

Gowramma's Ghost and Bengaluru's 'Zero' Out-of-school Children

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The manner in which migration and education interact in often unanticipated ways in urban spaces is examined. Drawing on a fieldwork narrative from Bengaluru, questions on migrant children's access to schooling are explored, and its interfaces with "being a migrant" in the city are located. Migrant communities' precarious experiences of the city significantly shape the educational experiences of children. The out-of-school construct has to be understood in a nuanced and layered manner in order to envisage meaningful educational initiatives for migrant children.

On one typical fieldwork¹ day in September 2017, I went to the learning centre for migrant children run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), only to find that an entire group of children from one particular location had not turned up to school that day. The NGO centre was located inside an upper-primary government school in Sulikunte (Bengaluru South) and ran a non-residential special training (NRST) intervention² for migrant children. Only a few weeks back, the NGO had discovered this migrant labour camp³ (which also houses a cement block factory) in Chikkabellandur, hidden away from the mainstream city. Even the cluster resource and block resource persons of the state education department were surprised to know that such a community existed for many years in that location and that there were around 80 "out-of-school" children (oosc) in that labour camp. State and NGO officials had conversations with nearby government schools to host the NRST inside the school premises and got the space to run the centre in the government school in Sulikunte. The NGO also arranged transport for the migrant children to commute from the labour camp in Chikkabellandur to the school in Sulikunte, approximately 5 kilometres apart.

After some days of attending school, many children caught a fever. A rumour quickly spread among the children and the community that the children were falling ill because of the presence of an evil spirit in the school. An animated version of the evil-spirit story circulated among the migrant community. The protagonist of the story is a woman called "Gowramma," and she had two children. She had been raped, murdered and

buried in the school premises, and her unsettled spirit was now "haunting" the school. More than the children themselves, it was the community that believed the evil-spirit story and refused to send their children to school.

Many families, not being able to afford the hospital expenses, were worried about the health of their children. The mother of a child who had fallen critically ill said,

We have come to the city for survival, we don't want to lose our children here. We can't risk our children's lives. Already the whole week's money is spent for the treatment of the child.

Members of the community, including the children, started getting "possessed" by Gowramma's ghost, and through them, the ghost repeatedly communicated its story. Unfortunately, another child died during the course of these events, which further reinforced the beliefs of the community. The community confronted the community mobiliser of the NGO aggressively, when he went to pick up children for school as part of his daily routine. Some mothers scolded their children and dragged them off the bus. The NGO later had intervened with the help of the contractor of the migrant labour camp and managed to convince some parents to send their children back to school. Still, some of them refused to send their children back out of fear, while some families returned to their village following this incident.

This narrative raises important questions in the context of migrant children's educational experiences in the city. How do experiences of migration and education interact in urban spaces and what does it mean to the lives of migrant children? Does the overarching category of oosc capture the nuances of migrant childhood in the city? What would it mean to educational policy and interventions to delve into the lived realities of marginal childhood in urban spaces? How do children's experiences of migration and education offer important insights into the existence of migrants themselves in the city? This article attempts to place the criticality of these

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questions in the larger context of oosc in Bengaluru (and in Karnataka).

Migrant Ghettos and Culture

Segregated habitations of marginalised communities are integral to urban spatial organisation and they construct their own socio-spatial environment (Ganguly 2018). Migrant communities in Bengaluru are usually situated away from mainstream city spaces. Clusters of blue *jhopdis* or tin sheet settlements⁴—where poor migrant families live—lie in unhygienic and secluded parts of the city. Migrants who speak the same language are mostly seen to be living together as a community. Even within labour colonies and settlements, where there are migrants from different parts of the country, one can find communities that speak different language inhabiting separate lanes. While there is a lot of intercommunity learning happening with respect to various aspects of culture, migrants tend to retain their cultural identity through language, food practices and other customs. Thus, migrant communities maintain boundaries that are intact and fluid simultaneously as they engage with the city. This is perhaps how migrants engage in their “place making.” As Lombard (2014: 46) succinctly explains,

Place-making can be seen in terms of resisting established societal and cultural norms, through the reproduction of symbols of place which are meaningful to the community, as an alternative to the imposition of symbols considered significant by the authorities. These place-making activities which confer meaning on space could also be taken as symbols of resistance to the idea of dehumanised slums often depicted in discourses about informality.

