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Educational Exclusion of Children of Distress Migrants in India

Vijitha Rajan*

Abstract

For the children of migrant labourers, particularly, seasonal and short-term migrants in distress, schooling is still a distant dream. The paper tries to highlight some important dimensions of educational exclusion of migrant children in India. The educational exclusion of migrant children must go beyond the realm of educational policy and processes, and hence, find place in the larger context of education, development and migration discourses in India. A new theoretical and policy discourse that embodies children's everyday experiences of migration and education in the larger politics of exclusion is envisioned through this paper.

Introduction

For the children of migrant labourers, particularly, seasonal and short-term migrants in distress, education and schooling are still a distant dream. These are the children, who remain invisible in the eyes of society and State as data, regarding their existence and exclusion, are not even recorded. Educational exclusion of children of distress migrant labourers is, therefore, a relatively under researched area.

Most researches on distress driven internal migration in India centre on its patterns, causes and consequences; relationship with poverty and livelihood; labour dynamics and politics; social and cultural dimensions; implications for development and rural change; and nature of labour informality and urbanisation. Major focus of these migration narratives is on the migrating adult population. The nature and extent of the presence and engagement of children in the

* *Assistant Professor*, School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka.

migration process has still not been explored, and has hence, remained a passing reference in most of the migration studies conducted as regards to India. Some studies highlight the conditions in which migrant children live, such as inadequate resources and safety conditions, fear of being forced to work as labourers, trafficking and abuse [Betancourt, Shaahinfar, Kellner, Dhavan and Williams, 2013; Burra, 2005; Deb, 2005; Ghosh, 2014; International Labor Organisation (ILO), 2013; Roy Chowdhury, 2014; Venkateswarlu, 2007; Whitehead and Hashim, 2005; and Whitehead, 2011]. Some studies explore educational access and exclusion of such children (Aide et Action, 2012; Boyden, 2013; Coffey, 2013; Roy, Singh and Roy, 2015; Schapiro, 2009; Smita, 2008. However, not much attention has been paid to critically exploring the relationship between migration and children's experiences of educational exclusion.

Giani (2006) argues in the context of Bangladesh that the impact of migration on children's lives is less explored in literature because of strong adult–child hierarchy, wherein, children are often viewed as passive beings just obeying their adults. This lack of exploration is evident in the Indian context as well. Inadequate attention to children of migrant labourers tends to de-politicise the hardships that they face. Therefore, it is important to focus on the experiences and perspectives of migrant children in their own right (Dobson, 2009).

Migration, Children and Education

Children, constituting a significant number of the migrant population, are central to the analysis of social consequences of migration. The fact that the number of children involved in seasonal migration in India is estimated at 6 to 9 million [Deshingkar and Akter, 2009; National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), 2012; Smita, 2008 and Van de Glind, 2010] is a clear indication of the complexity of the problem. Children belonging to migrant families form a critical mass of those who are educationally underprivileged (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003; UNESCO and UNICEF, 2012).

A survey conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, in 2013 cites migration of families as one of the most important reasons behind dropout rates at the elementary level in 21 States of the country. The survey reveals that around 12 per cent boys and girls dropped out in these 21 States because of families migrating from one place to another in search of livelihood.

There are studies that indicate that accompanying migrant children are more vulnerable to be engaged as labourers, and hence, face educational exclusion compared with children left behind back home (Roy, et al., 2015). It is important to understand their exclusion in light

of larger dynamics of education and development frameworks in contemporary India.

The fact that short-term and seasonal migrants are likely to belong to the lowest socio-economic strata (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012) is an example of macro level footprint that tells us about the nature and politics of migration by the most marginalised sections of the society. However, there are no comprehensive data that can reveal the scale and nature of this problem. Also, there is no systematic state intervention to include these children in mainstream education or provide them with meaningful learning opportunities on a large scale.

