

Ethnography and Migrant Children: Perspectives and Challenges

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Introduction

In this article, I share some of the methodological reflections that are emerging from my doctoral study with migrant children in the Indian city of Bangalore. The study aims to explore educational experiences of children belonging to internally migrating families in India. The nature of this migration is largely short-term and circular, and most children are either dropped out of school or are never enrolled in school. I employed ethnographic methods during the fieldwork to explore migrant children's everyday experiences in the city and the educational landscapes in which they are situated.

Epistemological shifts in social theories of childhood have enabled researchers to understand childhood(s) as socially constructed and children as active beings engaged in making their world. This newly formed theoretical inclination has become an "obligatory act of faith" (Nieuwenhuys 2013) among researchers of childhood(s) and education. Methodologically, this has resulted in the construction of ethnography, in new sociology of childhood, as uniquely capable of making sense of children's voices and lives (James and Prout 2005). Despite such epistemological and methodological convictions around ethnographically researching children's lives, fieldwork was less straightforward in its manifestations. Building on how traditional ethnographic ideals are getting revamped across multiple contours in current times, this article reflects upon some unique challenges that arise from my research with migrant children.

Ethnographic Presence

One challenge is presented by the complex patterns of mobility that migrant families in the city have. Various cross-cutting dimensions define the migrant population profile in the city, such as the nature of migration (e.g., inter-state/intra-district/inter-district), residence in the city (e.g., government allotted land/private land/worksite/slum/street) and labour sectors in which migrants are employed (e.g., construction/rag picking/domestic work/sanitation work). Along with this complex profile, migrant families and children frequently move between the village and the city, or between different worksites within the city. Selecting one site and a set of participants from within this complex profile was challenging because of its uneasy alignment with the traditional ethnographic requirement of "prolonged engagement" of the researcher in a "particular spatial location" for a "particular time period" and with a "particular set of participants." Research with migrant children disrupts the above-mentioned ethnographic ideals through their complex profiles and mobile lives.

The methodological principle that a "place" can be understood "by just staying there" is increasingly questioned (Merry 2000) in contemporary research. De-essentializing fixed

spatial and temporal ethnographic ideals around childhood, Stryker and Yngvesson (2013, p.298) pose the question, “what kinds of ‘fixed’ and ‘fluid’ relational contexts and trajectories of children’s circulation (the act of living life in multiple physical and social locations) can be identified that shape both figurations of childhood and the lived experiences of children?” In this light, it is important to deconstruct the spatial and temporal modalities of ethnographic research in order to meaningfully engage with the lives of migrant children. Fieldwork for this doctoral study was done for thirteen months in Bangalore between January 2017 and May 2018. Schools run by three NGOs in the city were chosen as specific sites for studying children’s educational experiences. On the one hand, this delimited the study and thereby helped address the question of fixing ethnographic “place.” On the other hand, this methodological choice became a trade-off for the ethnographic ideal of “fixed” set of participants, as migrant children enrolled in the NGO schools often “entered” and “exited” according to the mobility patterns of their families, defying the “place-centred” ideals of modern schooling. This trade off, initially perceived as an ethnographic roadblock, provided in effect, a vantage point to understand how “immobile” schools engage with educational inclusion of “mobile” childhoods (see Rajan 2019 for a detailed field narrative). The methodological combination of “static” researcher and “mobile” participants, thus, becomes a site for critical engagement rather than a limiting ethnographic anomaly

Constructing the “Other”

Another challenge is presented by how ethnographic research has evolved traditionally through the construction of the “other.” Anthropological discourse around the field as “a place set apart from the urban” (that is: “agrarian,” “pastoral,” “wild” and “a site of culture”) is intricately tied to the idea of ethnographic fieldwork being a project of studying “otherness” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The understanding of field immersion in “remote” and “bounded” fields as the “totem” of anthropological disciplinary identity has resulted in “ethnographic panopticism” (Coleman and Collins 2006, p.5). This has increased relevance in understanding the lived realities of migrant children, as marginalized children have been dominantly constructed by colonial research discourse as subjects of “ethnographic gaze” (Balagopalan 2014). In this background, it becomes imperative to question one’s own ideas of “field,” “self,” and the “other” in regard to the research subjects. While ethnography claims to have the capacity to listen to the “powerless,” “voiceless,” and the “marginalized,” one must ask, “who is listening and how are the voices of the ‘other’ understood and represented?”. “Giving voices” to children could also mean that “children are disabled and need a helping hand,” which may, in turn, result in subsuming diverse childhoods into a single category (James 2007).

On the one hand, migrant children are dominantly constructed as the “other” for being outside the normative locations of childhood and schooling and thereby passive objects of state and NGO governance. On the other hand, migrant children actively engage with their marginal locations, which in turn are reflective of the exclusionary contexts of education and development in India. Therefore, how the researcher constructs the “other” migrant childhood(s) is not merely a methodological question, but also an epistemological one. Balagopalan (2019) notes two dominant, overarching approaches that have critiqued the global child rights imaginary. The first is understanding how the plurality of childhoods in multiple contexts contest the global ideal of childhood. The second is problematizing how childhoods on the margins become objects of governance in modern neoliberal discourse around child rights. By employing a post-colonial lens, she argues for a third approach that foregrounds historical and structural modes of exclusionary citizenship that children on the margins are already framed in. Such epistemological modalities around how marginal childhoods are

understood and engaged with in contemporary research, influence how migrant childhoods—those which do not fit into the spatial and temporal ideals of both childhood and schooling—are methodologically engaged. It requires the researcher to problematize how migrant childhoods are constructed and circulated and be aware of how one’s own methodological alignment may reinforce the politics around the understanding of childhoods.

Therefore, a key task of this study, in addition to negotiating the hierarchical adult-child relationship, is to understand migrant children’s marginality through ethically sensible ethnographic encounters. One of the ways in which this is done in this study is through understanding and engaging with migrant child subjects as agentic beings who are negotiating sites of multiple childhoods, while being situated concurrently in marginal contexts of migration and development. In this framework, ethnographic research becomes a site of “education” that enables one “to attend” and “to follow along” without predispositions (Ingold 2014). For example, children’s work in the city is seen in the dominant discourse either as an anomaly to universal childhood or as a celebration of multiple childhood(s). A constructive ethnographic engagement would stand afar from such essentializations in all stages of research (Rajan 2018) and attempt to understand children’s experiences through active facilitation and observation of their own voices and participation (Jacquemin 2004; Lundy 2007).

Scholars, particularly those situated in the global South, often need to critically reflect upon the essentialized notions of childhood, and the political implications of the construction of knowledge around children and childhoods (de Castro 2020). It is in this light that I problematize ethnographic ideals around researching migrant childhoods and emphasize the need for employing epistemologically and methodologically just approaches while researching childhoods on the margins.

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