The songs of “yellamma”⁵ playing from mobile phones and the “thap thap” rhythm of preparing hard and coarse *jolada* or *sajje rotti*⁶ in the evenings are commonly heard in north Karnataka migrant households in the city. The get-together of men and women for traditional games such as “chowka bara”⁷ is common. Festivals are celebrated and “fasts” are observed with much rigour and interest. For Ganesh Chaturti, groups of migrant children collect money from neighbouring homes as donation to buy Ganesh statues. Children from different

migrant neighbourhoods compare and fight over who made the biggest statue and have the grandest celebration. Sometimes, one feels like these are “pockets of villages” inside the city. Cultural practices and boundaries are relived and rejuvenated by intra-state migrant communities, as well as by those from different parts of the country such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and so on.

Although culture is dynamic, transforming and getting diffused through the everyday lives of migrants in the city and breaking through the binaries of the village and the city, culture as an identity maker is central to “being a migrant” in the city. This interaction is illustrated through the story of Gowramma’s ghost, and it reveals one thread of the many migration–culture–city interfaces. Many children and adults started getting possessed by Gowramma’s ghost. Gowramma, through their bodies, told her story over and over again. She announced, through them, that she would not let anyone study in the school and she wants revenge for the injustice against her. One of the community members asked, “if there is no problem, how are all these children who get possessed saying the same story?” The mass psyche of the community wrote, rewrote and made true Gowramma’s ghost.

Irrespective of varying language, culture, and place of origin, what is seemingly common for the migrants in the Chikkabellandur labour community is their poor socio-economic background and their “rural” origin. But, as Lombard (2014: 39) rightly points out, “labelling a place or its residents as ‘rural’ within the context of the city may have pejorative connotations, as well as discursively separating the place and its people from ‘the city.’” Ghosts are integral to the cultural landscape of both rural and urban India, but what is unique here is the question of the implications it had on the education of children. Would the story follow the same pathway in an urban, middle-class community? Or, if this had happened in the village? How differently would it have affected the educational pathways of children when the socio-economic context of the city inhabitants

and their positioning within the city is brought into the analysis?

‘Zero’ Out-of-school Children

There are huge variations in the official figures of oosc and the reason for it is attributed to problems in the definition of the concept of oosc as well as methods in calculating the number of oosc (Bhatty et al 2017). Bhatty et al argue that when sporadic and irregular attendance is taken into consideration, the number of oosc children increases considerably. Even when children are absent for longer periods of time, their names are not struck off from the rolls. Only those children who take transfer certificates from the school—before changing the schools, dropping out or migrating to another place—are likely to get recorded in the data. Beyond these realities of our school system lie the complex narratives of why children are out of school. While child labour, poverty and poor quality of schooling are sometimes taken for granted as reasons for this, the various layers of these reasons are given less attention. Piecemeal approaches to educational interventions for oosc are focused on achievement targets and are based on an instrumental understanding that often disregards the layers of children’s lives. One such layer is the socio-political, economic and cultural milieu of the lives of oosc and the complexities they present to their schooling and education. Gowramma’s ghost putting children out of school is an example.

The Karnataka government has been on a mission of making the number of oosc in the state, “zero.” In 2013, when the state claimed that there were 51,000 oosc children in Karnataka, a Bengaluru-based child rights activist, Kathyayini Chamaraj—who had been permitted by the Karnataka High Court to intervene in a public interest litigation (PIL) *suo motu* initiated by it—analysed the enrolment figures of education department to provide evidence to show that the number of oosc is around six lakh in Karnataka⁸ (Chamaraj 2015; Hindu 2013). Seeing the wide variation in the figures given by state and civil society, the high court asked the state government for a fresh survey to estimate the actual number

of oosc. The new survey conducted by the state estimated around 1.7 lakh oosc in Karnataka.⁹ The education districts that have highest number of oosc are Bengaluru South (18,393), Gulbarga (15,468) and Raichur (12,128) (*Hindu* 2014). Interestingly enough, intra-state migrants in Bengaluru city overwhelmingly belong to drought-prone districts such as Gulbarga, Raichur and Yadgir. Migration, involvement in household work, other work, gender-related issues, school-related issues and physical disability are some of the reasons cited in the survey for children being out of school.

