

07.21



Commentary

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July 2021

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CONTEXT

India's 2011 Census recorded 453 million internal migrants in India, forming a significant 37% of the total population. According to data, one out of every five migrants is a child, resulting in an estimated 92.95 million migrant children¹. However, the Census and National Sample Survey's [NSS] short-term circular migration estimates are believed to be low and misleading (Srivastava 2020). The absolute number of short-term circular migrants as estimated by the India Human Development Survey [IHDS] 2011-12 stood at 200 million. These estimates were more than 10 times the 2007-08 estimates by NSS with 15.2 million short-term migrants (Nayyar and Kim 2018).

¹ Census 2001 and 2011 defined individuals from 0-19 as children. However, the 64th National Sample Survey Office [NSSO] round counted individuals from ages 0-18.

Deshingkar and Akter (2009) estimated the number of seasonal migrants² to be around 100 million. Around the same period, the number of children associated with these migrations was estimated to be between 4-6 million (Smita 2008).

Seasonal migration usually involves labour migrants leaving their source areas at specific periods of the year, usually coinciding with the post harvesting period beginning around October-November, to regions with a higher demand for labour typically in industries or agriculture for work. Temporary and seasonal migration is quite prominent in developing countries where it plays a crucial role in household survival, especially in rural areas. This movement from poor rural regions and agriculturally backward areas is predominantly a result of regional inequalities and uneven development across Asia (Deshingkar 2006). Most of these seasonal migrants find work in the manufacturing, construction, and agricultural sector. Seasonal migration cycles can occur between a few weeks to a few months according to which the frequency of movement varies too. Children whose parents migrate either accompany them to work sites or stay back in the source village, left behind without one or both parents. In both these cases, the educational progress of these children is thereby hindered.

THE CHILDREN WHO ACCOMPANY

The generally fixed nature of the schooling system makes it difficult for children who accompany their parents to continue their education during their movement to and from the sites of work, and the stay therein. This movement, and the stay at the work site, results in the children missing regular schooling for prolonged periods of time. The cycle of seasonal migration usually begins in October-November, following which migrant workers, and the children accompanying them, stay at the destination sites for around six to eight months. These families then return to their villages before the onset of the next monsoon. Since this movement overlaps with several months of the academic calendar, migrant children only get to go to schools between June and November (Smita 2008). Throughout this period, these children are often enrolled in school as per school records despite not having attended the school for many months.

At destination sites, educational facilities are usually not easily accessible. Since these children arrive in the middle of the academic calendar, they are usually not enrolled in the same period and end up losing an entire schooling year. Schools do not provide any training, bridge courses or support to these children in order to overcome the loss in educational gains. The children also end up repeating the same classes multiple times, which proves to be a significant roadblock in their educational progress (UNESCO 2016).

In a study of migrant children in 60 brickfield areas of West Bengal, Majumder and Rajarshi (2011) found that all 1700 migrant children in their survey were out of formal schools, compared to just 10% of the local children. Out of these, more than 85% children were found to have never been enrolled in schools while the rest had dropped out to move along with their migrant parents. Aide et Action (2014) also spotted a similar pattern while studying the status of children of migrant workers at work sites located in Bhopal, Chennai, Delhi, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur and Patna. The survey found that only 17.18% of children at these worksites had access

² The terms 'Seasonal Migration', 'Short-term Migration' and 'Circular Migration' are used interchangeably. NSS defines short term migrants as those who have migrated out for employment, for a period of more than one month but not exceeding six months.

to education while around 40.19% children had never been enrolled in schools.

THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

Migration by one or many family members is believed to have a positive impact on members staying at home owing to the resultant increase in the household's overall disposable income (Ellis 2003; Sasin and McKenzie 2007). However, this belief generally does not take into account the psycho-social costs that children bear due to the absence of one or both parents. The impact of seasonal migration on the children left behind hasn't been explored extensively in India, however, certain localised studies in Odisha, Bihar and West Bengal have found a negative impact of migration on children's education, psycho-social development and cognitive abilities (Roy, Singh, and Roy 2015; Biswal 2020; Agasty 2016; Nguyen 2016).

Parental migration entails parental absence from the home, which can have a detrimental influence on a child's health and educational outcomes that may outweigh the advantages through remittance (Antman 2012). Children with migratory parents have less supervision and academic support resulting in a less conducive learning environment at home. These children may also experience emotional and behavioural issues including higher risk of conduct disorder, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, when compared with children of non migrants (Fellmeth et al., 2018).

While these children may benefit through remittances from the migrant parent, the absence of one or both parents can severely affect their development and overall well-being in the long run. All of the aforementioned factors could manifest in problems concerning children's education and hinder their school progress. Roy, Singh, and Roy (2015), in their assessment of the impact of father's absence on children's behaviour and performance in school, found that the children left behind showed more disobedience, bad habits, and poor performance in school compared to non-migrant children. School attendance is also often lower in children of migrant households than non-migrant households. Moreover, at higher age groups, dropout rates are also higher for children of migrant households (Agasty 2016).

