

# THE CHILD AND THE CITY: AUTONOMOUS MIGRANTS IN BANGALORE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Literature on child migration has presented migration as a positive move in the lives of poor children, opening up credible alternatives in their lives. On this view, child movement does not necessarily reflect economic distress or family rupture, it may be the result of children's independent agency, a self betterment strategy. These views are in keeping with the broader development literature where migration has been a positive sub - narrative in the story of modernization/urbanization, which will inevitably happen in the course of development.*

*Our research into the lives of migrant children in Bangalore city led us to question these dominant assumptions in the literature. Autonomous child migrants (those who live on their own, or in foster homes, in the city) migrate due to acute economic want, frequently attended by serious familial dysfunction. Migrant children immediately become economic actors in the city, their lives attended by multiple deprivations. Child migration represents the movement of the child from rural to urban poverty, although the face of each is very different. In our findings, the city opens up opportunities for earning, but not for education or occupational or social mobility for migrant children.*

*Recent theorization on urban poverty has drawn attention to the structural exclusion of large numbers of unskilled workers, in the urban informal sector, from the benefits of technology driven and capital intensive globalized development in third world cities. In terms of this broad analytical framework, migration could represent stagnant ghettos rather than rising tides of development which carry large numbers of rural aspirants towards urban prosperity. This paper locates migrant children in Bangalore city in the context of this broad political economy understanding of urban exclusion.*

## Introduction

Child poverty and child labour have drawn considerable research as well as policy interest. In contrast, migration of children in India appears to be a relatively unresearched area. In terms of public policy, migrant children constitute a sub sector of the larger categories of poor children and/or street children, without a distinctive identity as migrants. Research on child migration in general in developing countries is limited, and of fairly recent vintage, emerging from a small academic research community, as well as from international organizations directly involved in Child Rights. Much of the academic work on child migration in developing countries has emerged from the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty (popularly known as the Migration DRC), housed in the University of Sussex, UK<sup>2</sup>. Child migration studies have also been carried out by the research wings of the ILO and the UNICEF. This paper foregrounds the discussion on child migration in Bangalore by referring primarily, though not only, to these two sets of the existing literature.

Drawing on field based research in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, much of this literature appears to be marked by some widely shared perspectives on child migration, which I highlight briefly here, and discuss in greater detail in section-2. First, this literature cautions against homogenizing all child migration in the categories of trafficked/exploited/abused children, and underlines children's agency/independent choice in the migration decision. Migration is seen, on this view, as not driven primarily by dire economic need or family rupture, but as an expression of child aspirations. Secondly,

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the links between child migration and child labour are recognized; however, the right of children above a certain age to work, as well as to move, are sought to be placed in the perspective of economic needs of children. Finally, in terms of impact, child migration is seen as a positive step-up for child migrants.

Using a recently conducted study on migrant children in Bangalore city, the present paper draws attention to the flaws of this research literature which has ignored the political economy of the poverty of migrant children. I argue in this paper that there is a specificity to the situation of child migrants, even while they constitute a sub sector of the larger category of children in poverty. This specificity throws up for consideration features of the political economy of poor households in rural areas, from where migrant children emerge, and their continuing poverty in the city as they seek a living, in low paid, urban work, with little access to education, shelter and health care. Typically caught in the constraints of slum/street life and unregulated work, migrant children have little opportunities to climb out of these constraints. Thus it could be argued that the migrant child is an embodiment of the structure of deprivations that attend the lives of poor households, and represent the continuum of the poverty of the rural into the urban. Far from being a break which then translates into an unilinear progress in the child's life, (as the literature on child migration appears to suggest) migration becomes a space of struggle and deprivation, nostalgia and yearnings, addictions and violence. Highlighting the structural factors underlying migrant children's poverty, the paper points also to the inadequacy of state and civil society approaches to the plight of migrant children.

Child migrants pose formidable problems of measurement. Beyond a few well defined industrial sectors (construction and brick making) and services (small eateries, domestic service), where they are found, most migrant children are in spaces that can be described as fluid and anonymous: children accompanying seasonally migrating parents to the city part of the year; children sent to the city by their parents to live in foster/relatives' homes; children travelling alone from rural to urban areas (autonomous migrants) who typically end up living on and off the streets. The fluidity between occupations (begging, street selling, and prostitution, for example) and between residences (the foster home and the street) creates a situation where the quantitative study of migrant children may yield only limited insights. While measurement must remain a crucial concern, any project of measuring child migrants must be attentive to these constraints.

