

The burden children bear

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Feb. 3: Are we failing as a society when it comes to bringing up our children? Do we treat them well?

The answer was a resounding no, according to both educationist Devi Kar, the director of Modern High School, and Jawhar Sircar, the former CEO of Prasar Bharati. The two discussed how we are “killing them softly” with our faulty policies, mindset and the education system at the annual Jit Paul Memorial Lecture held as part of the fourth Kolkata Literature Festival (KLF), in association with **The Telegraph**, at Milan Mela on Friday.

“The upper-class attitude towards children is more open and western... on the other hand the behaviour is proprietorial among the lower strata. But most Indian societies don’t treat children well by any standard,” Sircar said at the very beginning.

Kar pointed out how a child’s struggle for a healthy life starts right from birth. “Malnutrition in kids itself has two sides in India — under-nourishment as well as obesity,” she said.

Sircar spoke about the discriminatory attitude of many families while feeding their kids. “The male child often gets more food and the best nu-



Devi Kar and (right) Jawhar Sircar at the Jit Paul Memorial Lecture at the Kolkata Literature Festival. (Arnab Mondal)

trition at the cost of depriving others,” he said.

From problems of obesity and quality nutrition to the harm caused by our education system, the two discussed how we are treating our next generation poorly in every sphere.

“Today India possesses the largest educational structure in the world. Still we fail to give good education to our kids right from the pre-primary level. One reason is poor quality of teachers.... A teacher’s post is often sold here,” said Sircar, also dwelling on absenteeism among teachers and a dated curriculum.

“I wonder why kids attend

classes given the standard of education in the pre-primary and primary levels,” he said.

He compared the situation in the primary level with the money splurged on higher education. “Why is the government spending so much on higher education when IITians will anyway leave the country?” he asked.

“Just because a child is enrolled in a school does not mean he is learning.... There is little focus on the quality of education imparted,” agreed Kar.

From high dropout rates post Class V to a stagnant academic curriculum that does not allow kids to spend time and self-learn in innovative

projects such as the Atal Tinkering Laboratories, the experts discussed how a faulty system is further pulling children down.

Add to that the mindset of parents. “We have the ‘first hote hobe’ approach that makes matters worse,” Sircar added. According to him, digital tinkering helps a child learn more than a textbook.

The discussion touched on how political meddling and government policies are at fault too.

The experts did not stop at criticism, they also offered solutions. Change the content of what is being taught and how it’s being taught, both stressed.

“You must have a society where you give people space to breathe,” said Sircar.

Kar wondered how effective the right to education Act was when most students in good private schools still came from affluent families alone.

Sircar, however, felt that RTE and midday meal helped the number of children who did not go to school go down from 21 million to 3 million in five years.

The panellists ended on a positive note. They felt that forced education had its pluses too, even if it meant being able to do some basic math when the digital system collapses.