ANALYSING EXISTING POLICY RESPONSES

Policy framing and implementation in India focuses on a fixed framework which usually does not take into account seasonal migrant population for whom frequent movement forms a characteristic feature. Most of the interventions, therefore, have been either at the source or at the destination (Smita 2008). For any policy intervention aimed at improving the conditions of seasonal migrants and their children, it must take into consideration the factor of mobility and the issues faced during and as a result of said mobility in the population.

While the Right to Education [RTE] Act makes it mandatory for all schools to admit children coming from other areas or states, the process of enrolling older migrant children in RTE mandated age-appropriate classes is hindered due to the huge learning gaps (Rajan 2021). Hence, the practicality of these provisions needs to be re-evaluated and required amendments must be made to further strengthen educational inclusion of migrant children.

State-level Interventions

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and subsequently, the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, to some extent have been able to recognise the mobility factor associated with seasonal migrations. The framework lays provisions for seasonal hostels in source villages and schools at destination sites in addition to exploring the possibility of involving teaching volunteers. Furthermore, states like Gujarat and Maharashtra have also stepped in by creating seasonal boarding schools for migrant children, and engaging volunteers to provide after-school psychosocial support to left behind children, respectively (Chandrasekhar and Bhattacharya 2018; UNESCO 2019).

Taking into consideration the linguistic barriers faced by migrant children in schools at destination sites, educational volunteers who speak the mother tongues of migrant children have been appointed through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in Kerala. The state also enrolled around 8500 children from migrant families in government-funded schools during the academic year 2019-2020 (Kuttikrishnan 2019 as cited in Peter, Sanghvi and Narendra 2020). Similarly, through a memorandum of understanding between Odisha and erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, volunteers trained in Odiya help bridge the language gap among children of brick kiln workers in Andhra Pradesh (Mukhopadhyay and Naik 2017).

Gujarat, which attracts a significant number of seasonal migrants, introduced the Migration Card initiative in 2001, followed by the Migration Monitoring Software in 2009. The Migration Card initiative enables the state to track inter-state and intra-state migration of school-going children. During this process, intra-state migrant children are accommodated, and educated, in seasonal hostels at their domiciles while the inter-state migrant children are covered under Tent Special Training Programs in temporary schools near the parents' worksites. Further, cards with data regarding the educational level of children and their respective grades enable them to sit for their exams at their source region or destination site, thus resolving certain issues children face during seasonal migration. The Migrant Monitoring Software was utilised to streamline real-time tracking and resolve issues of inaccuracy and specificity arising due to a manual system. The initiative resulted in a significant decrease in the overall dropout rates for classes I to VII between 2004-05 (18.79%) and 2012-13 (7.08 %) (Gujarat Council of Elementary Education 2013).

Limitations and Recommendations

Hitherto, state interventions have mainly focused on stationary measures by keeping the children at the source region instead of addressing the various other issues faced by children of seasonal migrants (Chandrasekhar and Bhattacharya 2018; UNESCO 2019). Policies aimed at educational inclusion of migrants' children need to accommodate the special needs of these children. More site schools, with flexible curriculum and multilingual teaching, need to be established to cater to children living in and around work sites where very few schools are present. These schools must offer special training and bridge courses to children in order to make up for any losses incurred during the movement from source villages to destination sites.

Educational exclusion of migrant children needs to be understood in the context of a discord between 'mobile childhoods' and 'immobile schools'. Existing pedagogy and curriculum, even with the intervention of governments and NGOs to help bridge learning gaps among migrant children, is, in certain ways, unable to cater to the special needs of these children (Rajan 2021). In order to address the dissonance between the fixed nature of the current schooling system and non-stationary

migrant childhoods, there's a strong need to rethink schooling as it stands. While instructional interventions, as suggested in the Draft National Educational Policy (Government of India 2019), and other periodic initiatives might be able to impart education to migrant children temporarily, long run inclusion is possible only when the special needs of these children are taken into account. For these needs to be permanently addressed requires reformation of the entire schooling system to make it more flexible and inclusive.

There is also an immediate need for the creation of a nationwide database on seasonal migration and the corresponding effects. States should be required to create migrant portals with data on in and out migrants along with required data about their families and children. With the help of this data, source and destination states should work together to make sure that the movement between states does not prevent migrant families from accessing various services related to food, healthcare and education. This data can then be utilised to devise targeted interventions which would be effective in strengthening educational inclusion of children at worksites as well as those left behind in source villages.

With the help of a national database, regions with higher numbers of in-migrants can be identified. These regions can then be declared as Special Economic Zones [SEZs] as prescribed in the National Educational Policy (2020). Given that Special Economic Zones are to receive concerted efforts, in addition to schemes and policies implemented to the maximum, migrant children in these regions, once identified as Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups [SEDGs], can be expected to have better chances of educational inclusion than before. Comparable to the Migration Card initiative in Gujarat, digital repositories should be created across all states containing educational details of all migrant children. The presence of digital records accessible to all states should enable students to sit in exams and continue their education at source or destination states even when they travel in the middle of the academic calendar. In addition to this, accessing educational opportunities needs to be incentivised in order to retain the children who are prone to dropping out of schools.