Drawing on research conducted in Bangalore city,<sup>3</sup> the paper presents information on children who migrated autonomously, that is, those who left their villages unaccompanied by parents/guardians, and now live either in foster homes, on the street, or may have a dual residence between both<sup>4</sup>. The field research on migrant children was carried out (during 2010-11) mainly in six neighbourhoods in south Bangalore<sup>5</sup>. As newly developed areas under the BBMP, these neighbourhoods in the recent past have seen much construction of high rise buildings. Large numbers of migrant construction workers have appeared in these areas to seek work and have put themselves up in temporary, self-constructed shacks in unoccupied sites, or in sites provided by the builders. The six settlements studied each ranged from 100-250 households. Children who had migrated autonomously were found in foster households in these settlements. Several led a shadowy existence between the foster home and the street, and several others appeared to have left the foster home for the street, and were located in the same neighbourhoods. The study was then extended to a few older areas in the city: Shivajinagar Bus Stand,

Majestic Railway Station, each of which are receivers of a large number of migrant children from rural areas on a daily basis; A small, third set of case studies were done in Banashankari 3<sup>rd</sup> Stage in Southern Bangalore.

This paper is based on case studies of 45 autonomous migrant children, across the three sets of areas indicated above. In each of the areas of field work, we were guided by two leading NGOs of the city, which have been involved with issues related to migrant children and street children for several decades. As no formal or structured questionnaire based surveys were undertaken, the paper draws on our repeated visits to these sites, along with the NGO teams, qualitative discussions with groups of children, young adults, their families, local leaders, NGOs and corporators. Detailed case histories of the children were taken during the course of research. However, for reasons of space, in this paper I summarize the main findings and briefly highlight a few cases as illustrations.

The case study method has obvious limitations, particularly when the object of study is potentially a very large universe, in this case, migrant children in Bangalore city. The problems of actually measuring this group, even in a single city, have already been discussed above. Beyond that, one could say that in this particular domain, quantitative figures may generate some understanding while missing important parts of the reality. For example, total school enrolment figures convey nothing of the quality of schools which migrant children attend, or, the number of children making their living off the street may actually convey very little about the actual vulnerabilities which attend their lives. Case studies reveal life trajectories in a way that macro studies would not reveal.

Section-2 below provides a discussion of the existing literature on migration of children. While not exhaustive, this review is indicative of certain shared perspectives in the main strands of the literature that exists, and which is critiqued in this paper. Section-3 draws from our case studies to provide a narration of different categories of migrant children and the conditions in which they live and work. Section-4 offers an overview of state and mainly civil society institutional interventions. Section-5 sums up the findings and attempts to place autonomous child migration within the broader framework of emerging theoretical debates on urban informality as constituting a domain of exclusion, a domain that is structurally determined by the nature of capitalist development in developing countries and which, then, questions the optimistic narrative within which urbanization/migration studies are typically placed.

### **The Agency of Autonomously Migrating Children:**

Autonomous movement in child migration may have different shades of meaning, depending on contexts. However, a rough definition would be, children under 18, who move from home on their own, (with or without the knowledge and permission of parent/guardian,) and live at destinations, in place of employment, on the street, but may also stay in a foster home with relative or family/person known through village connection.

As mentioned earlier, much of the research on child migration in developing countries has been supported and conducted by the Migration DRC, located at the University of Sussex. This research spans South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, and has been conducted, over a period of time, by a number of scholars. The independent agency of children who migrate appears to be a central and shared theme

in this body of work. "The first thing to note with regard to children's migration is that the vast majority of ...child migrants were not compelled by anyone to migrate" (Hashim: 2006). A recent Briefing put forward by the Migration DRC summarizes the collective perspective of the programme on child migration: while acknowledging that children's work and migration, as far as advocacy and child labour elimination is concerned, are often associated with the worst forms of child labour, " yet the voices of child migrants that have emerged in the Migration DRC's research have produced a more ambivalent picture of child migration, which indicates that migration is often a self-betterment strategy for poor children in developing countries who lack other viable opportunities to improve their situations". Further, the majority of the children in the Migration DRC's studies indicated that they had played a major part in making the decision to migrate. This is a significant point which challenges the idea that children are simply passive in the face of adult decisions about their migration (Migration DRC: 2011).

Secondly, studies of intra family processes through which independent child migration takes place have suggested that child migration may not necessarily signal a breakdown of the 'inter-generational contract'<sup>6</sup>, (failure of parents to take care of children) as is typically assumed. "The possibility that independent child migration entails significant rupture in family relations has to be established and cannot be assumed....a child's migration can be a continuation of the social relations of the immediate family, but played out in a different spatial locality. Thus the movement of children between households does not necessarily reflect the breakdown of family relations and an automatic vulnerability to harm" (Hashim: 2006). Similarly, the original household is seen as extended into the foster household (Roy: 2011). The Migration DRC's research has emphasized that the foster home may in fact be, or be seen, as an extension of the child's parental home (Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen: 2007; Iversen: 2002), as well as the need to study children who have not permanently severed ties with their families and home communities, thus seeing migrant children as remaining part of the original household (Migration DRC: 2011). Iversen's work on child migrants from Mandya district in Karnataka, states that older children, particularly males, are likely to migrate autonomously, and typically find work in hotels, bars or shops, and such movement is usually adult-led (Iversen:2002, 2006). This appears to provide a certain legitimacy and credibility to children's movement, and further endorses that child migration is not the result of familial breakdown.<sup>7</sup>