Following the survey results by the state government, a number of policy-level changes were made. A high-powered inter-departmental coordination committee, including stakeholders from various domains, was formed in order to monitor measures that mitigate the figures of oosc in the state. The definition of “drop out” changed from “continuous absence of a child for 60 days” to “continuous absence of child from the school for seven days” (GoK 2013). Considering that prolonged absence of children from school will create difficulties in bridging the learning gap of children and in tracking them, the state proposed preventive measures rather than curative ones in a move to achieve “zero” dropouts in the state. Another policy change was to designate an attendance authority to reduce the number of oosc by ensuring regular attendance of every child enrolled in the school.

In the following years, the government kept under-reporting the figures for oosc in the state which were constantly contested by the figures from civil society members and statutory bodies like the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KCPCR). For example, a survey by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) identified 9,468 and 8,318 oosc in the state respectively in 2016 and 2017 (*Hindu* 2017). Varying considerably from these figures, the KCPCR reported the number of oosc to be 1.61 lakh (Belur 2016) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development reported the number of oosc to be around 17 lakh (Kumaran 2018).¹⁰ When enquired in person with the KCPCR office in Bengaluru, the author

is given a figure of 1,56,499¹¹ children identified as school dropouts under Shale Kade Nanna Nade¹² in the age group of 6–18 (KCPCR, personal communication, 20 June 2017).

Amidst this dispute between numbers, where does one locate the story of Gowamma’s ghost? Within which category of reasons can this narrative be included? Although migration is cited as a significant reason in the out-of-school surveys, the multiple layers that knit migrant children’s experiences in the city and their intersections with society, economy and culture are least explored and understood. Echoing the state discourse on oosc, a teacher (who has also worked as a cluster resource person) in the government school that hosts the NGO bridge course told me (in response to my question on the status of migrant children’s education in the city):

We made many surveys and compulsory admission of children to school according to RTE. In the beginning of every year we make the drop out number as zero, again it will change. We make it zero again. Zero, drop out, zero, drop out ... The government school is open to all migrant children, even to migrant children outside the state. We welcome all of them. There are all the facilities in the

government school, books, uniforms, food and everything. There are no restrictions. They can join the school at anytime of the year. Even documents are also not required. What more do migrant children want? Just that parents have to dump their children in any nearby government school even if they move to another construction site. But that they won’t do. They will move to places where they get more work and money, but not enroll their children to school.

When the “ghost” event happened and children stopped coming to school, the same teacher remarked, “you [the NGO] are doing great service to the society. God will not leave these parents who deny education to their children.” Not only are the convoluted lived realities of migrant experiences in the city forgotten here, but also their lack of access (physical and social) to schooling is considered easily manipulable and an issue that can be quickly fixed. In the Karnataka Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2014, the attendance authority is directed to “counsel the parents on the importance of education and inadvisability of the child dropping out of school,” if a child fails to attend the school even after getting the attendance notice issued (GoK 2014: 3–4).

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If this process does not help, then the concerned attendance authority shall direct the parents to appear before the Child Welfare Committee and the committee may provide economic assistance to the family, if the reasons provided by parents are economic in nature (GOK 2014: 4). Only economic reasons are given any significance here. The Gowamma's ghost incident, which resulted in children falling into the out-of-school category, is not devoid of economic reasons, but it is also embedded in the sociocultural beliefs of migrant parents and precarious experience of the city as a whole.

