

Research Article

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Moving Lives: Investigating Patterns of Migration, Labour, and Education in Kerala

Abstract

The state of Kerala has been experiencing large-scale internal labour migration in the past three decades. Among the many migration corridors connecting Kerala to other parts of India, the Murshidabad–Ernakulam corridor is particularly significant, with a considerable number of migrant families and their children on the move. While much of the research on internal labour migration to Kerala has focused on vulnerable working conditions, the nature of migrant work, labour rights violations, and the educational experiences of migrant labourers' children remain relatively unexplored. This paper aims to investigate how children's education is affected by internal migration, specifically among families migrating from West Bengal to Ernakulam in Kerala. The central objective is to understand the educational challenges these children face due to family mobility and to examine the strategies families use to address these disruptions. The study presents insights from fieldwork conducted in Ernakulam with families who migrated from Murshidabad and currently reside in the city and its adjacent areas. It also analyses how the Right to Education Act applies to these migrant children.

Keywords: Migration, education, schooling decisions, migrant families

Kerala's Tryst with Migration

Acknowledging the large-scale migration across different parts of India, the current research points out several key factors that are responsible for people moving: economic conditions and the informal nature of work, uneven development, seasonal nature of work in agriculture, and networks of labour and contractors (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; de Haan, 1997; Rogaly et al., 2002; Kundu & Saraswati, 2016). Tracking long-term migration between Kerala and West Bengal, this paper focuses on the connections between migrant families and education. How does education enter the overall schemes and practices of families that move? Does education hold the key to turning things around for migrating communities that operate in a subsistence

economy? How do policy initiatives such as the Right to Education Act work towards enabling migrant families? Scholars working in education, migration, and sociology have analysed mobile families and education, focusing on schooling discontinuities (Dyer & Rajan, 2020; Roy, Singh, & Roy, 2015; Smita, 2006, 2008), the gendered division of family roles (Vikram, 2021; Choithani, 2019; Cagliani, Mazzucato, & Fourie, 2024), and shifts in employment structures (Chand, Srivastava, & Singh, 2017; Singh, 2019).

The state of Kerala has a long history of migration. The large-scale Gulf migration, which began in the 1970s, played a significant role in alleviating poverty in the state. However, this exodus also resulted in a substantial labour shortage (Rajan & Zachariah, 2020). Labour migrants from Tamil Nadu began arriving in Kerala during the 1960s, providing a major labour force for the construction sector until the mid-1970s (Peter & Narendran, 2017). In the early 1990s, migrants from Odisha started to work in the timber industry in Ernakulam. Following a 1990s ban on forest-based wood production in Assam, labourers from Assam began migrating in greater numbers. Migrants from West Bengal also began arriving in the 1990s, bringing a unique flexibility to their schedules that employers preferred over that of Tamil labourers. Favourable working conditions and increased pay rates attracted even more labourers. They primarily engaged in informal sectors such as construction, lumber, plantations, mining, quarries, hotels, and hospitality.

Gradually, individual migration paved the way for more people to follow, and families became a part of this migration trend. Comparing census data from 2001 and 2011, there was a significant increase in the number of migrant labourers moving with their families (Parida & Raman, 2021). Peter and Narendran (2017) identified 12 new inter-district corridors connecting Kerala to other states that have evolved in the last two decades. Among these, a significant corridor links Murshidabad district with Ernakulam district. They pointed out that a considerable number of young males from different parts of Murshidabad have visited Kerala or plan to visit Kerala sooner or later. Murshidabad is one of the most backward districts, according to the Human Development Index of 2004 (Ashraf, Ahmed, & Rawal, 2013). Due to the unavailability of large industries and limited employment opportunities, people began to migrate within and outside the country. Migration from Murshidabad has diverse destinations, including large cities such as Mumbai and Delhi, as well as states such as Gujarat and Kerala. The initial pattern of migration began with single men from Murshidabad coming to Kerala.

Compared to the lower wages in their native places, the higher wages in Kerala motivated more people to follow the same route.