By and large, in prioritizing children's agency/choice, the research reviewed above has adopted an ambivalent perspective on the role of structural (particularly economic) factors in explaining child migration. Some have explicitly denied the role of economic factors in explaining child migration. Thus we have statements such as the following: "Children's decision to migrate are not necessarily rooted solely in economic reasons. Rather, production of income is only one aspect of this complex behavioural system" (Schidkrou: 1981, as quoted in Hashim: 2006). Iversen, concluding his study of older boys (12-14) who leave home independently, commented "for this segment, child labour interventions addressing household poverty are likely to be ineffective" (Iversen: 2002), thus clearly indicating that poverty need not be a factor in child migration.

For others, poverty is recognized as an important factor propelling child movement, Thus: "poverty was the major reason why children moved, but maltreatment at home appears to be one of the many implications such impoverishment carries for children" (Whitehead: 2007); in an earlier work,

Whitehead and others stated "rural underdevelopment and the absolute or relative poverty that accompany it constitute the primary constraints for both parents and children in relation to the migration decisions that are made", but nevertheless maintained that autonomous migration of children reflects a process of transition from childhood to young adulthood, expressing dreams, aspirations and desires of young people for a better life (Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen: 2005), thus indicating that poverty may not necessarily be a trigger in this process.

Thus, overall, there appears to be an area of ambivalence in terms of recognizing structural, poverty-related factors in propelling migration. Poverty as a determinant of child migration is recognized, but appears to be of secondary importance in this analytical framework, which prioritizes child aspirations and agency as the principal motivating factor. Additionally, rural poverty is understood more in terms of economic crisis situations in individual households, than within the framework of systemic or structural conditions that create poverty and prompt migration. On the whole, there is little light thrown on rural employment and earnings, or what could be the typical features of poor rural households that could explain characteristic features of households from which children migrate.

Third, several scholars appear to share the view that autonomous migration may indeed have a positive outcome in the lives of children. Iversen, in the study mentioned above, states that migration is a rational decision made by young adults for a better life: "pockets of the urban labour market may present subsets of the rural child population with credible exit options" (Iversen: 2002). This view of a better life is echoed in research in other locales. Khair, studying migrant children in Bangladesh, states, "Aspirations for a comfortable life encouraged these children to migrate, the general perception being that work for a few years will pave the way for a prosperous future for them." (Khair: 2005)". Similarly Hashim (2006) studying 60 children moving independently from north to south Ghana, perceives migration as a positive move, even though, in this study, as many as 16 out of 60 children reported maltreatment in the place of work, and the co-relation between education and migration was unclear; however, Hashim underlines the availability of income generation opportunities, in contrast to absence of these in the place of origin. Similarly, Whitehead and Hashim state that there is a disjuncture between the NGO perspective, which emphasizes the negative impact of child migration, on the one hand, and academic research, on the other hand, particularly done by Anthropologists, which has emphasized positive effects. Their arguments seem to concur with the latter "the overall effect is often worthwhile.... street children are ingenious in coping with difficult circumstances". (Whitehead and Hashim: 2005). With regard to the impact of migration on children's lives, there is an acknowledgement that the choices children make may appear, objectively speaking, not in the child's best interests, and may in fact potentially amount to reproducing highly problematic relations of inequality<sup>8</sup>. This theme, however, finds little echo in the larger body of the literature referred to here, where the overall conclusion appears to be that the positive benefits outweigh the negative dimensions of migration.

Overall, the argument of this literature would appear to be that child migration is a much more complex and diverse phenomenon, than is captured by the typical image of the child migrant as the object of force and exploitation. Drawing on such studies, Roy (2011) makes a plea for a departure from treating vulnerability, exploitation and abuse as objectively identifiable conditions; instead, there has been a shift to the perspective that these should be seen as socially produced realities which are

negotiated, experienced and perceived in different ways by differently positioned young migrants. Striking a critical note to this widely shared perspective, Ansell (2009) has drawn attention to the fact that such studies fail to theorize children's lives in relation to broader social processes and contribute to isolating childhood studies from other disciplines. Ansell has argued also that there is low emphasis on understanding structures in studies which focus on diverse subjectivities of the experience of child migration. However, literature of the latter genre, that is, emphasizing the need to understand the socio-economic structures that lead to, and determine, the modalities child migration, is limited.

In contrast, international organizations engaged with Child Rights have underlined the links between child migration and child labour. Thus the United Nations recognizes that "Children who are unaccompanied or separated from their parents are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and abuses at all stages of the migration process." (UN: 2011). Similarly, highlighting the link between child migration and child labour, an ILO document stresses that governments should consider the potential vulnerability of children to, in particular the worst forms of child labour, in the context of migratory flows ( de Glind: 2010). This study establishes that in a variety of areas migrant children are worse off in child labour compared to non-migrants. An ILO sponsored study on the basis of child helplines in Kenya, Nepal and Peru, emphasizes the need for social policies to include attention to migrant child labour (ILO: 2012).

