

Migrant Children and 'Free' Education in India

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Schooling of migrant children in India is compromised for various reasons, such as their mobility, disadvantaged backgrounds, and exclusionary experiences of schooling. Such contexts and experiences of migrant families and children are in stark contrast to how their aspirations and motivation are dominantly imagined by education functionaries of the state and the non-governmental organisations. Using narratives from the city of Bengaluru, this article throws light on the aforesaid discord, thereby highlighting the complex placement of migrant children with respect to inclusionary frameworks of schooling and education in India.

Muft ka chandan ghis mere Nandan (The sandalwood is free, keep rubbing it), a teacher in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) said to Vanitha, an eight-year-old migrant child, who was packing some extra food for home from the midday meal provision of the NGO school. Vanitha's family migrated to Bengaluru from Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh about three years ago, although her father had first migrated to the city seven years ago. Her father worked as a driver and mother as a homemaker. Before being enrolled in the NGO school, Vanitha was enrolled in another school in the city run by a charity trust. She had to drop out because the school did not permit her frequent absence necessitated by the mobility of her family back and forth between the village and the city.

Her family did not have money to enrol Vanitha and her two younger siblings in an English medium private school and was doubtful about the usefulness of enrolling them in a Kannada medium government school in Bengaluru. That was when she got enrolled into the bridging programme run by an NGO school in east Bengaluru where the policy is to mainstream children into English medium private schools and provide partial financial support to the parents towards paying the school fees.

The NGO bridging programme for the academic year 2017–18 was coming to an end, and for Vanitha's family, even half of the school fee, when calculated for all the three children in the city, was not affordable. Vanitha's mother asked the school for more financial support, but to no avail, as the NGO had to stick to its policy of funding only half of the school fees. The year before, Vanitha's elder sister too attended the same bridging programme but did not join a mainstream school and went back to live with her grandparents in the village. The teacher's

words, *Muft ka chandan ghis mere Nandan*, were therefore not only in reference to the "free" food that Vanitha was packing home that day, but also her inability of getting mainstreamed into a regular school despite having accessed all the "free" facilities provided by the NGO throughout the year.

Vanitha is representative of many migrant children, for whose families, mobility is integral to livelihood. Schooling of migrant children is compromised for various reasons, such as their mobility, disadvantaged backgrounds and exclusionary experiences of schooling, not to mention unprecedented global crises such as COVID-19. Such contexts and experiences of migrant children are in stark contrast to how their educational aspirations and motivation are dominantly imagined by education functionaries of the state and the NGOs. This article discusses the above discord by using narratives from Bengaluru. It juxtaposes the placement of migrant children with inclusionary frameworks of schooling and education in India.

'Unwilling' Parents

Researchers in the Indian context have long critiqued the dominant myth of disinterest and the unwillingness of poor parents in their children's schooling (Balagopalan 2014; Drèze and Kingdon 2001; PROBE Team 1999; Sharma 2013; Tilak 2018; Weiner 1991). Balagopalan (2014) argues that the differential construction of poor parents' educational aspirations is integral to how the modern colonial apparatus has historically engaged with imaginaries of schooling for marginalised communities. She argues that the "schizophrenic" agenda of colonial state, while on the one hand attempted to expand schooling, on the other, restricted educational opportunities of labouring children under the pretext of parental disinterest and unwillingness. In light of the evidence regarding increasing parental aspirations and motivation, "lack of interest" cannot be understood as an "independent" factor affecting children's schooling (Tilak 2018). Yet, in case of migrant children in the city, the age-old saga of the lack of parental motivation persists. This is

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echoed in the following words of education functionaries:

If they rent a house, they can bring children every day to school. In case of “shed” people (migrant families living in squatter settlements), they might vacate the place overnight. Local and settled migrant families take TC (Transfer Certificate) before they go to another place. “Shed” people do not. And when they are regularly absent, they will be marked as drop out. We can issue TC only when we know where they are going. Most often they give us wrong phone number, or someone else’s number. I don’t know if they are doing this deliberately. (Headmistress, Government school, Personal Communication, 31 August 2017)

Government tries to make provisions such that they (migrants) stay in the village itself. There are more agricultural labourers in the village. When there is no rain, they will not have work. Parents come to the city for economic purposes and take children along with them. They will be a burden. Migrant children take time to adjust with the new circumstances and they fall back in studies because of this. Higher class people also migrate, but they settle down. When parents make home in one place and settle, then it is fine. The problem is that these parents, they will not be stable. They will not stay in one single place. Once work is finished here, they move to another place. Automatically children will get dropped out. When they go to a new place, they will not get time to search for a new school. (Cluster Resource Person [CRP], Personal Communication, 13 September 2017)

