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# Migrant childhoods and schooling in India: contesting the inclusion-exclusion binary

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## ABSTRACT

Modern schooling systems operate through normative and sedentary framings of childhood, within which migrant childhoods get constructed as outliers. This paper problematizes the discriminatory ways in which such a system operates. The inclusionary mechanisms adopted to 'mainstream' 'hard to reach' migrant children into formal schools do not address the fundamental spatio-temporal modalities of modern schooling. This complicates the relationship between migrant childhoods and presumed policy dichotomies such as inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, this paper foregrounds how migrant children's lives, are spatio-temporally liminal and precarious in the city. It further explores how these modalities of migrant children's lives are in discordance with the spatio-temporal framing of modern childhood and schooling. Moreover, migrant children's own experiences of schooling and socio-spatial marginalization in the city bring out the contradictions of modern schooling.

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## Introduction

Parents come to the city for economic purposes and get children along with them. They (children) will be a burden (to parents). Migrant children take time to adjust with the new circumstances and they fall back in studies because of this. Higher class (rich) people also migrate, but they settle down ... The problem is that these (poor) parents, they won't be stable. They won't stay in one single place. Once work is finished here, they move to another place. Automatically children will get dropped out.

A state education official in the city of Bangalore stated the above during a conversation about why most migrant children are out of school in the city. Shared by several state and NGO functionaries, these normative perceptions, which valorized sedentary modes of living and laboring, viewed the migration undertaken by marginalized sections of society as the main reason for why their children dropped out of school. Families and children who move continue to be considered outliers to the normative ideals of fixed residence, identities and place attachments (Danaher and Henderson 2012; Ní Laoire et al. 2010) and thereby outside 'normal' modes of living and learning. 'Moral panics' around migrant childhoods are constructed around dominant ideals of modern childhood that expect for all children residential fixity, domestication (Ní Laoire et al. 2010) and 'safe, supervised and controlled' spaces (Nieuwenhuys 2013) such as formal schools. These ideals often view migrant subjects through binary frameworks of 'home/not-at-home', 'rootedness/rootlessness' (Ní Laoire et al. 2010) and by extension, 'school/out-of-school', leaving out the complexities and ambiguities of belonging and inclusion that unfold in children's lives.

Furthermore, migrant children are hardly perceived as active beings in androcentric and adultist imaginations of migration, childhood and education. In general, children are perceived in educational policies as citizens- and adults – in the making and in social welfare policies as vulnerable and at-risk (Morrow 2011). Similarly, though migration studies in the last two decades acknowledge and explore children's agency and active engagement in processes and experiences of migration (see, for instance, Seeberg and Goździak 2016; White et al. 2011; Van Blerk and Ansell 2005; Sime 2017), traditionally these have largely constructed children as submissive and passive beings; baggage that causes difficulties; dependents and victims; and devoid of voices, experiences and perspectives (Dobson 2009; Ensor 2010; Giani 2006). As a result, the ways in which education and development interventions are constructed and applied, often contradict how migrant families and children themselves perceive and experience their milieus (Morganti 2015), though the latter constitute a 'valuable source' that can shape the design of policies and programmes (Crivello and Vennam 2012). In an effort to contribute to the body of knowledge that problematizes the dominant constructions of migrant children and the educational interventions that result therein, this paper, explores the uneasy relationship between everyday experiences and perspectives of migrant children in the southern Indian city of Bangalore and the structures and processes of modern schooling through which these children are ostensibly included.

Revolving around ideas of access, integration, inclusion, belonging, and socio-cultural capital and mobility, questions of migration, childhood and education are largely explored in the context of children in trans-national and refugee migration (see Devine 2009; Bauer 2016; Sime and Fox 2015; Archambault 2012; Ottosson, Eastmond, and Cederborg 2017; Waters 2015). Such lenience in migration policy and research marginalizes the voices and experiences of large numbers of internally migrating families and children who are involved in mobility-dependent livelihoods in developing countries (Dyer and Rajan 2021; Zhang 2015). There have been some recent efforts to understand the educational experiences of internally migrating children, particularly in China (see Zhang 2015; Wang 2008) and also in African and South American countries (see Cheney 2004; Van Blerk and Ansell 2006; Punch 2007). Yet, lacunae in research is noteworthy in the Indian context, despite the significant and increasing presence of temporary migration in the country. The limited studies that are available (Coffey 2013; Roy, Singh, and Roy 2015; RoyChowdhury 2014; Smita 2008) largely focus on a quantitative and statistical analysis of migrant remittances, physical access to schooling and urban poverty and exclusion or are done through reporting formats that indicate numbers, targets and outcomes (Dyer and Rajan 2021). This study identifies a more fundamental problem with the modern schooling system that is predicated upon spatio-temporal ideals suited to sedentary and privileged childhoods. Such as system, I argue, denies the right to meaningful learning and education of migrant children from marginalized communities.