Notably, however, causes of child migration are traced to youth unemployment and family survival strategies, (de Glind: 2010) rather than to the nature and structure of rural economies which generate lack of income and prompt child migration. Similarly, the emphasis is on evolving social policies for child migrants, rather than to the elimination of child migration, or of those conditions which lead to child migration (ILO: 2012). A study supported by the ILO states clearly, "International and state actor responses need to recognize that children have a right to move. There is no basis in international law by which to restrict the migration of children of legal working age. It is important not to stop migration, but to increase the protection of migrant children, as well as enable them to better protect themselves" (Flamm: 2010) The idea that child migration and child work above a certain age should be regularized through state protection seems to tie in with the Migration DRC's position, where an important policy recommendation has been that support should be given to children's working organizations, and efforts should be made to establish trade union support of legal child workers (Migration DRC: 2011).

To sum up the main themes that emerge from the literature, first, while it is acknowledged that economic factors propel child migration, at the same time economic need or failure of family support appear to be of secondary importance in the broad analytical framework, in which children's agency/choice has been central for understanding child migration. Secondly, while the links between child migration and child labour are clearly recognized, nevertheless, child migration is seen within a largely positive paradigm, that is, a movement which allows children to access resources, such as education and income.

It is important to highlight that autonomous child migration in fact most typically takes place when the family is dysfunctional, as an economic unit, and/or as a framework of emotional support and care for the child. In our study, (reported below in section-3) children had typically moved from

situations of extreme impoverishment and deprivation in the place of origin. In many other cases, the death of a parent, the other parent marrying again or moving off, the lack of care from other relatives, extreme familial discord, child abuse, are some of the conditions in which children leave home to travel to the city. It is in this context that we need to examine the notions of agency and of family put forward by the literature reviewed above. First, the decision for autonomous migration could be taken by children, and/or by parents, but the situation of household economic distress in which such a decision is taken would indicate, in fact, lack of choice, rather than the exercise of choice or agency. In other words, the child may decide independently to leave home, and may or may not be supported by his parents in this decision, but the circumstances are frequently such that the child may not have any viable option but to migrate. The notion of agency is therefore of very partial relevance to understanding such situations. Secondly, autonomous migration may not signal the end of parent-child relationship, but it certainly signals the end of the inter-generational contract where the family is unable to provide the child with economic and/or emotional support. Therefore statements such as "children make strategic life choices and negotiate with adults to do so", (Hashim: 2006) make only limited sense, when set against the consideration that the decision to migrate is made under conditions of economic crisis and family rupture.

At the place of destination, children had access to opportunities for earning an income, but most lacked any other opportunities (education/skill formation), many lived on the streets, cut off from any kind of institutional aid that could facilitate their mainstreaming. Thus migration appeared to be a survival package rather than to represent a step towards mobility. The continuum of deprivations from rural households to urban living, which appeared almost uniformly in our research, cast shadows on the notions of agency and self betterment which are central to the literature reviewed. These points are taken up again in sections 3 and 5.

### **Autonomous Child Migrants in Bangalore:**

In this section I present information relating to forty five children in the age group of 10-18, (only two were above 16), who arrived in the city between 1 and 7 years back, (that is, between 2003-2010) without parent/guardian, and live either in foster homes, or independently. Of these, 7 were migrant children who came to the city alone, but with the knowledge and consent of their parents, and were living with relatives or families known to their parents through village networks. The rest (38) had come to the city alone and were living independently of any adult guardian. While a few in this group had travelled with parental knowledge and consent, many had travelled anonymously, their decision and whereabouts unknown to any adult family member.

#### **1. Child Migrants in Foster Homes:**

Children may travel from the village to the city to take shelter in the house of a relative, or a person or family known to their parents. The literature refers to these arrangements as foster homes. In practice, migration of children from villages into foster homes in the city represents a reciprocal arrangement where the foster family offers shelter in return for the child's help in childcare, household chores and partial earnings.

Parents/guardians in the village seek or agree to such an arrangement typically in contexts where, for economic reasons, taking care of the child or even providing two square meals has proved difficult, and where the village offers little scope for the child to earn in order to augment the family income. In the city, such children share space with the foster family, but may move between the foster home and the street.

The seven children in foster care spent part of their time looking after children in the foster home, and part of the time in street earning. These cases represented a certain pattern: the child, immediately on arrival to the city, becomes a producer of services (within the foster household) as well as an earner of income. In each case, it appeared that on the part of the foster family there was no question of sending the child to school. Even when NGOs attempt to reach such children in order to place them in schools, household economics in the foster home as well as in the village, push the child into the workforce. NGO workers uniformly reported that children staying in such foster homes rarely, if ever, get a chance to educate or skill themselves. Many take to the occupations of their foster carers, typically in road side begging, selling items at traffic signals, construction work, or may be placed in a private home as domestic servant, some may perform a variety of functions for the foster home, fetching water, cooking, child care. The NGOs reported that given the anonymous nature of the work, as well as the scattered and large numbers of children engaged in such work, it was virtually impossible to reach such children or to make a difference to their lives. I highlight three typical cases.