According to the 2021 Planning Commission report for Kerala, the state has approximately 3.1 million migrant workers across various states (Parida & Raman, 2021). An estimated 1 million are long-term migrants, constituting about 52,000 families. However, while they classified families as long-term migrants, a significant number reside in Kerala on a short-term basis. The report indicates that 61,000 migrant children are enrolled in schools across Kerala. This number contradicts data provided by Samagra Shiksha Kerala (SSK), which reports an actual enrollment of 20,869 migrant children in schools across Kerala for the 2023–24 academic year. According to the SSK report, children from West Bengal form the largest group of migrant children in Kerala, with a total number of 5,682. Among district profiles, Ernakulam has the highest enrolment of migrant children, with 7,147 children (SSK official, personal communication, October 2023). When the migrant children enroll in schools, they experience a series of challenges, including language difficulties, cultural differences, frequent dropouts, and so on. Hence, in light of these scenarios, this paper explores how migrant families in Kerala make schooling decisions for their children, arguing that these choices emerge from a complex interplay of sociocultural contexts, family aspirations, and economic constraints, all situated within the broader realities of migrant labourers' lives.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted with migrant families residing in Ernakulam, Kerala, from October 2022 to March 2024. The research was conducted in a government upper primary school known for its large population of migrant students. I regularly visited the school and conducted participant observations. As I stayed in the town, I established a good rapport with families who had settled in Kerala from West Bengal. For this paper, I use extended interviews conducted with four families. I was a regular visitor to schools and with families, as I became an “added” part of their daily routines and interactions. All the four families knew I was a regular visitor to the school of their children, and the school officials were aware that I was visiting the migrant families. Soon, I also became an intermediary person between the school and the families.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section examines the process by which children from migrant families enter the schooling system in Kerala, focusing on the barriers they encounter, such as cultural and linguistic challenges. The following section presents case

studies of four distinct families in a descriptive format. This method highlights the differences among the families and provides detailed information about their lives. The next section focuses on how migrant families navigate their children's schooling, migration, and the associated factors.

Negotiating Mobility: Access, Barriers, and Aspirations in the Schooling of Migrant Children

Through my interactions with local people, I understood that the connection between West Bengal and Kerala goes back to early 2000s when migrant families began to arrive in larger numbers. In the early years, most parents in Kerala didn't enroll their children in schools, and as a result, many children were out of school. This was because most of the time, families never settled in one place; instead, they moved from one location to another in search of better jobs and higher wages. Several factors influenced families' decisions to enroll their children in schools in Kerala. First, the companies needed workers year-round, which led workers to settle in one place rather than shift to different locations. Owners of the rented houses preferred to rent their homes to settled families. Both parties encouraged migrant workers to enroll their children in Kerala schools, hoping it would make the families settle in one place. Secondly, when the parents are at work, the children are alone, and their safety is uncertain. Schools can be an appropriate place to send them in such a situation, and many parents chose this viable option. Finally, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 also mandated the schooling of out-of-school children. Gradually, migrant families became more familiar with Kerala, leading to higher enrolment rates, which encouraged other migrants to follow suit.

At the school where this fieldwork was conducted, the first migrant child was enrolled in 2008. The family was from Faridpur, Murshidabad district, West Bengal. Eventually, the child stopped attending, and their prolonged absence was noted. In the initial few years, the status of migrant children was the same: they would enroll, and eventually, stop attending school. However, gradually, migrant children became an essential part of the school.

The level of assimilation of a migrant child within the school environment varies from child to child and is influenced by factors such as the duration of the family's stay in Kerala and their familiarity with Malayalam, the local language. These factors, along with the children's identity

as migrants, significantly shape their schooling experience. Those who speak the language and can mingle efficiently face minimal challenges. Otherwise, children who have recently arrived in Kerala—those who have not yet assimilated well into the local culture and have not yet learned the language—tend to lag academically and struggle with a sense of belonging in the school environment. This sense of belonging is highly subjective. It is further shaped by how native children and the school respond to the presence of migrant students. Most of the time, when there are a significant number of migrant children in school, the school is branded as “Bhai school” and the migrant children are called “Bhai children” or “Bengali children,” which is a derogatory way of othering them from the mainstream.