Migration, City, and Precarity

It is easy to sidestep the Gowamma's ghost event and the parents' choice to not send their children to school as an example of irrationality of rural migrants. Not questioning their choice for reasons of cultural autonomy can be equally problematic. This conflict is precisely captured in the words of Das (1999: 447),

Anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste and immorality are, in this way, defined and then located outside culture and civilisation by the state and its institutions. This exclusion of alterity is an important device by which the hegemony of the state is established; either certain "others" are defined as being outside culture, as are "mad" people; or they are domesticated, as with penal servitude. ... At the same time, the danger is that we may in the process be tempted to valorise the community as somehow representing a more organic mode and therefore a more authentic method of organising culture.

The narrative needs to be analysed in the complex terrain of migrant communities' existence and experiences in the city. Given the opportunity, most of the migrant families would like to send their children to school, and they do have educational aspirations and hope. The ghost superstition alone is not the only reason for parents to withdraw their children from school; their location in the socio-economic fabric of the city plays a major role in deciding the outcomes of the cultural beliefs. The precarious standing of migrant communities in the urban economy is an important thread that is predicated in this narrative. Socialities that undergird the lives of the poor are constantly being shaped by the experiences

of precarity that go beyond material scarcity (Das and Randeria 2015: S3).

Apart from the cultural belief of associating "children falling sick" with the "presence of an evil spirit," what rooted the ghost narrative in the community is the intensity and spread of the fever itself. The unhygienic environment in which migrants live (or are forced to live) would have definitely contributed to the origin and spread of the fever, as teachers and other children in the school did not catch the fever. Lack of affordable health facilities aggravated the spread of the disease. Those who went to the hospital for treatment could not go for follow-up visits as they were unable to afford the expenses. One mother said, "one week's earnings are completely spent in the hospital, now how do I take my child to doctor without money?" Some members of the community said that they had been staying in that location for many years, but had experienced the fever spreading in such a manner for the first time. "Ghost" is perhaps an easy and accessible explanation for the spread of the fever and their inability to deal with the situation. Their socio-economic conditions, precarious standing in the city fabric and the substandard living conditions are explanations that would not help them deal with their everyday realities and struggles.

Most children and adults wear sacred threads around their neck as a symbol of protection from God and to drive away "evil eyes." Circulation—the act of living life in multiple physical and social locations—is often essentialised as a prescribed, limited, and closed form of movement, "fixed" in origins and destination, in intent and outcome (Stryke and Yngvesson 2013). As we see in this example, circulation is not only continuous but also relates to migrants' act of "placemaking" in interesting manners. Their circulation and placemaking draw implications from (and have implications for) "who they are in the city." To understand this complex phenomenon, not only the political economy of migration, but also its cultural implications have to be understood in tandem.

Where would neo-liberal economics of migration place this "irrational" ghost

belief of migrants and their choice to not send children to school, in its dominant discourse of "rational" migrants moving from villages to cities to better their lives? How would the city and the institution of school, both having close connections with ideals of modernity, accommodate such cultural facets of migrant narratives? What does the monolithic construct of oosc mean for the labyrinthine plots of marginalised groups such as the migrants and their educational inclusion?

Educational Inclusion

There are multiple layers to the ghost narrative. The NGO teachers were disappointed that the children stopped coming to school after all their efforts to bring them to school and to help them learn and get enrolled in the mainstream school. The NGO management, with the help of teachers, did work hard to ensure meaningful learning for all children and believed in the emancipative potential of education. They understood that the fever originated from the community due to the unhygienic living conditions, and thought that the decision to not send children to school for this reason was irrational. They tried their best to convince the parents. Although they believed that there was no ghost in the school, they offered the community to organise a pooja in the nearby temple in order to "ward off" the ghost and thereby convince the parents to send the children to school without worry. Some families were convinced by the NGO and were willing to send their children to school, yet the mass hysteria about the ghost, that found its way into the labour camp, persuaded them to go with the crowd.

Educational inclusion of migrant oosc is a complex question. In Gowamma's ghost story, ghettoisation of migrant communities, their socio-economic position in the informal labour market of the city, unavailability of proper health services, and unhygienic living conditions added to the complexity of the scenario. In contexts such as these, interventions for migrant children based on fixed source-destination model cannot address the nuances of their educational experiences.