## Migration, children and schooling in India

The number of internal migrants in India (based on 'place of last residence') has increased from around 309 million in the 2001 census to around 454 million in the 2011 census (Irudaya Rajan and Sumeetha 2020). These numbers largely include permanent and semi-permanent migrants. Migrant families and children who participated in this study belong largely to the rural-to-urban, internal migration stream (i.e. interstate, and intrastate), but most of their migration is temporary<sup>1</sup> in nature. Despite the observed increase in forms of temporary migration in developing countries like India, accurate data remains scarce. Migration literature in the Indian context indicates that it is poor and socially marginalized from rural areas (who are also the least educated and skilled) who migrate more than others on a temporary basis (Keshri and Bhagat 2012). Such migrants are largely employed in vulnerable informal labor sectors such as construction, agriculture and manufacturing (GoI 2017).

Children from seasonally migrating families remain one of the most excluded groups in education (Chandrasekhar and Bhattacharya 2018). Among the school-going age group in India,

there are around six million children accompanying seasonal migrant families (Smita 2008) and 10.7 million children living in rural households with at least one short-term migrant (Chandrasekhar and Bhattacharya 2018); and these numbers are likely to be underestimated. Despite the scarcity of large scale systematic data, various micro-level surveys and studies find that temporary migration leads to various forms of educational challenges; and the migrant child's access to education is severely hampered both at the 'source' and 'destination' sites (see Aide et Action 2013; Betancourt et al. 2013; NCPCR 2015; Smita 2008).

This paper highlights, both conceptually and empirically, that the educational exclusion of migrant children<sup>2</sup> is not merely a question of mobile livelihoods or access to resources, but an outcome of the fundamental assumptions and structures through which modern schooling operates. I note three issues here: first, that formal schooling operates through the normative figure of the sedentary school child, which excludes the migrant child subject by its very design. More broadly, the educational landscape in India reflects sedentary dispositions. The 1966 Kothari Commission report, a purportedly progressive education report in post-independence India, declares that educational provisioning for mobile nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes 'will not be easy' and encourages extending support so that these communities might adopt 'more settled ways of living'. Only as a temporary solution, the commission proposed that mobile educational facilities could be offered to migrant children. The 'place-based' formal schooling system in India, as elsewhere, operates through sedentary norms such as spatially demarcated educational administration units, geographically fixed local community, static school processes (like fixed timings, annual calendar, requirement to be in school throughout the year), curriculum and language (Dyer 2012). This has educationally disfranchised the migrant child subject.

Second, the formal schooling system in India, as elsewhere, is organized around ideals of age, grade, learning levels and an immutable linear correspondence among these, that is, under 'normal' circumstances, a child of a certain age ought to be in a particular grade capable of achieving the equivalent learning level for the grade. Such an 'iron clad class (school grade) based schooling' system, as Dhankar (2017) calls it, operates through the linear progression of same-aged children along with corresponding grade and learning levels, which in turn, guides the curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy, exams, teaching and learning paradigms. For example, in such a system, the curriculum is more like a 'time-bound staircase' instead of a continuous learning curve (Dhankar 2017) which children must climb through linearly organized progressive age-grade coordinates. In this 'progressive' age-graded framing of schooling, migrant children who move with their families between the village and the city or different work sites within the city, get constructed as anomalies that disturb the temporal equilibrium of the schooling system.

Third, both the colonial and postcolonial Indian state has legitimized differential educational opportunities for children on the margins through increased adoption of non-formal educational interventions (Kumar 2006). In line with the 'schizophrenic' colonial agenda of formulating differential educational opportunities for children from marginalized communities for reasons of alleged parental unwillingness (Balagopalan 2014), postcolonial Indian states continue to construct children on the margins as outliers of modern schooling and development. The homogeneous construction of children on the margins as 'hard to reach' is central to this process, as educational inclusion for these children still remains as 'an open-ended site of continuous experimentation' unanchored from the requirements of equitable and quality education mandated by the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE) (Balagopalan 2018, 6). The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) uses the term 'Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups' (SEDGs) to include a variety of categories such as girls, other gender minorities, children with special needs, SC, ST, OBCs, Muslims, urban poor and migrant communities, and proposes 'multiple pathways' including both formal and non-formal educational modes to ensure the educational inclusion of SEDGs. This can only be read as a continuation of the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE), which legitimized and formalized Non-Formal Education (NFE) and the two-tier system of schooling for children outside the structure of formal schooling (Kumar 2006).