Educational access and systemic exclusion

Various studies indicate that migrant children's access to education is severely hampered both in source and destination sites. A number of reasons are cited for the educational exclusion of migrant children, such as lack of schools near parents' work sites, absence of residential hostels near source sites, involvement of children as labourers, burden of taking care of younger siblings, inability of parents to monitor children's education, sub-standard education provided by government schools, lack of guidance by parents and teachers, poor infrastructure and informal learning centres, and so on. Though migrant parents aspire to give quality education to children, they do not have the necessary support structure. These deprivations are more prominent for seasonal migrants. The schooling of their children is not coordinated in source and destination sites (Smita, 2008). Absence of adequate and appropriate educational facilities at destination sites, systematic transfer processes and provision of bridging facilities make it even more difficult for seasonal migrant children to get back to the formal education system (Ramachandran, 2006; Van de Glind, 2010). This is likely to have a cumulative impact on the learning and development of seasonal migrant children.

The existing education system is inadequate to respond to the needs of migrant children as it is fundamentally designed for settled populations based on ideas of spatially defined education administration units, fixed community, where the school is located, and school processes defined by fixed curriculum and language.

Dyer (2010, 2012) in her research with pastoralist migrant children calls this place-based schooling system 'hegemonic'. She argues that the education system de-recognises 'pastoralism' as a legitimate livelihood option through systemic exclusion, such as fixed institutional structure and its unquestioned features (like fixed timings, annual calendar and requirement to be in school throughout the year). Dyer further argues that the provision of educational access in India is historically based on ideas of geographical proximity

and sedentary habitation, which are unjust for mobile groups of population. Migration itself is perceived as an exception against the norm of sedentary patterns of habitation and livelihood (McDowell and De Haan, 1997).

Once this aspect of fundamental exclusion of migrant population and children in development and education frameworks is understood, one can understand the reasons behind the failure of initiatives designed to facilitate access to education to migrant children.

The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), 2007, provides various approaches to provide quality education to the children of migrant labourers. These include setting up of seasonal hostels to retain the children in source villages when the parents migrate for livelihood, establishing work–site schools at places where migrant adults are engaged in work, arranging for volunteers who can accompany the migrating families and take care of their children's educational needs, developing strategies for tracking such children through migration cards or other records in order to ensure continuity in education before, during and after migration. However, there are enormous challenges to such efforts. These include willingness on the part of employers, addressing the problem of congested learning spaces, designing curriculum for children of different classes or age-appropriate curriculum, provision of adequate and appropriate teaching–learning methods and aids, availability of volunteers and teachers speaking multiple languages, presence of under aged siblings at the education centre or school, and demand for domestic and work–site labour from children.

The children of distress migrants, especially, interstate migrants are uprooted from their culture and planted in an entirely new culture. With knowledge and learning being embedded in the language and culture of a particular region, the problem becomes even more complex. The inherent challenge of physical mobility (Smita, 2008) cannot be addressed by educational initiatives rooted in normative ideals of fixity, stability and place-based schooling.

Migrant children's educational experiences in India may be viewed in the historical context of systemic exclusion of disadvantaged sections of society. Post–colonial scholars argue that the colonial legacy legitimised differential educational access for children from marginalised communities (Balagopalan, 2014). This was continued by the post–independent Indian state and is a major impediment to the provision of equitable education to all children in the country as structural issues that kept many out of school were not adequately addressed by non-formal education programmes (Kumar, 2006). Though it is true that the effect of migration on the schooling of migrant children is highly context sensitive (Schapiro, 2009), it seems that there is lack of

commitment towards the education of such children, both in source and destination sites. Smita (2008) points out that the names of migrant children are on school rolls. Besides, no record is maintained for a large number of children, who drop out of school mid-session and migrate for long periods. In the destination sites, the education of migrant children is often left to the mercy of the rich, charity by private organisations or benevolence of civil society organisations. Hence, it is important to find out who is accountable for the education of migrant children.