***Monisha, aged 11, came to Bangalore two years ago from a village near Kolar, where her parents are landless agricultural labourers. She stays with her married elder sister. Her sister's husband is jobless and given to drinking. He lives in this household only partially. In the mornings Monisha looks after her sister's children, while the sister goes out to earn by begging on a busy cross road. In the afternoon, Manisha takes the sister's place in begging. She earns Rs 100-150 per day, and gives her daily earnings to her sister. Before coming to Bangalore, Monisha had attended the village primary school for three years, and studied till 3<sup>d</sup> standard.***

***Varun, aged 12, had migrated a year ago to live with his father's two brothers, who are construction labourers. Varun's parents are landless agricultural labourers in Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu. After coming to Bangalore, the child had somehow come under the radar of a local NGO which had put him in a residential government school for homeless children. However, the foster carers ( in this case, the child's uncles) insisted on taking the child out of the school so that he could start earning in order to augment the household income. At present he works as cleaner in a local bar, at a pay of Rs 700 per month, and helps with household chores in the mornings Varun had studied up to 4<sup>th</sup> standard in the village school.***

***Muniraju, aged 13, years migrated from Kadiri village in Andhra Pradesh three years ago. He stays with his uncle and his family here. His parents are agricultural coolies in the village. Muniraju lives partially in his uncle's hut and partially on the street, where he spends nights under the shelter of closed shops. He works occasionally as helper in the construction sites, where he earns Rs 60-70. Much of the time he sells stickers in the areas***

*of MG Road, Majestic, Mayo Hall, earning Rs 100-150 per day. He shares part of his income with uncle's family.*

## **2. Child migrants on their own:**

Secondly, we studied, through the case study method, 28 children in the KR Puram/ Mahadevpura/CV Ramannagar/ Majestic Railway Station areas, and 10 (in a group of boys) in Banishankari 3<sup>rd</sup> stage. Each of these children had come to the city alone, with or without the knowledge and approval of their parents. They had migrated alone, most lived on the streets in groups, a few lived partially in foster homes and partially on the street. A few lived with employers (in small hotels, or in domestic service). The age group of these 38 children ranged from 11-18. The largest number, 28, came from northern Karnataka, four came from Kolar and Mysore, while the rest (six) had come from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. 22 were rag pickers, 8 worked as domestic help, 4 as a helper in local eateries, and 4 girls who were studied in Majestic railway station seemed to be doing a combination of begging/selling, and prostitution by soliciting clients on the station platform. Presented below, are a few selected highlights from our case studies.

### **KR Puram-Mahadevpura - CV Raman Nagar areas**

- (1) Madhu aged 12 years, migrated from Kolar district four years back. His mother died, and he does not know where his father is. He had studied till 3<sup>rd</sup> standard in his village. He stayed at a childrens' home for one month, and then escaped to the streets. He now lives on the street, along with another homeless family (mother and son). His main income earning activity is rag picking, which he does intermittently all day, selling his waste collection for Rs 50-100 each day. He gives Rs 20 sometimes to his friend's mother for a meal. When there is no income or it is too little, he begs for food from the local bakery. During evenings and nights, he along with his friend and mother, take shelter in the balcony of the bakery. Madhu has some addiction to whiteners. He would like to work in a garage, where he would get regular pay.*
- (2) Dinesh aged 13 came to Bangalore two years back from Chitoor district in Andhra Pradesh. Mother died and father married again. Dinesh's father and step-mother were both abusive towards him, and there was hardly anything to eat at home. Dinesh stays with fellow rag pickers in a shed in Banashankari (Jayanagar). He is illiterate, never having attended school. Since age 5 he has been working and earning. In the village he used to work as shepherd, and after coming to Bangalore, he has been working as rag picker. He earns between Rs 50-100 each day.*

### **Majestic Railway station:**

- (3) Krishna, aged 15 years, came to Bangalore five years ago from Pavgada village in Chitradurga district in Andhra Pradesh. Parents were landless labourers who also migrated with him. For three initial years all of them were engaged in begging in the Magadi Road area, near the leprosy hospital. They were earning between Rs 300-600*

*per day, living in a temporary shelter they put up opposite the hospital. After three years, both parents returned to the village. In the past one year, Krishna has started selling samosas in the railway station. He earns between Rs 200-300 per day. He and five other boys have put up a temporary shelter in Bytaranyapura. He was once put in a rehab centre by the police, but after experiencing some physical abuse there, he left.*