Simple linear solutions at the source and destination not only miss the complex mobility patterns of migrant communities, but also their sociocultural lives and its implications for education. While the political economy of migration has received scholarly attention in the Indian context, the social and cultural aspects are not studied in depth, particularly so from the experiences of migrant children. Only when the issue of labour is involved do children's experiences figure in the narratives of migration. Grand narratives of child labour, poverty, parental awareness and willingness gain policy attention, but not the complex interface between migration and culture and its precarious location, the city fabric. This is not to say that children are not involved in labour or their involvement in labour has no implications for their schooling and education. In fact, migrant children actively support their families through activities such as sibling care, domestic work and sometimes through paid labour. These reasons that hinder children's access to schooling are complexly intertwined and cannot be separated from the sociocultural, economic and political positioning of migrants in the city.

Making Bengaluru (and Karnataka) a "zero" oosc zone will remain a distant dream unless children's lives and their educational experiences in the city are understood in their entirety and richness.

Policies, practices and indeed approaches to gathering data on inclusion, silence, distance and often exclude by design. Marginalisation is perpetuated by policy processes that operate as if they are somehow neutral. They do not problematise the failure of dominant discourses and practices of schooling and education to recognise or validate multiple knowledges, educational practices, ways of life or worldviews. (Aikman and Dyer 2012: 180)

Gowamma's ghost is not the only example that illustrates the complexity of migrant children's educational experiences in the city. The "out-of-school" construct have to be understood in a nuanced and layered manner in order to envisage meaningful educational initiatives for migrant children. Thought and action through democratic deliberation among all the stakeholders is an inevitable requirement to move forward.

NOTES

- 1 This fieldwork is part of my ongoing doctoral research on education of migrant children in the city of Bengaluru.
- 2 Non-residential special training is an intervention by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Karnataka for OOSC. It includes children of in-migrants who come to Karnataka for employment from various places. It is meant for non-enrolled and dropped-out children, and gives special training to them and mainstreams them to an age-appropriate class in a regular school. Various NGOs anchor the intervention in collaboration with the government.
- 3 Most of the families in the camp were Kannada- and Telugu-speaking, and some were Hindi-speaking. They came from districts such as Gulbarga, Raichur and Yadgir in Karnataka, Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh, Kathiar in Bihar, Uttar Dinajpur in West Bengal. Most of them belonged to the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. While most of them were working as construction labourers, some worked in the cement block factory that the labour camp houses, others worked as house helps, and some as painters, security guards, and so on.
- 4 A jhopdi, as the migrants call it, is a slum-type dwelling usually made of blue tarpaulin sheets. Labour colonies usually have one-room structures made of tin sheets.
- 5 A goddess worshipped in Karnataka.
- 6 Roti made of jowar and bajra are commonly eaten by people from the villages of northern Karnataka.
- 7 A traditional board game played commonly in Karnataka.
- 8 According to Chamaraj, 78,76,110 students have been admitted to Class 1 from 2005-06 to 2011-12. In 2012-13, the government's figures say that there were only 72,48,063 children studying from Classes 2 to 8 in 2012-13. Hence, the difference of 6,28,047 children have either dropped out, or are missing, after enrolment in the last seven years (Hindu 2013).
- 9 Consolidated figure from both school and household survey.
- 10 According to the human resource development ministry, the projected population in the 6-17 age group is 1,26,95,148 and the Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) enrolment data for Karnataka shows 1,09,28,854 children are enrolled in schools in 2016. Hence, the difference of 17,66,294 students are out-of-school (Kumaran 2018).
- 11 The author conducted personal interviews with KCPCR officials. According to the data provided, the number of children identified as school dropouts under Shale Kade Nanna Nade in the age group 6-14 is 55,148 and number of children in the age group 15-18 is 1,01,351 giving a total of 1,56,499 OOSC. The officials themselves remarked that the survey is not done in a systematic manner and there are many loopholes in the methodology of the survey.
- 12 Shale Kade Nanna Nade is an awareness campaign initiated by the Karnataka State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights in collaboration with the government as well as NGOs, in order to increase enrolment in schools.

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