Despite such challenges, many migrant children are succeeding in school thanks to their families’ support. The conversations with many families revealed that, even if the parents couldn’t help with their children’s studies at home, they arranged tuition for their children, thinking it might help them achieve better results. Many of them believe that even if they are unaware of the type of job their children will secure after studying, education is still important and will likely lead to a good job.

However, this is not the situation for all of them. During the migration process, the most vulnerable group is the returning migrant children. Families move back for various reasons, such as agriculture, religion, family matters, or marriage; these journeys can last for months. Despite the consideration for schooling, the children also travel with them. Sometimes they return, and often the stay extends for weeks or months. Mostly, those children attend school in their native village. Considering the different atmospheres, languages, and social setups at their previous schools, these children have to face a whole new set of challenges there. Afterwards, if they return to Kerala again, the absence of a few months of schooling significantly affects their learning. Hence, within each family, concerns differ, including how they view education, their aspirations, the role gender plays, and how they negotiate despite their class struggles. To discuss this, the paper examines the experiences of four migrant families in Kerala through case studies, detailing how they initially faced challenges and overcame them, as well as how they seized opportunities. Every family or one of the spouses discussed in this paper moved to Kerala between 2006 and 2016.

People on the Move: Livelihoods, Settlements, and Education

According to the 2011 Census, one in every five migrants in India is a child. These children face numerous vulnerabilities, including a high risk of child labour, uncertain safety, and inadequate nutrition and education, all of which put them at significant risk (Coffey, 2013). Seasonal migration has a considerable impact on children's education (Smita, 2008). Children are among the most vulnerable populations during migration, and seasonal migration has a severe impact on their education (Smita, 2008; Chandrasekhar & Bhattacharya, 2018). Roy, Singh, and Roy (2015) argue that temporary labour migration among families with children affects both those who accompany their parents and those who are left behind. While left-behind children may have better access to schooling and experience reduced gender gap due to remittances, accompanied children often remain out of school, with some becoming vulnerable to child labour.

Migration disrupts schooling and hinders educational continuity. The migration process often does not align with the school calendar, disrupting and breaking children's education. Sengupta and Guchhait (2022) discuss that long-term seasonal migration of parents severely impacts left-behind children, often leading to early dropouts. Dyer and Rajan (2020) argue that while policies such as "Education for All" and "leaving no one behind" aim to address the educational needs of migrant children, they often overlook the specific challenges related to participation and retention. To address these challenges, including seasonality and language barriers, comprehensive policies are needed to identify and bridge the gaps in current welfare measures.

The Indian education system functions as a significant mechanism for reproducing existing social hierarchies, particularly those related to caste and class. Scholars such as Naik (1975) and Kumar (1989) have demonstrated that the system's core structure, curriculum, and language policies are embedded in upper-caste and middle-class cultural capital, which systematically devalues the knowledge of marginalised communities. Nambissan (1996) and Velaskar (1998) have documented the everyday experiences of discrimination and stigma encountered by Dalit and Adivasi students. As Sarangapani (2003) illustrates, the hidden curriculum and pedagogical practices reinforce these hierarchies, resulting in children predominantly inheriting their parents' social and economic positions. Tukdeo (2019) argues that the process of education policy-making in India is not merely technical; rather, it is deeply influenced by cultural politics, unequal power relations, and existing socio-economic

hierarchies. Hence, this paper aims to examine how the education system functions for marginalised groups, such as migrant communities, in the Indian context.

Migration can be studied through the lens of family studies. Scholars such as Banerjee (1981), Bhattacharyya (1985), and de Haan (1997) have emphasised the importance of viewing migration as a family process, rather than solely through the traditional economic lens focused on individual perspectives. However, despite the growing body of scholarship on migration, there is a need for greater emphasis on family migration and the significant impact of family dynamics on the migration process. de Haan (1997) notes that, alongside economic factors, social and cultural considerations also play a significant role in the family migration decision-making process. He argues against the general portrayal of migrants as passive victims, emphasising that they are, in fact, active decision-makers who are aware of ways to improve their families' conditions. According to Jayaraj (2013), the spatial mobility of families in India occurs in four distinct patterns: rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural, and urban-urban, and suggests that analysing family migration requires considering more than just push and pull factors.