Given this sedentary, temporally frozen and differential schooling landscape, inclusive state policies mandated by RTE such as ‘anytime enrolment during the school year’ or ‘detention/non-detention’ become nominal measures that do not address the fundamental exclusionary ontology of the modern schooling system (Rajan 2020b). Furthermore, mobility being only one social reality, intersecting with other marginal locations of children’s lives such as caste, class and gender, provision of meaningful education for migrant children would entail a fundamental overhaul of the schooling system. It is in this context that this paper situates the multi-local and marginal lived realities of migrant children and thereby problematizes normative ideals of migration, childhood and education through which modern schooling operates.

## Research site and methodology

This paper is based on my research in the Indian city of Bangalore for thirteen months between January 2017 and May 2018. Bangalore, the capital city of the state of Karnataka, is the most urbanized district in the state, with ninety-one percent (around 8.7 million) of its total population residing in urban areas (GoK 2016). Twenty percent of the city’s total population currently lives in slums and the capital-labor relationship is predominantly structured by relations of informality (Roy-Chowdhury 2011). Migration to the city for purposes of livelihood is common and, on the rise, despite the lack of adequate investment in the city’s infrastructure or services (Sridhar, Venugopala Reddy, and Srinath 2013). Notwithstanding the significance of poor migrants’ ‘cheap labor’ to the development of the city, they live in the margins of the city with vulnerable conditions of living and working.

Children belonging to temporary migrant families largely have access only to NGO schools in the city. These NGO schools provide bridging and accelerated learning programmes for numeracy and literacy, and attempt to enroll these children in age-appropriate grades in formal government or private schools. The narratives in this paper are drawn from observations and interactions in NGO school sites and communities in Bangalore East Taluk (of the revenue district of Bangalore Urban) and Bangalore South 4 Block (of the educational district of Bangalore South). Large number of migrant children live, along with their families, in what is prevalently called as the ‘shed’ houses (temporary shacks made of tin or polythene sheets) in squatter settlements or labor camps (residential and informal work sites) in peripheral locations of the city, having little access to water and sanitation infrastructure. The parents are employed in informal labor sectors such as construction, sanitation work, rag-picking and domestic work. Although most migrant families have better earnings in the city (ranging from around 4 to 5.4 dollars for men; and 2.7 to 4 dollars for women per day) compared to what they earn in their village, their lives in the city are difficult, irregular, uncertain, and insecure. Most of the migrant families have migrated to the city for reasons of drought, crop failure, landlessness, debt, lack of work and in search of better livelihood opportunities. Most families reported belonging to the Hindu religion and within them, the largest number belonged to marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).<sup>3</sup> A majority of the intrastate migrant families were from the poorest and least developed districts North Karnataka (Gulbarga, Raichur and Yadgir) and interstate migrant families were from the neighboring southern state Andhra Pradesh or the Eastern and Northern states of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh respectively.

Ethnographic field work, largely through methods of observation and informal interview, was conducted with migrant families, education functionaries and children.<sup>4</sup> These methods were used as they embody the possibilities for the researcher to understand how children construct and engage with their everyday lived experiences and social worlds; and thereby, foreground their voice (James 2001). And these were pursued by ‘being there’ (Fetterman 2009), ‘hanging-out’ (Murchison 2010) and ‘going-along’ (Kusenbach 2003) with children in their everyday spaces that include their settlements, NGO schools and other outdoor locations such as those used for play or the route they walked from school to home. There were limitations to such engagements as the

place where I lived in the city was quite far from children's settlements and my travel time necessarily led to missing out on multiple spaces and times that children actively engaged with. Yet, given the fuzzy nature of the field where migrants are situated in the city, engaging reflectively with the complexity and limitations of the research is more important than the ethnographic obsession of spending prolonged time with a fixed set of participants (see Rajan 2020a for a detailed note on this and other ethnographic dilemmas).

The study had three phases, each of which focused on a specific NGO school, the migrant communities it worked with and where possible, the government schools it enrolled children to. Each phase took around 3–4 months of field work depending on the nature of access that NGO provided. A typical fieldwork day included observations and interactions with children and education functionaries in the school during the school hours (6–7 h) and with families and community members outside school hours (1–2 h). Data was recorded primarily through field notes and reflections but also through photographs and audio-recordings where consent was obtained. Though there were broader indicators around experiences of migration, childhood and education that guided observations and conversations, participants often presented new lines of inquiry. It was this possibility of reciprocal knowledge construction that guided this ethnographic study. It also enabled oneself to research 'with children, as social actors and subjects', rather than, 'on children, as objects of inquiry' (Christensen and James 2017).