CONCLUSION

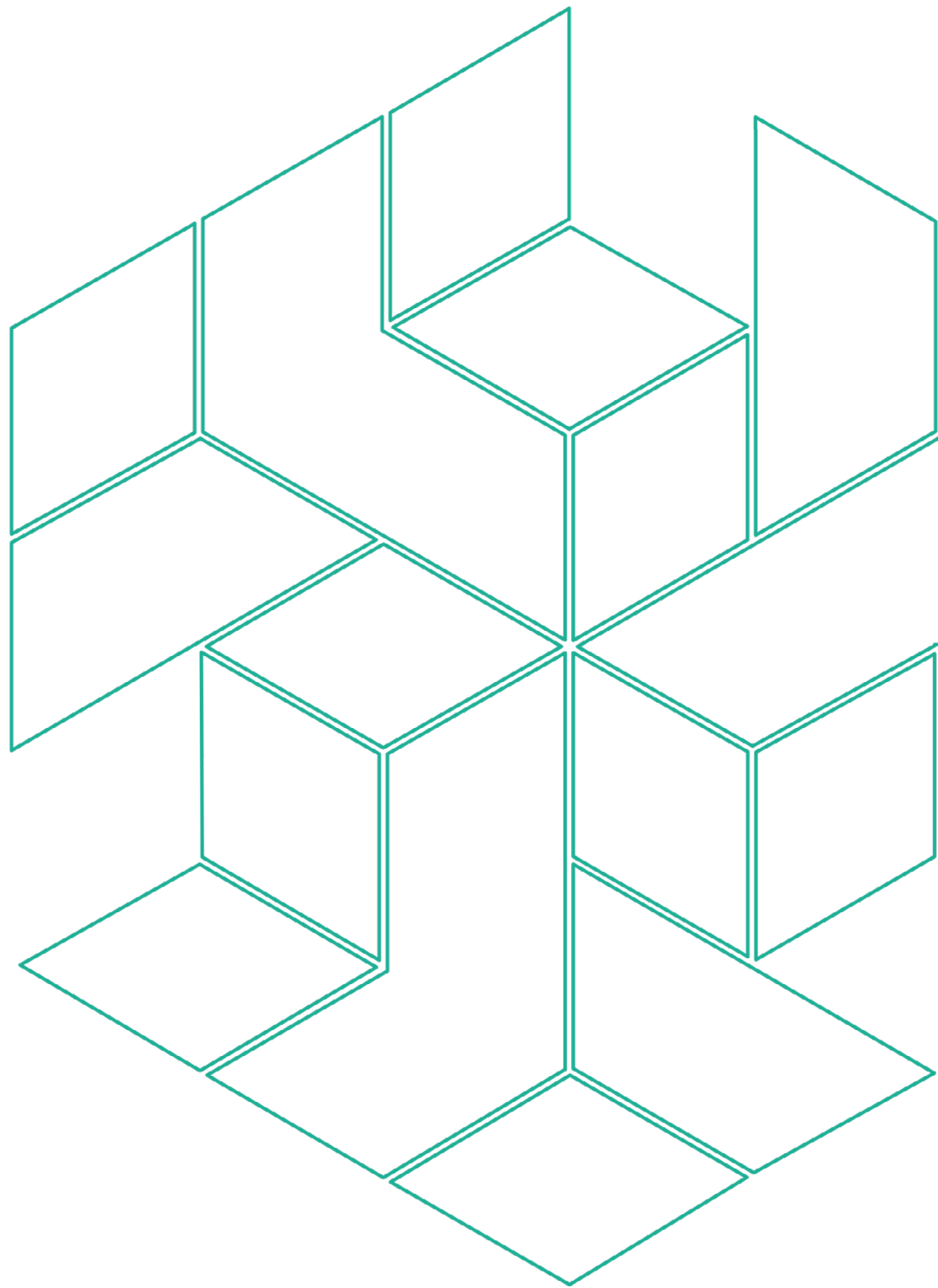
Seasonal migration adversely affects the education of children from migrant families. These children either accompany their parents to work sites or are left behind with one or no parent. Children travelling to work sites either drop out of school at source villages or stay nominally enrolled. In both the cases, their educational progress is hindered due to the frequent movement between source regions to destination. At work sites, educational opportunities are limited. Children often end up completely dropping out of schools or struggle with learning gaps caused due to prolonged absence. Children left behind at their source village experience significant emotional and behavioural difficulties due to the absence of the parent(s). These, in turn, affect children's education, psycho-social development and cognitive abilities. While there have been several attempts to strengthen educational inclusion of these children, most of these have not recognised the factor of mobility. Policies aimed at improving the educational conditions of children of migrant families must be tailored to the special needs of these children.

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