These state education functionaries held parents to be solely responsible for their children’s dislocation from the village, frequent mobility and irregular attendance in the school. It is also perceived that educational inclusion means physical and material access to school, and that poor migrant families and children are interested in the “free” resources of school but not “real” education. Despite providing everything for “free,” functionaries wonder why migrant “shed” children do not attend school regularly. Consider the following narratives for example:

[Addressing a migrant child who came back from village after a few months to re-enrol in the school]

See this boy. If you give him books and bag, he would stop coming to school from tomorrow. Last time he took all the facilities from the school, when he got enrolled in June and then stopped coming. What should we do with these “shed” children?

(Headmistress, Government school, Personal Communication, 31 August 2017)

When I ask them, “where did you go all these days?” they say that their parents did not send them. We are giving everything to you

free, then what is your problem? They get money if they go for rag picking. Some children go back to their native place. Some of them continue till 5th or 6th standard. They are not interested to come to school. There are all the facilities in Government school. Akshaya Patra is there for mid-day meals. Uniforms are given free. Volunteers come and teach music and dance. They teach even English. There is drawing, painting, computer, football coaching and what not. Everything is there in government school also. I do not know why they are not coming. (Teacher, Government school, Personal Communication, 13 April 2018)

Along with such views of inclusion, educational functionaries assume that the system is “open to all” and provides optimal conditions for migrant children’s education. Consider the following response of a CRP, when asked about government provisioning for migrant children:

Whatever government is giving for regular children, same thing we are giving for migrant children. Another advantage for migrant children is that wherever you go, you get admission anytime from June to May. What else do they need? Nowhere we have put a board saying, “no admission for migrant children.” Whichever time of the year they come, we give them food, books and all other benefits. We even admit children who are from another country. For example, in case of migrants from Bangladesh, we cannot know. There are many people from Bangladesh, we think they are from north India. They make all documents faster than everyone else. They make ration card and Aadhaar card faster than us. I still do not have ration card. We ask them later, then they say they are from Bangladesh. We discussed this in the district office. Then they said, “let them be from any country, now that they are here, we will give them education.” We are giving everyone free education. From wherever they come, there is admission in government school. That is one big advantage for migrant children. Many teachers do overtime, participate in surveys, make friends with parents and try to get children to school. After we make the admission, the parents will not be here, they will move to another place.

(Personal Communication, 13 September 2017)

The education functionary, here, assumes that the government school being “free” and “open to all” is a sufficient condition for migrant families to enrol their children in schools. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 facilitates provisions, such as admitting children during any time of the year (Section 15), without documentary compulsion (Section 14) and to an age-appropriate class (Section 4). However, the actual modalities of migrant

children’s enrolment, attendance and retention in schools remain ambiguous and challenging (Chandrasekhar and Bhattacharya 2018). And ill-founded and prejudiced perceptions about parental interest and willingness not only ignore the structural conditions of migrant children’s exclusion, but also how universal frameworks of “free” and “open to all” education contradictorily engage with migrant childhoods.

Perspective of NGOs

Most NGOs¹ (if not all) engage with migrant families and children with similar assumptions and beliefs about parental motivation, as reflected in the introductory narrative. Schooling is equated to an instrumental “give-and-take” transaction that involves incentivisation through material benefits, such as free food, clothes and school bags. Using tangible incentives to bring children to school is quite prevalent in the Indian education discourse (Sharma 2013). Incentivisation in itself does not appear to be a problem, but the manner in which it was unfolded in everyday spaces was so rigid that in one of the NGOs, several children were sent back to settlements if they came to school “only for food” (Field Observation, 13 February 2017). Older children in the settlements, who had huge learning gaps and several domestic responsibilities, would often come to the NGO school only during lunch hour, but were denied food because of their irregular attendance. In another NGO, conditional incentivisation, such as presenting “attendance gifts” to children who come to the school regularly, was used as a mechanism to encourage children to attend school (Field Observation, 19 April 2018). Similar to how in the former NGO, the rigid provision of incentivisation negatively affected children’s access to food, many children in the latter NGO were often put in the spotlight and made answerable for their irregular attendance.

Many NGO functionaries thought that migrant families in the city are not “im-poverished” as one might imagine. They are alleged to be extravagantly investing on food items, clothing, mobile phones and cultural events, instead of prioritising children’s education.