Migration significantly reshapes family structures. As Hemrom and Behra (2025) observed, labour migration from tribal villages in Odisha reshapes existing familial roles, regulates and restructures traditional social structures, and shapes transportation development in the region. By examining migration through the lens of family life stories and their experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The empirical data presented for each family offer insights into the broader migration context and highlight how they navigate the process dynamically, providing a new perspective on migration studies.

Living and Learning in Kerala: Insights From Four Case Studies

The first case study is of Birajul Molla, a 35-year-old migrant worker from Sarkarpara in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, who has been working for a plywood company in Perumbavoor, Ernakulam district, for the past ten years. The family consists of four members: his wife, Sadiya Bibi, 34 years old, and their two children, Shahana, 14 years old, and Shahina, 16 years old. He first came alone, and after three years, his family joined him. Birajul studied until Class VI. In response to my question about why he had not continued his studies, he said, "Generally, what happens is that you enroll in school, and then one day, you leave". He joined

farming after quitting school, but barely made ₹50 a day, and even that amount fluctuated throughout the week. There was hardly enough land for farming, and he could not make enough money to support his family. His wife, Sadiya Bibi, did not attend school. She got married at the age of 16. When the whole family moved to Kerala, they thought she would also work since an extra hand would help them earn more money. She is also working for a plywood company in the same locality.

The second case study concerns the family of Rahman and Fathima, who have been residing in Ernakulam district for the past 15 years. They hail from Choapara in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. The family has two daughters: 14-year-old Ayisha and two-year-old Amina. Rahman is in his early 30s and completed primary education up to Class III in his village but did not pursue it further. The decline of agriculture and the low wages associated with it created a predisposition for migration within the village. In 1999, the wage for agricultural work in his village was just ₹20, whereas in Kerala, it was ₹150–200. Rahman's parents are currently in Kerala and live within walking distance of his home. His two brothers also reside there; one brought his family, while the other did not. Fathima Bibi is 32 and from Raypur, one of the nearest villages to Choapara.

The third case study concerns the family of Shaharul Mondol, 34, and Asma Bibi, 32, from Narayanpur in Nadiya District, West Bengal, who unexpectedly came to Kerala in 2016. Driven by severe financial hardship in their village, where they lacked both land and a stable income, the 4-member family—Shaharul, Asma, and their two sons, Shahid (8) and Afreen (5)—were forced to leave their home. During their train journey, a random conversation with a fellow traveller working in Kerala, who informed them of the higher wages available there, inspired them to continue their journey to the southern state. With the assistance of this stranger, they found accommodation and employment. Shaharul, the only son of deceased farmers, completed his education up to Class VI in his village. Asma Bibi, whose parents are also farmers, completed her education up to Class VII. While Shahid was in Class II at a government school in Narayanpur, Afreen was too young to attend school.

The fourth case study concerns the family of Khadeeja, 30, and Amir, 35, who resided in Jalangi Block, Murshidabad. They were migrants to Kerala even before they got married. Khadeeja arrived in Kerala with her parents in 2006, at the age of 13. She studied only until Class V.

Amir worked for a plywood company and could only study at the primary level; after that, he went to Kerala. The couple got married in 2009, when they were both in Kerala. They married in West Bengal due to her minor status and concerns about legal implications. They have two children now: 13-year-old Rabiya and 10-year-old Raniya. Both were born in Kerala. Khadeejah arrived in Kerala when she was 13 but didn't join a school. Instead, she worked for a plywood company, earning ₹150 daily at that time. She now works at another plywood company in the same area and, after 18 years, makes ₹450 a day. Amir also worked in the same field. Since the beginning, he has worked for plywood companies and now earns around ₹800 daily.