Coming from different geographical backgrounds, children spoke different languages, many of which I had no expertise in. Broadly, the communicative language with children belonging to Northern regions of India was Hindi, and with those of southern regions were Kannada and Telugu. For instance, children whose mother tongue was Bengali/Bhojpuri would communicate with me in Hindi since I did not understand the former. Even within the state of Karnataka, there were regional variations in the language of Kannada. This limitation often posed challenges to everyday engagement in the field, interpretations made during the fieldwork and translation during data analysis. At the same time, given the multiplicity of languages and cultures in India, this is an unavoidable challenge that researchers would face in working with migrant communities in any of the Indian cities.

Informed consent was obtained primarily from NGO management, and this reveals the complexity of ethical and agential considerations while working with children on the margins (see Rajan 2020a for a more detailed discussion on ethical challenges). The data presented in the following sections are anonymized to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of data collected from the field.

### **The liminal migrant child: locations and belongings**

Migrant families and children make sense of place through their engagement with the dualities of the village and city – which for them do not exist in static and disconnected silos but in the continuous and mutual constitution of each other. For example, a dominant narrative that emerged in conversations with migrant families about their village was that 'there was nothing in the village'. In the words of many Kannada-speaking intrastate migrant families, 'uralli enuilla, mazhayilla, olayilla, beleyilla' (There is nothing in the village, no rain, no land, no harvest). Yet, when we talked about their lives in the city, many of them said that it was not a livable place. As many Hindi-speaking interstate migrant families articulated, 'gaav mein kaam hei tho, shehar mein kon rehega?' (If there is work in the village, who will live in the city?). These narratives from the field contradict the linear vision of modernity that constructs the village as a dark 'waiting room', antithetical to the city and to be escaped from (Parry 2003). Migrant families' multiple and decentered experiences are, instead, placed in an 'extended milieu' where the place is not a fixed entity in a specific geographical space, but a 'configuration of meaning across distance' (Dürschmidt 2013). Furthermore, migrant families belonging to the lowest socio-economic strata had to negotiate their marginality in both the city and the village.

Children's narratives, too, reflect these multiple belongings with the village and the city. For instance, in the conversations around whether one likes village or the city and for what reason, Shahina, an eleven-year-old girl from west Bengal said 'jo vahan hai vo shehar mein nahi hai, jo yahan hai vo gaav mein nahi hai' (what is 'there' is not in the city, what is 'here' is not in the village); Sonu, a six-year-old boy from Uttar Pradesh articulated 'kabi kabi gaav, kabi kabi Bangalore' (sometimes village, sometimes Bangalore); and Swathi, a nine-year-old girl from North Karnataka mentioned 'illi idre illi, alli idre alli' (here when I am here, there when I am there). Like Shahina, Sonu and Swathi, many children articulated the simultaneous negotiations with the city and the village during conversations about how they related to places.

This does not mean that there were no preferences in children's attachments to the village or the city. Based on varying experiences of living, working, playing, and learning, children had preferences. Children's affective relationships with family, peers, pets and environment; their access to schooling and opportunities to play, all shaped these preferences. For instance, Sindhu, a twelve-year-old girl from north Karnataka, preferred to live in her village than in the city because of the unfamiliar environment, unhygienic living conditions, lack of access to basic resources and lack of safety and security in the city. For Madesh, a seven-year-old boy from North Karnataka, it was friendships in the village; and how he was isolated without friends in the city and deprived of infrastructure and company to play that made him like to live in the village. Children like Bairamma, a nine-year-old girl from Andhra Pradesh, instead preferred to live in the city because of her access to schooling in the city (though limited to an NGO school); and her aspirations around making a better living in the city. Bairamma's preferences may also be gendered, even if in a different way to other girls, who often accompanied families to the city to assist with domestic work and sibling care; were taken out school for gendered cultural expectations; and felt more unsafe in the city than the boys.

Yet, for most migrant families, the city is not simply the ontological other of the village but an extension of their life worlds in the villages. Migrant families have concrete and substantial connections to their villages that get manifested through socio-cultural and economic avenues of migrant lives such as seasonal labor, village festivals, family occasions and visiting extended family. Their experiences of home are therefore embedded in 'multiple social fields of attachment and belonging' (Ní Laoire et al. 2010, 157). In the Indian context, even poorer families, who undertake fewer temporary forms of migration, strongly maintain cultural (more than economic) linkages with their areas of origin through festivals and social events (Manjrekar 2012). Such trans-local and trans-national nature of children's sense of home across place and time has also been observed in other contexts of migration (see Gardner and Mand 2012; Moskal 2015). Yet, unlike in the context of international migration or permanent and semi-permanent internal migration (where families sedentarise, live with stable and better livelihoods and thereby adapt their hometown/village/country visits to the school calendars), temporary migrant families are unable to adhere to the spatio-temporal order of schooling.