*(4-7) Anjanamma, Netra, Veena and Radha aged between 13-15, hail from Chitradurga district in Andhra Pradesh. Two of them have studied till 3rd and 5th standards and two are illiterate. Veena and Nethra are sisters, they lost their mother, their father and step mother live in the village. The other two are not related but from the same village. Each set of parents are landless agricultural labourers, with large households. The girls live in a group in temporary shelter in a slum in Yelahanka. They catch the train from Yelahanka station in the morning, always travel ticketless, work in the Majestic railway station all day, and return in the evening. They reported that they do multiple jobs like begging, selling hair, and selling cloth pins. However, on observation they appeared to be doing only begging. NGO workers working in the station platform reported that they do a combination of begging and casual prostitution. Each girl earns between Rs 100-300 per day.*

**Banashankari 3rd Stage:**

*A group of about ten migrant boys, were located in Banashankari Third Stage, a fairly affluent, middle class neighbourhood. We undertook this case study with the help of a local NGO which keeps in touch with the boys through regular contact, without necessarily trying to institutionalize them.*

*Though unrelated, all the boys in this group appeared to share a common life trajectory. They were all free-lance garbage pickers from the neighbourhood's street dumps, houses, and shops. Some of them confessed laughingly that they also often steal material from construction sites, and sell to scrap dealers. They eat in cheap hotels, sometimes the houses from which they collect garbage give them a meal. Each one mentioned, in a matter of fact manner, some kind of addiction. They move and work together, sleeping in the same place, on a nearby road, under a big tree, or in the balcony of a shop. They have no address.*

*The boys had migrated from places like Tumkur, Mandya, Mysore. In each case, the parent, either because of low or no income, alcoholism, ill health, death, or just disappearance, had never been a significant presence in the child's life. A few had been through a few years of school, ranging from one to three years. Others were illiterate. One or two affirmed doubtfully that they would like to go to school. This was greeted with loud, mocking laughter from the others. Most said that they did not want to go to school. They told us that life was good. When asked to give us a list of three things they want, in order of priority, they looked puzzled. At the same time, it was impossible to imagine that they would ever agree to subject themselves to schools, completely disconnected as they were*

***from the structure of motivations that propel middle class children through the discipline of schools.***

Of the 45 children, 38 came from landless rural families, in which both or one parent were in construction labour or in agriculture coolie work. Each of these children said that they had come/or been sent to Bangalore to earn, that food was insufficient in their rural homes. Autonomous migration is of course aided by peer group, as well as occasionally by adults, who show the way out. From our case studies, however, it appeared that migration, was invariably the result of economic distress or collapse of the household, rather than primarily through peer or adult influence. Thus typically children flee when there is the perception that the household can no longer be a space for physical survival. This may be a crisis situation, (brought on by indebtedness, illness, death, or disappearance of one or both parents) or may be the culmination of a long period of deteriorating economic conditions.

A significant number, 28, from the group of 45 children studied, came from dysfunctional families, wherein one parent had died and the other parent had disappeared, or re-married, both parents were dead, a single parent was addicted to drinking, both parents were abusive and violent, both parents had re-married, and so on. It appeared, then, that no parent, or guardian, had a significant presence in the lives of these children. It was in this complete emotional vacuum that they had left home, or had been forced to do so, by the violence of a parent/guardian.

The literature on child migration appears to believe that "migration is a consequence, not a cause of limited educational opportunities", (Yaquob: 2009). To the contrary, from our findings it appeared that migrant children had had some access to schools prior to migration, which was terminated after migration.<sup>9</sup> Around 30 of the 45 children had gone to school in the villages where they had lived prior to migration. Several had studied till 5th or 6th class, two had studied up to 8th and 9th class, one had completed SSLC, and others between 2nd and 3rd class. Each of the children who had gone to school stated that they had had to leave school in order to migrate. Not one of the children had had a chance to go to school after coming to Bangalore. Two of these had been placed in orphanages, from which they had escaped. These findings highlight the absence of opportunities to attend school in the point of destination<sup>10</sup>.

In our study, rarely did any child express any desire to go to school. While the pitfalls of earning and living on the streets, as well as facing exploitative and violent foster carers were mentioned by many of the children, over our discussions it appeared that they were not aware of any options, nor did they have a vision of the future which was very different from what they were doing at present. The literature, discussed in section 2, talks of children reporting their "need for human capital accumulation through schooling and skills development, asset accumulation, and independent income generation that children feel are needed for their transition into adulthood ...." ( Yaqoob: 2009), and of migration as a self-betterment strategy ( Migration DRC:2011). However, the reality appeared to be one where the children, inserted early into an unregulated system as workers, were far removed from any vision of a better life<sup>11</sup>. In this context, their distance from mainstream life in the city, is one which bears a closer look. While they are physically close to the urban mainstream (collecting garbage, domestic service, selling at traffic lights) their life aspirations, if at all they have any aspirations, have little to do with the city's rapidly growing domains of wealth and technology. In the shadowy existence of the street, where

the child negotiates a life between the garbage dump, the scrap dealer, the roadside shelter, the thief, the exhorter, the policeman, the drug peddler and the sexual predator, the crucial question is: what is the space where the state, or civil society, can step in?