Migrant families in Kerala adopt diverse approaches to adaptation. While some struggle to adjust to the unfamiliar environment, others manage effectively by leveraging social networks and personal adaptability. Once families decide to bring or raise their children in Kerala, educational concerns become paramount. Each family pursues the most practical and context-specific strategies to address their children's educational needs.

Distress-Driven Migration: The Lives of Birajul and Sadiya

The substantial wage difference was a big help to Birajul and Sadiya when they came to Kerala. Initially, wages in plywood companies were around ₹350–400. Now, Birajul earns ₹1,000 daily and, on average, works 22 days a month, providing a stable income. After three years of migration, he brought his family to Kerala in 2017, a year before the severe floods of 2018. Initially, the family stayed in Aluva, but their room got flooded, so they relocated to their current location. They live in one of the line rooms for migrant workers in Perumbavoor. Shahana and Shahina arrived in Kerala midway through their schooling at their native place. After obtaining an Aadhaar card, they enrolled in a primary school in Ernakulam. However, their locality was severely affected by the infamous Kerala floods, which prompted them to relocate and join an upper primary school in a different area. This disruption meant that their schooling journey had to restart. At the new school, Shahana joined Class II at the age of 10, while Shahina joined Class IV at the age of 12. Shahina completed Class VII at the age of 15 in 2022 but discontinued her schooling and now works for a plywood company.

The family could not afford education for both children, so they had to discontinue their elder daughter's education. The father shares the educational expenses; the bus fee alone is ₹1,000 per month for both children, and he also needs to cover costs for books and clothes. As an

alternative, the family is considering marriage for the elder daughter. However, the estimated wedding expenses are around ₹4–5 lakhs. They plan to have her work for the next two years to save for this. Shahina currently works for a plywood company, earning ₹350 daily. The family views her wedding as an “emergency” and is working hard to save money. Birajul said:

The wage difference between Kerala and West Bengal was huge. When I was alone in Kerala and working, even though I received good money compared to my village, it was not enough for a family to live on. Then I realised that many of us were bringing our families, and I asked my wife and two children to join. It was the best decision in terms of financial benefit. At that time, we were so poor that the only aim was to earn more money. My two daughters were in the second and fourth grades at that time, and honestly speaking, money was the primary factor; we didn't think much about their schooling.

Birajul couldn't survive in school, and neither could his daughter. They could not afford the education, and eventually, both of them slipped outside the realm of education and went to work as migrant labourers to earn money.

The Intergenerational Presence of Education in Migration: The Lives of Rahman and Fathima

Rahman first moved to Kerala when he was 13 years old in 2006. He initially worked as a hotel assistant but later learned to drive, obtained a driving licence, and has worked as a driver ever since. When they arrived in Kerala, there were few facilities, and the number of migrant labourers was significantly smaller compared to today. Fathima was the only woman in their group. Learning Malayalam was a lengthy process for her. Day by day, she learned words for vegetables and groceries with the help of a shop owner during regular visits. She started learning small phrases like “I don't know” and “I will tell”. Initially, Fathima earned money by cleaning raw cashews at home. She has since acquired a good command of Malayalam and joined an accounting office as a helper. Together, they earn approximately ₹25,000 per month and live a happy life. Rahman is an active member of the local football club and participates in palliative care activities. Fathima sometimes works as a translator in courts for cases involving migrant workers. They own two vehicles: a taxi car and a scooter. Compared to other migrants

from the same region, this family lives a better life due to their strong social network and awareness of legal activities.

Rahman and Fathima's daughter, 13-year-old Ayisha, is a Class XI student at a government-aided high school in their locality. Born and raised in Kerala, Ayisha grew up speaking Malayalam, the native language of the state, and is also fluent in Hindi and Bengali. Fathima's father was an early migrant from that village; he moved to Kerala in 1999. She vaguely remembers her father's absence from home:

I was in Class IV when my father first migrated to Kerala. For me, back then, Kerala was a place far away from my home, a journey that took days. My father worked in Perumbavoor, though I initially mispronounced it as Perumbur. Even though we were not wealthy, in many households, girls were married off at a very young age. However, my father wanted me to study further and find a job. In my village, completing high school without getting married was a significant achievement. I studied until the higher secondary level with my father's encouragement.

