

Education of Children affected by Seasonal Migration of Parents: Findings from a Field Study in Jalna District, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Every year, nearly 200,000 children below the age of 14 accompany their parents when they migrate to work in sugarcane harvesting. This qualitative study examines the effect of seasonal migration of parents on the education of children. Data for this study were collected online from 13 villages of Jalna District in Maharashtra during February-April 2021. Methods such as Case Narratives, Participatory Rural Appraisal, In-depth interviews and Key Informant Interviews were adopted for data collection. Migrant children are found more vulnerable in terms of education and capability formation. Many migrant children do not go to school as schools are far from worksites, or due to the language barrier. They are unable to go to school as they often work in the field or look after their younger siblings and helping with domestic chores. For the stay-back children, seasonal migration constitutes a distinct form of parent-child separation. In the absence of their parents, these children receive no supervision and they suffer due to household responsibilities and exposure to work. The shift of schooling from classroom to online due to the Covid-19 induced lock down also affected many children as they have no access to smartphones and internet facilities.

1. Introduction

Seasonal migration has been a common livelihood approach for several households in the semi-arid regions of the state of Maharashtra. Every year, at the end of the rainy season (September), several households and families migrate to work in sugarcane harvesting field and sugar factories of the neighbouring state of Karnataka and other districts within Maharashtra. In the process of seasonal migration, children are the worst affected whether they accompany their parents or are left behind in the villages. An estimate by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra (2017-18) shows that nearly 60, 000 children (6-14 years) miss out on school for six months of the year due to seasonal migration. According to Oxfam (2020), every year, nearly 200,000 children below the age of 14 accompany their parents when they migrate for sugarcane harvesting in Maharashtra. The number of children who stay back (alone or with caregivers) is even higher. Against this backdrop, the current study attempts to understand how seasonal migration affects the education of children. For this, the study collected information from children, parents and various stakeholders from Jalna District in Maharashtra. The fieldwork was conducted online during February - April 2021. The findings presented in this paper are based on the preliminary analysis of the field data.

2. Methods and Materials

This research takes a qualitative approach. The district Jalna in Maharashtra was purposively selected for data collection. It is the district having both high volumes of in-migration as well as out migration of seasonal migrants. The district has eight Blocks. From each block, the three most out-migrating villages were selected for fieldwork. A total of 24 villages were selected for data collection. Participants in this study were purposively selected to include a broad range of people. The two main groups included were children (12-17 years) and their parents that fall into four categories: (1) Seasonal Migrant Children (2) Children Stranded at worksite/destination during the Covid-19 and lockdown (3) Stay Back Children, and (4) Non-Migrant Children. The study also collected information from key stakeholders at the village

level such as Sarpanch, Gramsevak, Teachers, Police Patil, ASHA and Anganwadi Workers. From each selected village, one child from each category was selected. For ensuring gender balance in the sample, an equal number of male and female children were recruited. Data were collected using methods such as Case narratives and Participatory Rural Appraisal (with children), In-depth interviews (with parents), and Key Informant Interviews (with stakeholders). Under the PRA, the techniques of 24-hr clock, Trust Circle and Mobility Mapping were conducted. Data collection was carried out during February – April 2021. Given the potentially devastating consequences of conducting face-to-face data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic, data collection was carried out online with the help of locally appointed youth facilitators following a Standard Operating Procedure for collecting data during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Findings

The findings presented in this paper are based on the preliminary analysis of the field data. Most seasonal migrant families belong to either the Scheduled Caste (*Matang*) or the *Vimukt Jati Nomadic Tribes (Vanjara)*. Families with no relatives and extended family members in the village tend to take the children along with them to the workplace. Many parents and children stated that at the destination, they are deprived of basic facilities like access to safe drinking water, housing, the health care systems etc. At the destination, seasonal migrants and their children experience greater difficulty in gaining access to basic living conditions and thereby their fundamental needs are not always adequately met.

Education: The 24-hr clocks prepared by the non-migrant children illustrates their ability to access education, spend time for studies and play. As per the clock, studying was not part of the daily activity for the migrant/stranded children. They reported that they did not get time to study or unable to study as they feel tired and sleepy after work in the field. As per the 24-hr clocks prepared by the stay-back children, they spent a significant portion of their time supporting their caregiver (mostly grandparents) in work such as fetching water, feeding cattle, ‘family labour’ on the farm. This demonstrates that the migration of parents put more work burden on the stay-back children and hence they can spend only a little time in studies.

Many teachers reported that the children who miss out on school due to migration fail to cope with the studies and their interest levels go down and gradually drop out of school and end up working as child laborers. The long absence from school due to migration leads students to forget what they have learned in school or prevents them from developing relationships with teachers and classmates that help them progress through school. Seasonal migration of parents also affects the education of the stay-back children. Most households of seasonal migrants keep their school-going children in villages and this constitutes a distinct form of parent-child separation. The stay-back children of migrant parents receive less supervision and academic assistance and live in a home environment that is less conducive to learning.

The Covid-19 and lockdown also affected the schooling of the children of seasonal migrant workers. The sudden shift of schooling from classroom to online affected several children of economically poor families as many of them were not having access to smartphones and internet facilities. However, several parents reported that the *Uchal* (advance received from the labour contractor) has helped them to buy smartphones for online classes of their children during the Covid-19 situation.

4. Conclusion

Seasonal migration affects the education of children, and children accompanying their parents (to the destination) are at a higher risk in terms of educational vulnerability and capability formation. At the destination, many children do not go to school as schools are far away from worksites, or due to the language difference in the medium of instruction. Further, migrant children are often treated as an additional workforce (to help parents in their work) or given the responsibility of looking after their younger siblings and helping in domestic chores. Children who stay back in villages while their parents migrate also suffer due to the absence of parents, additional household responsibility and exposure to work. The Covid-19 and lockdown also affected the schooling of the children of seasonal migrant workers. The sudden shift of schooling from classroom to online affected several children of economically poor families as many of them were not having access to smartphones and internet facilities.