Migrant lives additionally break the village/city binary through their inhabitation of settlements organized around identities of caste, community and region of origin (Manjrekar 2012). In the present study, migrant families who speak the same language and originate from the same region were mostly seen to be living together as a community, and often continued observing their socio-cultural practices like language, food practices and customs in the city. Such cohabitation often emerged from migrant social connections and networks of kinship, language, and village of origin. The transient nature of migrant families' living and labor in the city itself made it difficult for them to make enduring engagement with their neighbors other than trusted relatives and village social connections in squatter settlements and labor colonies. Temporary migrants, therefore, have concrete spatio-temporal relationships with their villages and therefore negotiate multiple belonging even while they are living and working in the city. Such alternate ways of experiencing social relations and belongings are constructed as anomalous in modern framings of geospatially stable

childhood and schooling, that are built upon normative ideals of 'stability and security through fixed domestic and familial milieus' (Ní Laoire et al. 2010).

## Ideals of 'good house' and 'real school'; and children's negotiations

### *Marginal locales of living and the ideal of 'good house'*

In the city, migrant children's experiences of dwelling and schooling have intersections with that of children living in contexts of urban poverty and marginalization. Children's socio-spatial belonging to a place is closely related to the nature of their access to physical and symbolic resources (Crivello and Vennam 2012; Besten 2010). A significant element through which the child participants of the current study constructed their socio-spatial belonging is their marginal location in the squatter settlements of the city. Many migrant families and children often expressed their dissatisfaction of living in the squatter settlements of the city – where there is no access to basic resources such as water, electricity and sanitation – and aspiration towards constructing a 'ideal' house. For example, Aditi, a thirteen-year-old girl from Assam, while taking me to her house in the squatter settlement, highlighted that it was here (in the city), that her family did not have a house, but in the village, they lived in a 'good house'. Despite inhabiting the city, families and children were aware of being part of the peripheries and not its mainstream.

A well-equipped kitchen, a garden around the home, plants and pets and access to water and electricity are perceived by families and children as integral to the imagination of a good ideal house. While walking back from school to settlement, Kanaka, an eleven-year-old migrant child from Raichur, observed and classified the houses in the neighborhood into three categories: 'thakidu mane', 'badege mane' and 'building' (sheet/shed house, rented house and building/apartment house respectively). Kanaka's classification of houses in the city is not merely based on their physical appearance, but how social identities of caste and class are embodied in those physical structures. She said that those who live in 'thakidu mane' are 'badavaru' (poor) and those who live in 'building' are 'sowcararu' (rich). Kanaka's friend corrected her and said, 'they are not sowcararu but gowdru' (a dominant caste community in Karnataka) and everyone laughed. She further said, 'rich people live in the building. They have money. We don't have money. They don't have any debts, but we have. They have thousand crores'. Differential access to housing and inhabitation in the city is a significant facet through which children like Kanaka experience socio-cultural and economic marginalization in the city.

While living in a 'good house' is central to the process of how migrant children make sense of place in the city, formal and non-formal sites of education inadvertently reinforce normative ideals of a 'good house' and, thereby, construct migrant childhoods and their habitations in squatter settlements as deviant realities that are to be escaped. The following vignette narrating a classroom episode in an NGO school demonstrates this point.

The topic of the lesson today was 'an ideal house'. The teacher began the lesson talking about different types of houses people live in- apartments, buildings, tents and huts, and the advantages and disadvantages of different types of houses. She further asked, 'which one do you think is good?'. The children responded unanimously, 'apartment' houses. The teacher nodded affirmingly and explained why 'pucca' houses<sup>5</sup> are stronger because of the materials used. She consoled the students that though they don't have such a house currently, they can make such a house in the next ten or fifteen years and that they would have even become an engineer or doctor by then. She reminded children that it is always important to remember what kind of house they are living in. She asked children, 'don't you dream to live in an apartment house? It comes to every child's mind naturally, like when you see the play area in an apartment'. Encouragingly the teacher asserted, 'you should not leave your studies. You have to work hard and build a good house'. Continuing the lesson, the teacher read out from one of the sections in the textbook (published by Karnataka Textbook Society, Government of Karnataka) titled 'How should a good house be?' that explained the criteria for a house to be good and pretty. This includes having sufficient space, light, fresh air, large and strong windows and doors, kitchen garden, roof without cracks and holes and protection from thieves. A 'good house' has to also avoid worms and insects, be cleaned every day, be protected from rain, snakes, and



rats, be cleaned, and safeguarded from waste and have adequate facilities for sanitation and drainage. Post describing the criteria, children were asked to take notes and memorize the questions and answers from the chapter for the class exam the next day.

The aforesaid curricular conception of a 'good house' (mediated through sedentary and middle-class norms of what constitutes a house) was in stark contrast to migrant families' inferior housing and marginal locales in labor camps and squatter settlements of the city. The teacher encouragingly told her pupils that they should work hard, get a good job and aspire to build such a 'good house' in the future, unlike the one they inhabited at present; children nodded agreeingly as they too aspired to escape their marginal locations in the city. What came to be misconstrued and devalued in such classroom transactions is how many migrant families are compelled to move and inhabit the margins of the city for purposes of livelihood, often while they may have a better house of their own in their villages or how they are structurally marginalized both in the village and the city. Furthermore, the normative construction of material deficits such as not having a 'good house' not only resonates with and reinforces children's own perceptions of the lesser place they inhabited in the city but also depoliticizes the systemic socio-spatial marginality that migrant families face in the city. The text responsabilises children for improving their marginal conditions of living in the city and the educational challenges that these might entail. Furthermore, this event reflects how the experience of being a migrant child in the city contradicts the ways in which experiences of schooling are framed and structured.

Often parents themselves aspired for their children to have a 'good house' through hard work and schooling, while meaningful access to education for migrant children was limited through the exclusionary politics of schooling.

### *Exclusionary locales of schooling and the ideal of 'real school'*

The normative ideal of formal school as a happy place enabling children to achieve professional occupations and social mobility contradict migrant children's negotiations of physical, social and pedagogical access to schooling in both the village and the city. Migrant children's memories of their experiences in the village school primarily revolve around fear of corporal punishment. Many children shared how they feared corporal punishment in school through animated description of the various types of physical punishment and verbal abuse. Children also felt that meaningful opportunities for learning are lacking in school classrooms. When children got back to the village from the city, teachers either punished or ignored them, but they were not helped in understanding the lessons taught while they were away. Most of the children being first generation learners, families were unable to provide adequate educational support to children. In a conversation about children's experiences of schooling in village, the mother of two seven and five-year-old boys, Hadisha from Bijapur district, stated that in the village school, 'children go and come, but nothing else happens', indicating how attending schooling is reduced to mere physical presence of children. Twelve-year-old, Kaveramma from Gulbarga district expressed her discontent in how she was 'falling behind' in studies compared to her peers and her inability to achieve grade appropriate knowledge.

The context of children's educational access is no less exclusionary in the city. On the one hand, school enrollment campaigns in the city – run collaboratively by the state and the NGOs – circulated narratives of aspirational futures of schooling, for instance, through posters depicting colorful pictures of school buildings and happy school-going children. A poem, 'School is a Place of Pleasure' (Grade 6 English textbook, Karnataka Textbook Society) that was being taught to migrant children in a government school reflects how the aforesaid imagination translates into curriculum. It read:

School is a place of pleasure; It gives us knowledge and treasure; School makes us strong, to fight against wrong; School teaches us to respect elders and follow the teachers order; School makes us bold, to shine

like gold; School makes us work harder, to become doctors and lawyers; School gives us hope, if we fell from a slope; School gives us new will power and makes us smile like a flower.

Contrarily, most migrant children did not have even physical access to city schools. The squatter settlements where children lived were secluded, and children were afraid to cross the busy roads of the city on their own to get to the school. Parents could not help as they leave for work early in the morning. Children who did manage to get to school through transport arranged by the NGOs or by walking with their peer groups, found it difficult to regularly attend the school for various reasons such as lack of support structure and resources at home. For example, eleven-year-old Mohan from Andhra Pradesh mentioned that he often came late to the NGO school because he did not have a clock in his house to keep track of the time. Gendered domestic responsibilities often made it difficult for girls to regularly attend schools. For instance, eleven-year-old Savitha, from North Karnataka, was the sole primary caretaker of her elder sister who met with an unforeseen accident at the construction work site. Being a single parent, Savitha's mother had no choice other than going for construction work, leaving the care work to her younger daughter. As families did not have access to water supply, children, mostly girls, collected water from nearby apartments during school hours. In addition to such unpaid work, some children also joined their parents for paid work such as rag-picking or construction. These realities are a misfit within the temporal organization of schooling that favors children from privileged and sedentary families.

