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Urgent Need to Give the Children their Due

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Book Review

Locked Homes, Empty Schools: The Impact of Distress Seasonal Migration on the Rural Poor by Smita; photographs by Prashant Pranjiar, foreword by Amartya Sen; published by Zubaanbooks; pp. 200 Hb, 8"x11", landscaped, four colour photographs; ISBN 8189884174; price : Rs 695.

Locked Homes, Empty Schools is a chronicle of the tragedies of millions of workers and their families—men, women and children that are forced out of their villages as seasonal migrant labour. It gives a record of gross violation of human rights in contemporary India. Reading through the book one wonders at the texture of democracy in the country and the State's incapacity to reach out to millions of poor. None of these families seek charity or doles. All they seek is work and wages even as they struggle against all odds to live a life of dignity and honour.

This is a significant addition to the existing literature on migration in India, eminently readable with poignant photographs that speaks volumes and hits the heart. Reading the book, one cannot but feel the pain and suffering of our labor force who contribute to the generation of wealth of modern India. This tells us about something very unfair happening to our children and shows that this predicament need not

be accepted as inevitable. It shows how there have been heroic attempts by NGOs to give succour to children and provide solutions that can be taken to scale by the policy-makers, bureaucracy and its legion of staff.

Not many studies on migrant labour have focused attention on what really happens to children and their exploitation as workers in the labor force. This study focuses on the pain and suffering of millions of children and it compels us to reckon with the fact that children are so crucial and vital to the phenomenon of migration. Some hundreds and thousands of children who should actually be in schools and studying accompany the families, for example, of the 650,000 migrant labour force in the sugarcane industry in Maharashtra, which is itself is a humongous number, 200,000 are children in the 6-14 years age group. Similarly in the brick kilns it is estimated that countrywide there are 25 million workers, of whom about one-third that is 7.5 million are children.

The neglect of such children is indeed woeful. There is no cognisance of their plight and thus they are not even mentioned in the Five-Year Plans, nor are they the focus of any special schemes or sub-plans. The absence of concern at the macro-level reflects in form a total lack of schooling or educational facilities for these children. It is noticed that despite such children actually being out of school, their names continue in the attendance registers, which is a gross violation of children's right. And this is not even recognised in most such schools.

The combination of a succinct text and images of the trials and tribulations of the poor provokes moral indignation. The author gives a graphic picture of their movement from one site to another, always starting a new chain of exploitation and drudgery. Living precariously they are pushed out of homes as ecological refugees in search of livelihoods especially in those sectors that are labour intensive and require unskilled work. They are preferred because they are a source of cheap labour dependent on the employers for their very existence

and survival, and will never question and can never get organised. They are not being sought after because of scarcity of labour locally. This the author argues results in “widespread depression of wages and disempowerment of labour”.

The causes for such large scale migration are drought, degradation of soil, salinity ingress in coastal areas, displacement due to large-scale mining and construction of mega dams on the one hand, and due to high demand for manual labor in labor intensive works in agriculture, mining, brick-kilns, sugar cane harvesting on the other. The work force moves out of the villages, cramped in buses, trains, trucks and on bullock carts which causes untold risk to their lives. The terms of contract are indeed exploitative, it is rare and that they even know where they will be located; the duration of the contract varies from around three to nine months with no written document to vouch for. Payment made on piece-rate basis provokes the entire family men, women and children to work.

There is a vivid and moving description of dwellings on the work site. One wonders at the resilience of the human spirit and its capacities to take insult, humiliation and a sordid life in order to survive. Children are left uncared for and their predicament is burdensome whether they are with their parents on the worksite or they have been left behind to fend for themselves in half empty villages and deserted neighbourhoods. Even those as young as three to four years carry head loads and soon graduate to becoming hard core labourers by the time they are 11-12 year old. Lives of girls are precarious, as often they become victims to several abuses.

According to the author, there is an utter lack of State response to such a large scale migration. The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 has several loopholes as it does not protect the rights of migrant workers which take place within the state. The Act also applies only to those migrants working for a registered contractor. It is widely acknowledged that such a registration does not take place and neither

is there a legal instrument to monitor contractors who have not been registered. Further the Act does not have any provision to protect children and their rights.

The strength of the book is in highlighting some initiatives of NGOs to ensure that children of migrant labour who leave their homes do not miss out on education. The experience of Janarth in Maharashtra tells how it provides for schools to cover around 12,000 children of workers engaged in sugar factories in seven districts. Beginning with setting up of alternate schools on work sites it has even attempted to set up seasonal hostels in villages where migrant workers leave behind their children just so that their education does not get disrupted. This must have been a Herculean task but shows beyond doubt that the poor want to send their children to schools and are willing to leave behind their children if arrangements are made for the same. It is important that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan takes this to scale.

Likewise there is a study of the programme implemented by Setu in Jamnagar and Rajkot in Saurashtra from where migration takes place to salt pans and brick kilns to the adjoining blocks in large numbers. Even here seasonal hostels have been set up with a great amount of success. The regularity of such children had an impact on the functioning of their school and thus helped children of non-migrant families too to have a proper school. The intervention started with migrant children and has now resulted in taking up the cause of all children in the area and their right to education. This is indeed phenomenal work.

The case study of Vikalpa and Lok Drishti in Orissa shows how a small town Kanatbhanji in Bolangir district becomes a hub of

recruitment of migrant families to work in the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh. The NGOs have set up seasonal hostels to arrest the movement of school going children along with their parents who embark on migration. Each year the numbers of children willing to stay back are growing and thus there is a corresponding increase in the seasonal hostels. There is also an effort to provide education at work sites for those children who could not stay back, and consultations with the counterparts in Andhra Pradesh both in the government and at the NGO level have been tried.

Significantly, all of the above NGOs have negotiated with the SSA and urged the respective governments to take the programme to scale. There is also a quick mention of some of the initiatives of the governments as in the case of Madhya Pradesh where seasonal hostels have been set up in 700 villages in 40 districts in 2005.

The book shows how it is important to have multiplicity of interventions to ensure that children of migrant families find schooling in one way or another. The first attempt is to make sure that they stay back through the seasonal hostels, and the second attempts—for those who accompany their parents—is a provision for their education at worksites. The latter has its concomitant problems, as the arrangement is not a full fledged school. On returning home the local school too is often reluctant to reintegrate these children. There is a need for bridge courses for those children who have missed out on education and finally the capacities of the local schools too are to be strengthened to encourage children to stay back while their parent are on migration. The need however is for the Central Government to learn from all these initiatives, and evolve a policy on education for children of migrant families as well as children who work as migrant laborers and to allow for flexibility in the SSA programmes to accommodate such innovations. The book emphasises repeatedly that there is a need for the SSA to recognise the issue, and work out appropriate systems and procedures to enable children complete their education without any disruption.

Often such records of battle of children for schools do not show how they can be resolved in a manner that the battles are actually won. This study is important as it lays down concrete ways in which children can be protected even in the context of such a grim reality. It is a positive book, which seeks the attention of policy-makers to take up the agenda of giving children their due with a sense of urgency. One can only hope that the Indian State wakes up to this call and recognises that in protecting children's rights it is affecting deep foundational changes in our country's economy and its democratic texture.