After completing Class XII and majoring in history, Fathima was unable to continue her studies after marrying Rahman. Although she wanted to pursue further education, social and financial constraints prevented her. Soon after their wedding, they both moved to Kerala. The wish to get educated did not stop for Fathima; she strongly desires to ensure her daughter completes her higher education. Her daughter is currently in Class IX.

Ayisha is the third generation in their family to live in Kerala. Fathima reflects that if her father had stayed and worked in the village, she wouldn't have been able to pursue higher secondary education. Migration to Kerala brought in money, which then helped Fathima's family to invest in housing and education for her and her brother; both studied until the higher secondary level. Fathima has realised that education and a good job are the primary means to achieve financial prosperity and a hassle-free life. Currently, the family has no plans beyond educating Ayisha and securing employment for her. Fathima said:

Every day, I push her to study. If she refuses, I won't marry her off early like others. I told her there's no escaping studies—not even through marriage. Allah knows what's next, but I want her to take science at the higher secondary level—something I couldn't do.

The family is committed to providing financial support for Ayisha's education, regardless of the cost, and they prefer to continue her education until she secures a good job. This approach contrasts with that of most migrant workers, who marry off their daughters once they reach puberty. Currently, Ayisha also goes for private tuition after school hours. The family has adapted well to Kerala and plans to stay for an extended period. However, they do not intend to settle in Kerala permanently and expect to return to their home region eventually.

An Unexpected Journey to Kerala: The Lives of Shaharul and Asma Bibi

After arriving in Kerala with help from a co-passenger, Shaharul's family settled among other migrant workers. Within weeks, Shaharul landed a security job at a production company in Manjappetty. Over the course of two years, the family's improved circumstances enabled them to move to a better home. Now, Shaharul works as a boiler operator, earning ₹22,000 per month, while Asma Bibi earns approximately ₹14,000 as a housemaid. Without ancestral support, their hard work and stable income have enabled them to build a secure new life.

The family of two boys, Afreen and Shahid, enrolled them in school a month after arriving in Kerala. Afreen is now a Class VII student, while Shahid is in Class IX. Both boys attend tuition classes after school hours, as their parents believe it helps them learn better. Both parents understand a bit of Malayalam but speaking it is difficult. As a result, they usually do not visit schools or meet teachers. They were unable to attend school for one and a half months because they travelled to their native place. During this period, their new house was under construction, and they hosted a housewarming party. After the long break in July, when it was time for their children to return to school, the father accompanied them; otherwise, they rarely visit the school. They also do not attend the parent-teacher association meetings.

The parents, who overcame financial distress through determination and hard work in Kerala, are now ambitious for Afreen and Shahid. Their stability allowed them to build a home in their village, and now education is their main focus. They worry about Shahid's academic

difficulties and his dissatisfaction with his school, with Shaharul being particularly concerned about the quality of the teaching:

Initially, I thought, being a migrant student, the teachers were not paying attention. However, I realised later that there is no difference between migrant and non-migrant students; the teachers only pay attention to those who perform well. The rest are invisible to them.

The family now plans to enroll Afreen in a private school with hostel facilities, believing it will support his studies. Shaharul and Asma have two reasons for remaining in Kerala: higher income and more consistent education for their children. Returning home would jeopardise both, so they plan to stay for years yet. Reflecting on their journey, Shaharul said:

Everything feels like a miracle. Imagine leaving your village, driven by poverty, and ready to go anywhere for a better life. Now, both of us are working, earning a decent income, and educating our children in Kerala. I am supporting my family with the money I have earned hard. Coming to Kerala was the best decision.

This case illustrates how migrant families arriving in Kerala, through perseverance and adaptability, can achieve stability and new opportunities.