While NGO schools had policies intended to address such lived realities of children through provisions of sibling care (by means of early childhood education), flexible school hours (enabling children to attend to domestic responsibilities) and transport arrangements to school; often, these practices were not effectively implemented and some teachers even punished and denigrated children through verbal and physical abuse for their irregularity and falling back in studies. This does not mean that NGO schools are homogeneous in their philosophy, approach and methods towards migrant education, in fact, this study shows the contrary. Among the three NGO schools, there was one NGO that was particularly progressive in its attempts to provide meaningful learning through a flexible curriculum and fearless and supportive learning environment. Yet, even there, children's mobile and informal contexts of living and labor were in discordance with the NGO's placement in the larger sedentary framework of modern schooling. Furthermore, many children were aware about their differential placement in NGO schools and did not perceive these schools as 'real schools' (Balagopalan 2014). For example, in a conversation about why children aspired to study in a mainstream school, ten-year-old Kalyani from Andhra Pradesh articulated how NGO schools lack features of a 'real' formal school such as opportunities to socialize with same-aged peer group and how they were always put together with children of multiple age groups. For twelve-year-old Lavanya from Maharashtra, it was the learning of 'real' subjects such as science and mathematics that was missing in the NGO schools. Many such factors such as proficiency in English, big playground and classrooms, school uniforms and morning assembly session were perceived by children as missing in NGO schools. NGO schools themselves circulated the idea of their schools being 'transit' and 'preparatory' locations for '*shed makkalu*' (children living in 'shed' houses) before being mainstreamed to 'real' formal schools, though they mimic the structures and processes of formal schools to varying extents. Hence, these schools are largely perceived by children as 'temporary passages' towards 'real' schools and lacking in themselves the symbolic epithets of formal schools – strict spatio-temporal divisions, fixed routine and rituals, standardized performances, and processes.

### The immobility of schools

As noted earlier, the frequent (and erratic) absence of children from the school is often interpreted as a failure and irresponsibility of migrant families, despite their complex and marginal experiences of living and learning as seen above. What is disregarded here is how the rhythm of the school is

incompatible with the lived realities of populations such as those seasonally migrating (Bey 2003). For migrant children, the formal school acts largely like a choultry, which migrant children visit and leave multiple times in a school year as temporary inhabitants. Even when children are spatially and temporally absent from schools, their names are not struck off from the school registers. They ostensibly remain enrolled and included in the school system. Only those children who take official transfer-certificate from the school administration while migrating to another place are likely to get recorded in the data. Bhavana, a fourteen-year-old girl from Maharashtra, went to her village school only for writing term end exams; Pooja, a twelve-year-old girl from Bihar and Anjali, her seven-year-old sibling, went to the village school to merely collect financial aids offered by the state through the school system. Through many such ways, children are kept nominally enrolled in the village school registers and are often automatically promoted to the next grade despite their lack of access to regular and meaningful learning. With the bureaucratic pressure on teachers and education functionaries to show reduced numbers of out of school children and thereby exhibit better performance, data regarding their actual number remain distorted. This situates migrant childhoods in states of limbo, neither inside nor outside the spatio-temporal logics of schooling. There are also no systematic and accountable mechanisms to track the nature and extent of children's migration and its impact on their education.

While education functionaries perceived that schooling is now 'open' and 'free' for all children and it is families who fail to make use of the system, migrant children's liminal placement in the system created a learning crisis. Immobile spatio-temporal logics of schooling puts migrant children in a perpetual state of catching up to the learning levels of 'normal' sedentary child subjects as they negotiate their presence and absence in the village and the city (Rajan, 2020b). For example, Karthik, a migrant child from Bengal, studied till Grade 8 in his village in West Bengal and had to discontinue schooling after coming to Bangalore. He had a two-year learning gap when one of the NGOs in the city identified and enrolled him in the school. The medium of instruction in his village school being Bengali, Karthik was unable to follow either Kannada or English through which the instruction took place in the NGO school. As a result, he was irregular, fell behind and faced constant verbal abuse from teachers. He was regularly scolded for 'doing time pass' and 'ageing' without achieving age-appropriate learning, thereby stalling his progression in the NGO bridging programme and consequent admission to mainstream formal school. Like in the case of Karthik, the linear progression of age, grade, curriculum and learning in modern schooling, and a taken for granted synergy among these, constructed through the sedentary child subject, complicate the ways in which dichotomous policy constructions – of both state and NGOs – such as inclusion and exclusion are manifested in the lives of migrant children. It is through these hierarchical relationships that work to the advantage of privileged sedentary child that Indian modernity and its project of schooling has constituted migrant childhoods on the margins and their educational inclusion.