### **State and Civil Society Interventions:**

As mentioned at the outset, migrant children have received relatively little government attention. State attention has been focussed largely on the question of child labour, and only indirectly on migrant children. The National and State Child Labour Projects have set up Bridge Schools to provide elementary education to children rescued from child labour, many of whom are migrants. The Tent School scheme of the Government of Karnataka is one of the very few measures designed specifically for children of migrant labourers. The limitations of these schemes, specifically the failure of Bridge Schools and Tent Schools in mainstreaming migrant children, have been discussed elsewhere<sup>12</sup>. For the present purposes, I would highlight that given the anonymous and fluid nature of their existence, autonomous migrants, whether in foster homes or on the street, are neither aware of, nor are entitled to any of these benefits. It has been left, largely, to civil society efforts to provide limited assistance to children who are autonomous migrants.

### ***NGO interventions:***

While the observations here are limited to the two NGOs that we worked with, most civil society efforts at rehabilitation of poor children more or less fall into the pattern outlined here. First, given limited funding, NGOs often try to place migrant children in government supported institutions for homeless children. Both NGOs reported that there are a large number of drop-outs or run-always from these institutions, due partly to the low quality of care.

Secondly, NGOs maintain booths in Bangalore's central railway and bus stations, where a large number of children arrive every day into the city, alone, in search of work, but frequently without any purpose except to escape a family situation. NGOs attending to such children, given limited resources for institutional rehabilitation, have adopted "rescue and reunite with family" as a strategy: to first trace the child's family and then return the child to them. The child's fate, post return to family, is not followed up by the NGOs, and there are no mechanisms in place to prevent continuing deprivation and/or abuse, or to prevent future flight of the child. "Rescue and re-unite" therefore has obvious limitations, but is a strategy adopted in a situation where the choice of institutional responses to the plight of migrant children are limited.

Thirdly, both NGOs also run rehabilitation homes as well as schools for run-away children. The scale of this activity is limited by the small and often variable resources available to NGOs. Finally, an important component of NGO activities is to run open shelters for street children, which act as temporary lodging. While not designed to be a substantive intervention into street children's lives, nevertheless shelters do attempt to provide some kind of counselling services. By and large NGOs provide institutional support for the maintenance and education of a limited number of street children; given the huge scale of the problem and the continuous influx of poor children into the city, "rescue and

rehabilitation', temporary shelters and so on represent efforts to reconcile limited resources with some kind of minimalist intervention<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusion

There are obvious limitations in using a case study based, single city study in critiquing a larger body of literature. However, as discussed in section 1, measurement of autonomous migrant children and the creation of large data sets about their conditions pose obvious difficulties, given their highly fluid and anonymous conditions. Given the limitations of the case study method, the present study thus might be seen as providing a starting point in what could be larger enquiries into the lives of autonomous migrants. For the present, it allows us to question what appears to be a fairly hegemonic perspective in the existing literature on child migration. This shared perspective, as discussed in section 2, based on studies of autonomous migration, particularly in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, has highlighted that child migration reflects children's independent agency and desire for self betterment. On this view, child movement may be propelled by poverty or familial dysfunction, but children's dreams and aspirations for a better life, and their agency in making the decision to migrate, provide a broader understanding of child migration. Thus choice is central to child migration, and migration is instrumental in providing children with greater opportunities and life chances.

This positive view of child migration, which the paper critiques, is in keeping with the larger development literature on migration in general. Migration, broadly speaking, has been seen as an inevitable part of the larger processes of urbanization and development. At the same time, that R-U migrants become part of the unskilled, low paid, informal sector of manufacturing and services, and they remain excluded from the benefits of economic development as well as from basic urban services, has been widely documented. Although the links between urban informality and urban poverty are well established empirically, there is as yet very little theorization of the links between migration, informality and urban poverty. The image of the migrant as the potential embodiment of the fruits of urbanization/development remains fairly hegemonic. Child migration has in fact been seen largely within this optimistic paradigm, depicted widely in the literature as not necessarily forced or harmful, but as an act of choice, which opens up positive options in the child's life.

Our study of child migrants in Bangalore shows the location of children in the rough edge of economic distress, which is a continuum in their lives from the rural to the urban, forcing them to become economic actors. While an analysis of rural economic distress, which appears to underlie much of child migration, was beyond the scope of this paper, our research highlighted that autonomous child migrants typically move to cities fleeing rural households that are economically unstable, and dysfunctional family situations. In the city, far removed from any kind of state intervention by their hidden, fluid and shadowy existence, such children earn a subsistence income, but rarely have access to opportunities to acquire education or skill. In contrast to the received literature on child migration, the present research highlights these structural disadvantages, rooted in the poverty of rural households and in their urban livelihoods, which, then, determine the *absence* of migrant children's agency and choice, as well as opportunities, at both ends.

