot basis and is localized in character. But, it needs expansion to various care

homes accommodating children who are going to complete the age of 18. For the expansion of the programme, certain structural changes are needed which are suggested below:

- As the programme is an ambitious programme and is at its infancy may need multiple role players. For the purpose on region basis a consortium of non profit organizations can be made who will be assisting the nodal department to carry out the programme at the grass root levels.
- Regular sensitization of these civil society personnel is needed and interim appraisal of their activities and achievements in relation to aftercare can make them alert and more delivering in nature.
- Aftercare is a sensitive work which needs a lot of activities in chains right from identification of children to counseling and satisfying their needs. So it needs more personnel to reduce the overburdening of the people working for the purpose.
- Aftercare personnel should not take it as a profession but a mission. So, dedicated, devoted and sincere people should be recruited to carry forward the programme.
- A well designed hierarchy can be created for aftercare where there will be flow of information from top to bottom and from bottom to top to make the programme effective.

A suggested hierarchy can be:

- ◆ Department of Women & Child Development
- ◆ Task Force
- ◆ CWCs
- ◆ Local non-profit organizations earmarked for aftercare

- ◆ Care homes
- ◆ Communities
- Specialized officers can be recruited for aftercare centres like career planners, counselors, Risk Manager.
- Each child under aftercare can be put under a proctor to share his/her difficulties.
- The Officers for aftercare should be allotted with a handsome amount of fund at hand to utilize them during emergencies.
- Care homes and aftercare centres should not be tightly segregated rather should be a strongly interlinked to support each other at the time of need.

However, developmental and designing innovations, structural renovations cannot make aftercare programme a real success unless and until some functional reforms are introduced into the system. Among the functional reforms needed the following may be suggested as supreme and urgent.

- A massive sensitization drive may be launched about aftercare, its need, its process, its target and the need of role players among the public, civil societies, corporate houses, CWC members, CCIs to draw the best support for the implementation of the programme.
- Career planning is an integral component of aftercare programme. It should start from the moment a child enters into high school stage to create a deep consciousness in him/her about his/her future. Career planning should solicit the choice and accommodate the voice of the stakeholder.
- Innovative programmes like BPO training, retailing transcription training should be introduced in aftercare services to increase the marketability of the children after the

programme is over. Skills should be chosen on the basis of the market demands which can increase the potentials of the young adults and guarantee them employment.

- Linkages with medicals, colleges, recreation centres should be done before the transit takes place from care homes to aftercare centres.
- Case histories of the children under aftercare should be done on longitudinal basis to trace out the real impact, pace of the progress and to furnish interim reports.
- Auditing of the aftercare homes should be taken up regularly. This will include financial auditing, administrative auditing and progress auditing. This can enable to unearth the problems and to solve them, to ensure better progress to the programme.
- Health check ups, both physical and mental health should be regular to ensure stability to the children.
- Counsellors should try to strengthen the interpersonal relations of the children under aftercare to better integrate them with the larger society and avoid exclusion.
- Care and Correction Officers with special training should be attached to the after care organizations to avoid deviant behavior in the youths transiting from care homes.

- Financial support to the aftercare children should be regular to avoid any disruption in the programme.
- Leadership, managerial, self defense mechanism trainings should get a priority with other life skill trainings to make the youth under aftercare more equipped, enabled and empowered to lead an independent life.

If these few suggested interventions can be incorporated at the policy level, can be adopted at the practice level and can be indoctrinated to the role players, Aftercare programme will attain its noble objectives and will be more delivering to the stakeholder.

References :

1. Facts About Aging Out (2011) Children's Rights www.childrenrights.org
2. Guidelines for Aftercare for Children Under ICPS.

Prof. Navaneeta Rath, Professor in Sociology, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar.