

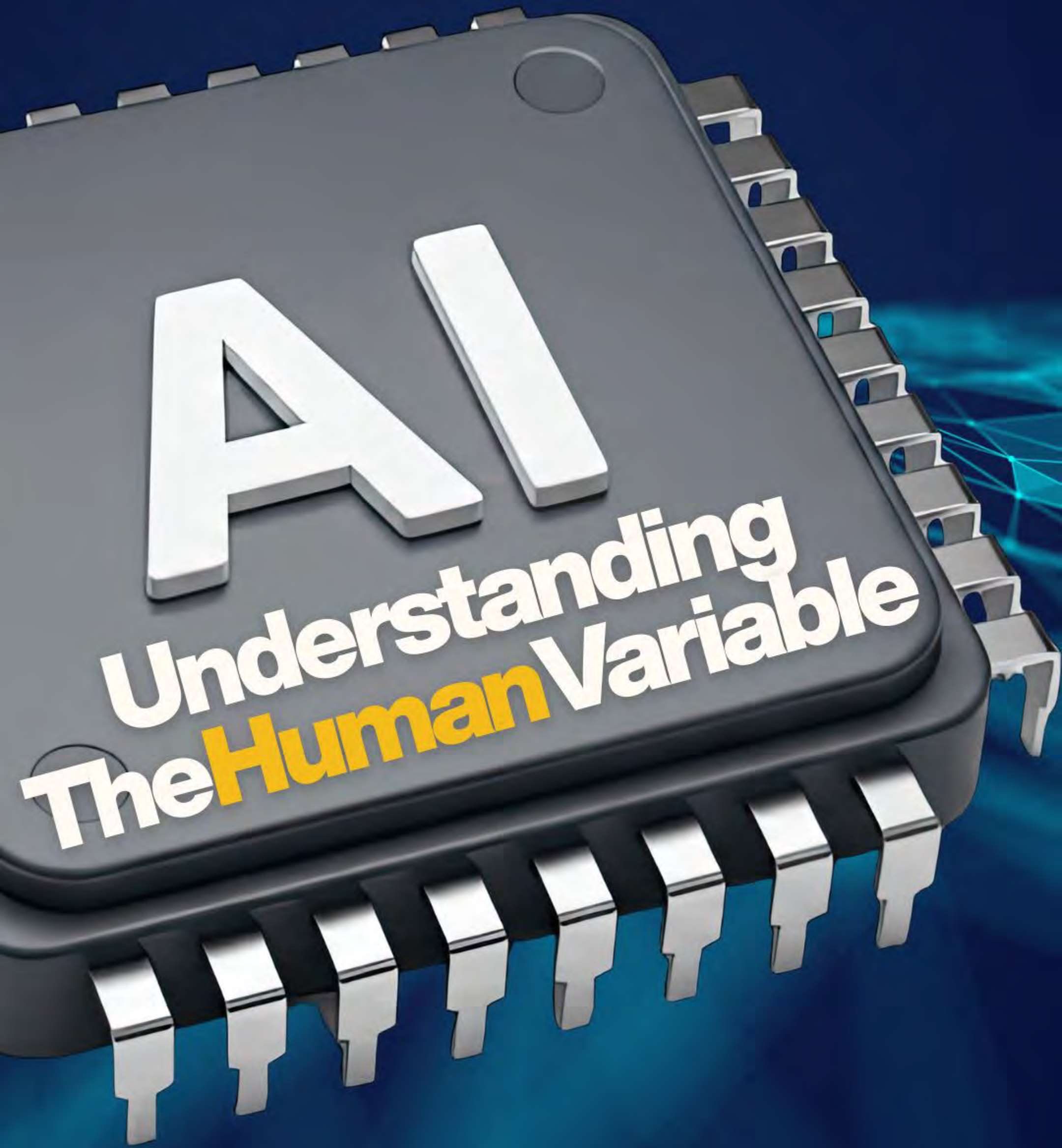
BUSINESS MANDATE

MADRAS
MMA
MANAGEMENT
ASSOCIATION
ESTD. 1959

**KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG**

VOL. XXXXI NO.5

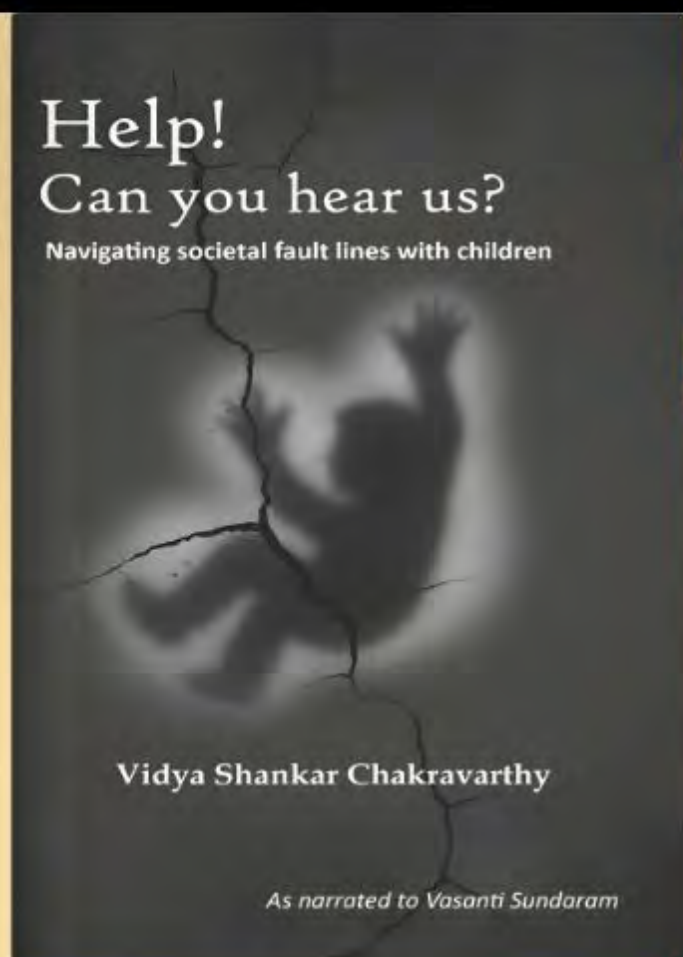
MAY 2026



F O U N T A I N H E A D O F E X C E L L E N C E

THE COST OF NOT LISTENING TO OUR KIDS

DISCUSSION
ON THE BOOK



Vidya Shankar Chakravarthy
Author & Founder, Relief
Foundation



Dr S Muralidhar
Senior Advocate &
Former Chief Justice, Odisha High Court

A book, a judge, and a child rights activist ask the question India keeps avoiding: can you hear its children?

Dr S Muralidhar

Senior Advocate & Former Chief Justice,
Odisha High Court

I want to start by congratulating Vidya on this remarkable publication. This is not an easy book to conceive of and to put together, and I want to thank Vasanti for extracting the book out of Vidya. The topic Vidya is dealing with is not easy, and many of these stories are not happy stories. For people asking how children in India live and how they see the justice system, this book is a good starting point.

There are two broad categories in law. One is children in need of care and protection — essentially abandoned, neglected children — and how the law looks at them. The other is children in conflict with the law: children involved in crime, accused of crimes, navigating the criminal justice system. This book straddles both worlds, which is something unique about Vidya Chakravarthy, who has served on the Juvenile Welfare Board as well as the Juvenile Justice Board. Very rarely do you find a person who has straddled both.



What is important about this book is that in law we always look for empirical data and we are rarely able to get it accurately. Even today, if you ask how many children India has, you are taken back to the 2011 census — fourteen years old and wholly inaccurate. The decisions of Juvenile Justice Boards are never published anywhere for lawyers or researchers to refer to. So first-person narratives are extremely rare, and this is a first-person narrative from someone who has been part of that system. It is invaluable as a document for research, for planning, for understanding the limitations of the law — and for seeing whether any course correction is possible.

This book asks us to introspect. It asks: what is the kind of world children are finding themselves in, and what kind of alternative are we offering them as a society? Let me paint four scenarios.

In August 2023, a Dalit student in Nanguneri, Tamil Nadu, was attacked by upper-caste boys because he was performing too well in school and they were envious of that. His younger sister, who tried to save

him, was attacked too. Both were critically injured. When the boy finally confided in his school principal, he was attacked in his own home. The Chandru Committee Report that followed — 'Nanguneri Never Ever' — reveals that as far back as 2015, students in Tamil Nadu government schools were wearing coloured wristbands signalling caste identity, and policing the social interactions of their peers. A major national party protested the government's circular banning this practice, calling it an affront to Hinduism.

The second scenario is from Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh: a private school teacher instructing class seven students to queue up and slap a Muslim boy because he could not recite his multiplication tables. The teacher's words were communal and deeply scarring. The Supreme Court intervened. But this is the poison being injected into children at the level of schools, and we, as a society, cannot leave it to the state to fix. This is a collective responsibility.

A third disturbing scenario: three sisters in Ghaziabad jumped from their apartment terrace. They had become addicted to an online game that assigned increasingly dangerous tasks. Digital addiction is causing depression among our youngsters and driving them to extreme acts of violence — against others and against themselves. We are talking not just of teenagers. I was once on a flight, seated beside a mother unable to control her three-year-old. She gave the child a phone. Instant silence. Complete absorption in a moving image. We are introducing toddlers to devices, and the effects are pernicious.

The fourth scenario is a hopeful one: the Bal

Puraskar Awards. A boy in rural India saved his father from a crocodile. Another saved thirty-seven people from fire. These are not ordinary acts of bravery; they are remarkable. Children are capable of extraordinary things. We must remind ourselves that one-quarter of the world's population — 220 crore children worldwide, 44 crore in India alone — is under eighteen. Seventy-four percent of these children live in rural areas. We have 1.1 crore child labourers by official count. That figure excludes children in prostitution, begging, and criminal supply chains. In India, never go by percentages — go by numbers. The numbers are staggering. Read Vidya's book and you will make the connections. A child fleeing exploitation at home ends up exploited by a police officer or a criminal gang, and remains scarred for life. What I find most heartening about this book is that Vidya does not mind admitting where she failed and where she succeeded. She lays it bare before us, posing the challenge: is this the kind of world we want to offer our children? These questions cannot wait.

Vidya Shankar Chakravarthy

Author & Founder, Relief Foundation

What I had locked up in my heart and never thought of bringing out as a book became one at the prompting of a few elders in my life. It took the Himalayan patience of Vasanti to bring it out of me, and I am happy to see it in this form today. The journey of those ten years would not have been possible without government staff, senior police officials, NGO members, and civil society who came forward, spoke up, and advocated for children.

The future of India lies in liberating its children from the clutches of adult-centric systems. As Dr. Muralidhar was speaking, many other instances came rushing to me — cases I have not recorded, cases that were never written about. I recollect every case of trafficking, every raid on buses where children were being picked up and sent to other states in droves. Police would raise their hands and say they could not do much. That is why the public conscience is the third eye — the one that must move its gaze from the screen and truly look at the lives of children around us. We have learned to selectively insulate ourselves, and it must stop.

My plea is this: first tune your ear to hear those cries. Only then will their syllables make sense. Children have a voice and a capacity to speak. We must stop calling their silence obedience and their cries unruly. Can you hear us? Dr. Muralidhar is right that we must replace the word 'hear' with 'listen.' Listening requires the synchronicity of eye, heart, and mind — something we have denied these children for far too long. I wish to thank everyone in my family and friends who have been my cheerleaders while I worked in this difficult, gravitas-laden space. Special thanks to Vasanti — for prodding, pushing, shouting at me, and making me go deeper. Memories will go on, and possibly a second edition will emerge with additions that this book has already triggered. I thank MMA for readily accepting and validating this event. If there is one takeaway from this evening, let it be that we cry out, listening to children, making their voices resonate with us and echo louder.

InConversation

What does justice look like when a child is involved?

Dr S Muralidhar: It looks very harsh, very intimidating, and very confusing. Sit as a family court judge deciding custody between two parents. You have this conversation with a five-year-old or nine-year-old, you are supposed to determine the child's best interests, and the child asks you: 'Why should I choose?' The justice system has no answer. You are forcing the child to make a choice they do not want to make. Children are torn in broken relationships, switching loyalties between parents, and that scars them. In the criminal justice system it is far worse — judges look at a muscular, six-foot-tall fifteen-year-old and say: 'This cannot be a child.' The reduced age of criminal responsibility from eighteen to sixteen for serious offences is going to have very pernicious effects. These children will be kept with adults in jail. If you lose a child at the cusp years of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, you lose them to crime forever.

Do our systems treat children as little adults?

Dr S Muralidhar: When the crime is heinous, they stop looking at the child as a child and only look at the child as a criminal. We have a way of collectively deciding whom we should keep out of society — sex workers, beggars, pavement dwellers, and now children in conflict with the law. We do not take responsibility for producing these conditions. Vidya's

book is replete with examples of ruthless acts by children — acts that all have a background. If a child has been continuously tortured at home, subjected to corporal punishment, you harden the child. If the child has lived on the streets, they must survive gangs. We have failed to introspect because we expect the state to care for children. The state is incapable of caring for children.

Some children prefer staying in juvenile homes to returning to their families. What does that say?

Vidya Shankar Chakravarthy: They are running away from poverty, from drudgery, from abusive parents, from a society that has not prioritised their safety. They sense that they are safer as their own masters than in a vulnerable, known setting. Some have told me they do not want to go back home because they know they will be pledged again — rented out, sold, exploited again. I remember a boy of seven or eight, a bag-lifter on Ranganathan Street, who explained to me eight ways in which they cheat customers and said, 'I am a master in all of it.' When I asked if he wanted to change, he said softly: 'If I go back, the brokers will come and take me again.' Within fifteen days, a broker obtained a High Court order and we had to release him. In those moments, I have felt like a victim myself.

What is the most urgent thing that needs to be done?

Dr S Muralidhar: First, accurate statistics. We still go back to the 2011 census. We are either ashamed or in denial. The number of stunted children in India is shocking; the number of children not attaining full,

healthy childhoods is alarming; and we are not able to get those real numbers. Second, all forms of exploitation must be accounted for — begging, prostitution, trafficking, smuggling, child soldiers. Third, our homes must be made safe spaces. POCSO cases show that over seventy percent of perpetrators of sexual exploitation against children are inside our own homes and extended families. We have a complete veil of secrecy, and it is time we actually did something about it.

Vidya Shankar Chakravarthy: Public consciousness must rise. Focused child safety procedures cannot happen because of some system alone — they can happen only when the public engages, when there are platforms where children can express themselves and public can speak up for them. Civil society members must get educated on children's rights, understand how systems work, and then become participants — in child welfare committees, in juvenile justice boards. The next ten years, our country must focus on child safety policies and systems. Only then can we be sure our nation will become truly great.

What is your single piece of advice for a young person who wants to work in child justice?

Vidya Shankar Chakravarthy: Start volunteering. My colleague Murali was a software professional who volunteered for several years before approaching me. That culture of volunteering is the foundation of everything we have built at Relief Foundation. Read about child rights. Get educated. Speak to people. Engage. Only then will the floodgates of real information open.

Dr S Muralidhar: Get the more privileged children to interact with the less privileged. When I was Chief Justice of Odisha, I worked on an idea of bringing students from class eleven and twelve in public and private schools to meet their counterparts in villages and observation homes. Child-to-child communication is very different from how an adult communicates with a child. Everyone in control of these institutions is an adult. A child will open up only so much to an adult. You need repeated visits to earn trust, because some adult has already exploited that child and exposed their secrets. We have ghettoised these children behind institution walls. We must allow children to breach those walls and interact with other children in society. That is one way forward. No child is a failed child — unless we come to that point, we cannot take the first right step. ■