Emerging literature on the trajectory of post colonial capitalist development has highlighted that a large workforce exists and grows in cities in developing countries, marked by unregulated wages

and low income self-employment. While in the mainstream development discourse this underbelly of the urban workforce is either ignored, or still located optimistically as in the transitory phase towards modernization, more critical scholarship has seen this large, unskilled workforce as structurally, and permanently, excluded from capital and knowledge intensive globalized growth structures. Constituting the outside of capital, this unregulated and ghettoized sector is nevertheless necessary to capital in that it provides subsistence to a peripheral but large population.<sup>14</sup> If the story of modernization is even partially disrupted by the story of unskilled informal sector urban workers, migrant labour in cities are the dramatis personae of the latter narrative, and child migrants possibly their more tragic counterparts.

Is migration still a positive move in the lives of children? "If children's independent migration is entirely harmful...then why do children do it?" (Yaqub: 2009). Child migration, as chronicled by our findings, is a part of the process of relocation from rural poverty to urban poverty, although the face of urban poverty looks different. Instead of starvation, there are three meals, as well as money left over for addictions and so on. The material presented above highlights, importantly, the lack of access to education, skills, occupational and social mobility, as far as child migrants are concerned. Seen from this perspective, then, migrant children appear to be firmly inserted in the structure of exclusion marked by lack of skills, low wages/incomes and absence of channels of mobility. As mentioned above, the continuous flow of poor children from rural areas to cities would place state funding and institutional capacity for child welfare to impossible tests. Therefore attention needs to be refocused on the question of how to address household poverty, both rural and urban, and the issue of informal, unregulated work is the core of this question. In the shorter term, policy makers perhaps need to pay attention to why even existing institutions, such as tent schools, remain only token interventions.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The research reported in this paper was conducted with the help of two NGOs: Association for Promoting Social Action, Karnataka ( APSA), and BOSCO ( Bangalore). The author is grateful to Shri Lakshapathy and Sm. Deboshree of APSA, Father George of BOSCO, and to their respective teams, for facilitating this research. KC Smitha of ISEC provided valuable research assistance.
- <sup>2</sup> The Migration DRC programme which began in 2003 was concluded in 2009. It has been replaced by the Migration Out of Poverty Consortium at Sussex University. The Migration DRC has supported several research studies on child migration, (discussed in this paper,) some of which are independently published, others are in the form of Research Reports and Briefings of the programme.
- <sup>3</sup> The research reported here is part of a larger research study : Supriya RoyChowdhury et al (2012) "Migration, Informal Work and Welfare: a Policy Perspective in Karnataka's Cities", Project Report ISEC, Bangalore ( mimeo).
- <sup>4</sup> A more detailed study on child migration in Bangalore, including autonomous child migrants, and children accompanying migrant parents in the construction industry, is available in the Report cited above.
- <sup>5</sup> Nagavarpalya and Hosannagar in C.V Raman Nagar Constituency, (Ward numbers 57 and 51), Ramaswamypalya and Pai Lay Out under K.R. Puram Constituency, (Ward Numbers 81 and 56), Thubarahalli and Nellurehalli, under Madevpura Constituency (ward numbers 82 and 84).
- <sup>6</sup> On this, see Kabeer (2000).
- <sup>7</sup> see, also, for example, de Lima, Punch and Whitehead: 2012,
- <sup>8</sup> Hashim and Thorsen (2011), as quoted in Roy (2011).
- <sup>9</sup> There is an apparent contradiction between rural distress related child migration and the fact that several children in our case studies had attended a few years of school in their villages. However, there has been a steady increase in the number of government primary schools ( number of habitations with primary schools

within a distance of one kilometre increased from 84% in 1993 to 88% in 2002). as well as in rural school enrolment in Karnataka ( on this, see Suresh and Mylarappa: 2012; Bajpai et al; 2008). The availability of schools, the school mid-day meal scheme, and the fact that there are no employment opportunities for children in rural areas, are possible explanations of why migrant children had attended school in their villages before migrating.

- <sup>10</sup> For similar findings, see Smitha (2008).
- <sup>11</sup> An early study of street children in Bangalore reported that finding accommodation, a place to sleep, and two meals were a daily, uncertain pursuit. Drug use was often reported by the children as a way to escape from chronic conflicts ( Benegal et al :1998).
- <sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Bridge Schools, under the NCLP, see Rajasekhar et al ( 2011); for a critical discussion on Tent Schools see our Report (2012).
- <sup>13</sup> An important recent work on child labour in Karnataka reports that Bridge Schools, created under the State Child Labour Project (SCLP) for the purpose of rescuing children from hazardous industries and mainstreaming them, had extremely mixed results. A large number of children (52%), according to the study, dropped out from the Bridge schools before completion, or dropped out after they were mainstreamed into government schools. See Rajashekhar et al (2011).
- <sup>14</sup> See, particularly, Sanyal, Kalyan (2007). See also, Gooptu (2009); RoyChowdhury (2011).

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