Though some families sedentarised in the city with the hope that NGO interventions will improve the future of their children, it was possible only for families who were already at a better socio-economic position or those who managed to find better work in the city and thereby moved to more secure accommodation in the city.

## Conclusion

This paper problematizes the normative framing of modern childhood and schooling, and its emancipatory claims through the migrant child subject and her educational inclusion. It highlights how migrant families and children negotiate the village and the city simultaneously and how children make sense of their living and learning on the margins of the city. Integral to children's experiences are affective and multiple belongings to the village and the city; peer interactions across age groups; engagements in both paid and unpaid labor that contribute towards the family sustenance; and exclusionary experiences of schooling. Furthermore, children's

experiences of living and learning are mediated through mobile, informal, and marginal contexts of their family livelihoods. Notwithstanding such lived realities, normative framings of 'ideal' home and 'real' school as archetypical locations of childhood, get circulated in schools, which in turn construct children's own realities as milieus to be escaped for a better future. Often left to NGO generosity in the city, migrant children's educational experiences question the dominant narrative of aspirational futures of schooling.

Many of these experiences are not unique to migrant children, as these are also relevant to the lives of marginalized children in general, particularly along the lines of caste, social-class, and gender. At the same time, irregular and complex patterns of temporary mobility undertaken by migrant families and children uniquely problematize spatio-temporal order of modern schooling, that is, notions around the fixed neighborhood, regular attendance, disciplined routine, everyday clock time regulation and long-term developmental milestones towards adulthood – and the hierarchies that these allude to. Children's experiences also question how these dominant spatio-temporal ideals of modern schooling operate, get unproblematically deciphered as learning crisis of migrant children which, in turn, construct self-perceptions of children through notions of 'falling behind' and 'catching up'.

Some specific research directions can be proposed from the learnings of the current study. This study was delimited to understanding the experiences of temporarily migrating children in the city. There are various other groups of children who are engaged in the phenomena of migration such as children 'left behind' in source sites, independent child migrants and internally displaced migrant children. The educational experiences of migrant children in these various contexts need to be studied and critically analyzed. Another research direction emerging from the current study is to understand migrant children's experiences longitudinally along a spatio-temporal continuum, inquiring long-term experiences of children across multiple places and the implications they may have for children's educational inclusion and social mobility.

To conclude, this paper calls for giving due consideration to children's own experiences and perspectives of migration and childhood, which then can shed light on how state and NGOs could move past the normative logics and hierarchies of modern schooling that envisage spatio-temporally fixed interventions for migrant children. In the current Indian educational landscape, migrant children are not only denied modernity's promise of right to education but also are adversely incorporated into the promise. The policies and practices of educational inclusion of migrant childhoods in India are reiterations of its normative ontology, since to ensure meaningful access and retention in schooling, migrant children will have to sedentarise, at the least, attuning their livelihoods to the spatio-temporal workings of the mainstream formal schools. The policy justification that mobility makes the educational inclusion of migrant children a difficult task, therefore, needs to be critically evaluated in the light of (in)compatibility of immobile and sedentary imaginaries of schooling with mobile livelihoods and childhoods. Whether Indian schooling in its present form is capable of breaking free of its spatio-temporal shackles and thereby ensuring meaningful inclusion of migrant children is the larger question at hand; the prospect of it seems bleak at the moment.

## Notes

1. Temporary migration indicates migration undertaken by poorer sections of society (primarily for purposes of livelihood) which is largely short-term, seasonal and circular in nature. Data regarding temporary migration is insufficiently captured even by national data sources such as Census and NSSO.
2. In this study the categories migrant children/childhoods are used to indicate children/childhoods situated in contexts of temporary migration undertaken by poorer sections of society (primarily for purposes of livelihood). Furthermore, the focus has been on children accompanying temporary migrating families and not on children who are left behind in villages or those independently migrate.
3. SC and ST are constitutionally designated categories of communities-on account of their backgrounds of caste and tribe- who have been historically excluded and exploited in the Indian society.

4. The total number of children observed or interacted with during the fieldwork is 88 (53 girls and 35 boys) across three NGO sites. Out of the total, 11 belong to age group-1 (1–6 years), 61 belong to age group-2 (7–12 years) and 16 belong to age group-3 (13–18 years). Majority of them spoke Kannada, Telugu, Bengali and Hindi.
5. Durable houses made of materials such as brick, cement, concrete, timber and so on.

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