Macro context of migration and development in India

The exclusionary development paradigm, in which migrant lives thrive, is critical to problematising the educational exclusion of their children. The economic dualism between village and city in post–independent India facilitated transition of labour from field to factory and massive migration of people from rural to urban areas (Breman, 1996). Breman argues that the dualism of formal and informal sector, and conceptualisation of informal sector as waiting room for unskilled rural worker to migrate soon to the formal sector has remained a fallacy in the Indian context. Economic reforms based on growth oriented neoliberal development model and capitalist exploitation of informal labour form the background of migration by people belonging to the marginalised sections of the society.

Srivastava (2011) points out that the pattern of growth in India has widened the gap between agriculture and industry, and spatial inequalities between rural and urban population. Like Breman, he, too, argues that labour in India is getting increasingly informalised due to increased growth in certain sectors, and subsequent demand for flexible and cheap labour. Migrants form the core of this labour in both rural and urban areas.

Exclusionary urbanisation (Kundu and Saraswati, 2012) and neoliberal restructuring of the city (Jha and Kumar, 2016) shape migrant experiences. The way migrants are placed in this larger development paradigm defines their relationship with the State. In the study of *Adivasi* seasonal labour migration in western India, Mosse, et al. (2005) explain how migrants depend on agents, brokers and contractors as labour departments, unions and law fail to protect their rights. This results in increased exploitation of migrant workers. The living conditions of the migrants influence the childhood of their children — their development and education.

Education does not occupy a significant place in the policies drafted for migrants. The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, does not include details of family members while registering workers during recruitment (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 2012), leave alone the provisions for the education of migrant children.

The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970; Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and Minimum Wages Act, 1948, too, do not have anything substantial for the education of migrant children. To top it all, the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, says that different minimum rates of wages may be fixed for adults, adolescents, children and apprentices, reinforcing the idea of child labour. Even as this point, apart from some others, was proposed to be deleted through an amendment(s), the idea was to remove the disparity in wages and not the fundamental problem of legitimising child labour.

The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996, though talks of compulsory provision of crèches and responsibility of the welfare board to provide financial assistance for the education of children, education as a fundamental right of these children does not find a mention.

The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, considers education schemes for children as a social security and welfare scheme but there is no indication as regards to its implementation. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, also needs to be amended so as to specify educational provisions for migrant children. Though Sections 4, 9 and 15 of the Act speak about the educational inclusion of migrant children, the modalities of working these out, and appropriateness and practicality of such provisions in the lives of migrant children remain ambiguous.

Migrant children

The hard-to-reach category of migrant children is not intellectually comprehensible due to homogenisation or extremely broad classification, which do not recognise the varied contexts of their lives (Dyer, 2013 and 2015). Such policy discourses understand children's experiences in the light of normative ideals of childhood and education, and propose uniform, standard and techno-rational solutions. Such understanding constructions of children from marginalised communities are problematic for various reasons. Firstly, it does not consider the geographical, political, cultural, institutional and socio-economic locales of the children's lives and their educational experiences. Secondly, it undermines the children's agency and resilience.

How would the current law governing child labour (that permits children below the age of 14 years to work in non-hazardous family enterprises) understand the experiences that migrant children face on a daily basis? The current policy discourse is critiqued for envisaging compulsory education as the foremost and uncontested solution to the problem of child labour, viewing formal schooling as a space that saves child labourers (Balagopalan, 2008 and 2014). What is, therefore, required is to re-examine the policies and reforms and save the lives of children coming

from marginalised communities. The need of the hour is to construct research and policy discourses that enable understanding children's lives in their real spaces and imagining educational initiatives that speak of alternative visions of childhood, education and social justice.

Conclusion

The educational exclusion of migrant children is stark and its implications complex. The problem needs to be addressed on priority so that all migrant children enjoy the right to quality education.

This paper highlights three important dimensions that shape educational exclusion of distress migrant children in India. They are — systemic educational exclusion, macro context of migration and development, and homogeneous construction of the migrant child. People with least education and skills are more prone to distress migration. Besides, the children of distress migrant workers face the highest form of educational exclusion at destination sites. Therefore, it is important to change the perception of treating children as luggage, source of anxiety and agents, who experience the world in their own right (Dobson, 2009) and place their everyday lives and experiences in the larger politics of exclusion.

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