Though we assume that migrant children are vulnerable, at the end of the intervention, we feel that they are no longer vulnerable. They get everything free for their education. Migrant families also have their own system of survival and perceptions, their own decision making. They spend a lot during festivals and marriages. They buy smart phones and eat lot of non-veg food too. But when it comes to investment in their children's education, they are not willing. Sometimes we think poor are really poor, but they earn good amount of money. (Founder member of an NGO, Personal Communication, 30 June 2016)

We provide all facilities to these families, free food, health check-up and many other things. Parents are carefree. They have everything actually. If you observe, all these children who come to my school are "chubby" looking, they are not "stunted/malnourished." (Principal of an NGO school, Personal Communication, 30 January 2017)

These kids, you know, are so irregular. They come for two days, become absent for one day. Then again come for one day, then again absent. How do we make them understand? Today I teach something, and next day the child is not in class. What to do in such situations? Simply they will not come, this reason, that reason, stomachache and other silly excuses. Most often their parents are not sincere. Sometimes parents want their children to do their housework. They are not understanding that they are playing with their children's lives. They don't understand the value of education. Some people understand, and their lives become very different. (Teacher in an NGO, Personal Communication, 20 March 2018).

Differential construction of migrant families and children and the moral imperative of NGOs to reform the "shed" children is often done in a punitive and surveillant manner. During the fieldwork, NGO workers sometimes introduced the author as a police official who came to inspect if all parents were sending their children to school. Often, it was told to parents, in a rather condescending tone, that it was a punishable offence if they did not send their children to school. On the one hand, families are often reminded of their legal and moral responsibility to send children to school. On the other, their voices and agency in matters of children's care and education are taken for granted, as illustrated in the following instance.

In February 2017, one of the NGOs was partnering with the government in implementing the mass immunisation drive for measles and rubella vaccination

meant for "schoolgoing children" below 15 years of age. Campaigns and debates were taking place across the city against the vaccination for the lack of information about the benefits and risks of the vaccination and the flouting of parental consent (Gunnupuri 2017). While there were various platforms for middle- and elite-class parents to raise concerns, awareness and consent of "poor" families were taken for granted. In an orientation programme, one of the government health workers said that the reason people question the vaccination was because it was given to them "free of cost," and if it was charged, they would accept all the dangers associated with it (Field Observation, 6 February 2017).

In the community meetings organised by NGO-1, to obtain parental consent for the vaccination, teachers were focused on obtaining signatures of consent from parents rather than providing proper information about the vaccination (Field Observation, 9 February 2017). One of the teachers took signatures from families who said they did not have children at home, as she was instructed to obtain consent from as many families as possible. This indicates how poor parents are expected to be reticent about "free" state provisions and that their actual awareness and accord do not matter. These narratives indicate how accountability is often perceived as one-sided, where poor parents are morally bound to educate their children but, at the same time, not entitled to receive adequate information or hold educational providers accountable.

Migrant children, on the one hand, are considered to be included in the education system by virtue of their "nominal" presence in the school registers (Srivastava and Dasgupta 2016). At the same time, their lifeworlds stretch across multiple locations (Mander et al 2019; Rogaly and Thieme 2012) and necessarily entail their absence in a sedentary system of schooling.

Navigating Presence and Absence

Similar to how migrant families are socially and politically disfranchised through the ideals of a sedentary citizen subject (Mander et al 2019; Roy 2016), migrant children are educationally disfranchised

through the sedentary imaginaries of the modern schoolchild.

Rajan (2019) demonstrates how unanticipated events can further aggravate the informal and precarious conditions of migrant lives in the city and shape the educational possibilities of migrant children. An extreme example of this is the mass exodus of hundreds of migrant families and children from various Indian cities in the event of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing nationwide lockdown. Various news reports observe that the pandemic is likely to severely affect the family income, health, education and well-being of migrant children, and it is essential to ensure their inclusion in source villages (Daniel and Ravindranath 2020; Rozario 2020). Despite migrant parents' willingness and aspirations for their children's education, their nowhere locations in the discourses of development and education place them at odds with the "free" and "open-to-all" framework of educational inclusion in India. Unless such marginal locations of migrant citizens and child subjects are acknowledged and addressed, the blame game of reproving "Nandan" for exploiting the abundantly (and ostensibly) available "chandan" will not only remain inoperable but also discriminating.

NOTE

- 1 The author did come across some NGOs in Bengaluru that reflectively and empathetically engaged with the marginal contexts of migrant families and children.

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