Life and Belonging in Kerala: The Life of Khadeeja and Amir

Khadeeja and Amir have fulfilled their desire to build a home in their native place. Because they live in an area where migrant labourers make up most of the population, neither speaks Malayalam very well. Their daughter, Rabiya, completed her primary education at a local primary school. After finishing Class IV, she moved to a nearby high school, where she is currently in Class VII. Rabiya's family is happy with her education. They believe she is doing very well due to the excellent school atmosphere, and they will continue to support her education. Rabiya is also satisfied with her schooling; she can approach her teachers at any time, and they help resolve any doubts. Amir said:

We didn't study a lot. We came here with our parents when we were very young, and ever since then, we have been working here. When we started our family and our daughter

reached school-going age, my friend Abu, a Keralite, encouraged me to enroll her here. Initially, I was skeptical because of the language difference, but I enrolled her at Chemparathumala Mappila LP School when the time came. She adapted quickly and, within a few months, learned the language as well as any Malayali.

Looking ahead, they decided to stay in Kerala from the time Rabiya expressed her desire to finish her education. Rabiya wants to pursue a degree and secure a good job. After moving, the family received criticism from their native villagers regarding Rabiya's education in Kerala. The villagers doubted the quality of education there and expressed concerns that she would not learn Bengali if she studied in Kerala. Despite this, Amir paid no attention. He said:

When we return home after a few years, the people in our village will respect us because my daughter is studying and behaving well. It will be a source of pride for the entire village if she achieves a good position. I am looking forward to that day.

Despite the concerns, her parents encouraged her, telling her she could learn Bengali in two months after returning to their hometown. Amir remains hopeful about the future.

Migration and Schooling: Negotiating Education in the Lives of Migrant Families

Structural factors such as financial instability, seasonal migration patterns, and language barriers constrain the ability of migrant parents to prioritise educational needs for their children. All of these families have their own distinct educational environment. When it comes to Ayisha, she didn't face any potential difficulties in her educational journey, while the rest encountered temporary or permanent barriers to their education. Coming to Afreen and Shaheed's family, even though their parents prioritised education, the children did not attend school for the first two months of the academic year. They travelled to their native place in April for Eid and returned after Eid al-Fitr in July. In between, they finished building their new house. Such instances hinder their schooling and further learning.

Gender plays a complex role in Shahana's and Shahina's family; things are more complicated there. Due to frequent shifts during migration, both sisters lost three years of schooling. Along with that, the financial crisis led the parents to focus on one daughter and marry off the other.

The family's financial distress could not overcome their desire to educate both. By the end of the following year, the parents hope the combined earnings of all three family members will be enough to save up for Shahina's wedding. They would have supported their children's education if they had enough money. Since Shahana performed well in her studies, the parents didn't want her to stop schooling. After Class X, they want Shahana to pursue a computer course. Studying computer courses will open up job opportunities in Kerala and West Bengal. Birajul said:

Despite our inability to make arrangements due to financial constraints, we managed to enroll them in school. If I had money, I would help my daughter study well. I am considering sending her to computer learning after school. If we open a computer shop at home, we can have Xerox facilities and survive. Upon my return home, I could open my shop.

They are not planning to return to their native place anytime soon. Currently, they don't own a house or land. They will work until they find money to buy land, build a home, and start a business in their native place. They plan to continue working in Kerala for at least ten more years and then return after saving some money.

For Rabiya and Raniya, the process of migration disrupted their education. In 2018, the family visited their native place. At that time, Raniya, the younger daughter, was a UKG student. After spending time with her grandparents, she hesitated to return to Kerala and stayed back for four years. She returned to Kerala four months ago, in March 2023, and has been living with her parents. However, when her parents went to the school to enroll her, they realised that learning a new language at this age would be difficult. After careful thought and calculation, they decided to send Raniya back to the village. Despite being dissatisfied with her education in West Bengal, Raniya will be shifted to an English-medium school there, where they expect more focused attention from teachers. Ultimately, parents strategise to find the best solution for their children. They believe she won't be able to succeed in a school in Kerala because she hasn't been in touch with the language for four years. Raniya had to sacrifice her desire to stay with her parents to continue her "proper" education. Hence, a trip to their native place disrupted the younger one's schooling in Kerala. The family faced the difficulty of separation once they prioritised Raniya's education in their native place.

In conclusion, the economic status of migrant families directly shapes their children's educational opportunities. Families with sufficient resources typically maintain their children's schooling throughout migration, whereas those facing hardship are often forced to let education lapse. Among the four families described, Shahana's and Shahina's are the most vulnerable, highlighting that building a home in their native place is often prioritised over consistent education. Once housing needs are met, education becomes a primary focus, as seen with Afreen, Ayisha, and Rabiya's families. Ultimately, financial stability is foundational to sustaining school attendance and future educational ambitions.

Conclusion and Discussion: Social Position and Educational Pathways in Migration

The children in migrant families are highly heterogeneous (Dyer & Rajan, 2020). They probably won't fit the traditional definition of family and categorising them under one umbrella would be unreasonable. Many single male migrants working in Kerala often do not bring their families. Their wives and children live in their native places, where they attend schools in West Bengal. In many such cases, male members hesitate to bring their families for two reasons. First, they are not fond of education in a language other than their mother tongue. Their immediate concern is that learning a foreign language will be difficult for their kids, even though there will be long-term benefits. Interestingly, they prefer sending their children to English-medium schools there. Government schools are not highly regarded, and many believe that English-medium schools will provide a better education, ultimately leading to better job opportunities.

Second, they don't want to relocate their families here in Kerala. Quoting one migrant worker, "*Akela theek hai, family achcha nahi*" (Being alone is better; bringing the family is not good). A few migrant labourers believe that their location in Kerala is not appropriate for "good women". Male migrants who bring their families are also highly diverse. A large segment consists of "traditional" families, comprising a husband, wife, and children. The children might have studied in West Bengal and might not have transfer certificates. Once the family is in Kerala, their immediate priorities are finding a job and a place to stay. Sometimes, educating their children becomes a priority afterwards. Regardless of the school calendar, they continue to visit their native place, even after they have settled in Kerala. In some families, the husband and wife never bring their children to Kerala. In such cases, the children either stay with their

grandparents or extended family members or in hostels. The parents visit them once a year or so.

Migrant families' education decisions are deeply shaped by their economic class, which defines both their aspirations and their ability to support schooling. Although all aspire to provide good education, only those with adequate resources can act on these ambitions. The socio-economic context of each family moulds their educational priorities. For example, a migrant worker in Kerala, who had been there for over 20 years, described how his low income led to his son dropping out after Class VII and becoming a mechanic. He shared his opinion:

Padhne ka kya faida? Hum toh gareeb hain. Paise nahi hain. Paise ke liye kaam karna pad raha hai. Malayali aadmi zyada padha aur isiliye, achcha kaam mil raha hai unko. Humko padhai se kuch faida nahi hua (What's the use of studying? We are poor. We have no money. You have to work for money. Malayali people study more, so they get good jobs.

We did not get much from education.)

Neither he nor his wife could read or write, and neither attended school. They have another child; she finished school up to Class X in West Bengal and was married off.

Class is a defining factor in the educational experiences of migrant families from West Bengal to Kerala. Economic status, occupation, and awareness collectively shape families' ability to support their children's schooling. For many, immediate survival needs take precedence over educational aspirations, and only those with a degree of financial stability view education as a means to future security. Therefore, class provides a critical framework for understanding disparities in educational outcomes and aspirations among migrant children within the broader context of migration patterns.

The Right to Education Act offers opportunities for migrant children, but its effectiveness is limited by linguistic, cultural, and systemic barriers. Migrant children often lack foundational academic skills due to disruptions caused by mobility and language differences. Schools may enroll them in age-appropriate classes, but without educational support, these children risk falling behind. The modern, non-adaptive school system overlooks the realities of mobile populations, making sustained learning difficult for children whose families move for work.

Extended absences related to cultural or economic obligations break educational continuity, leaving many children disengaged and likely to drop out by adolescence. The system thus fails to support migrant children as intended, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and limiting the impact of the Right to Education Act.

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