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Bridging the Gap:

Enhancing Access to Higher Education for Children of Migrant Labourers

Geneva Challenge 2025
The Challenges of Migration

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July 2025



Geneva Challenge
2025

Abstract

SDG 4 of the United Nation's Declaration of Sustainable Development Goals 2015, talks about ensuring INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE and QUALITY education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Yet as a decade has passed, the situation hasn't changed much. There was minor progress however, nothing substantial has been achieved yet. Children in vulnerable situations, especially those of migrants, still continue to face challenges in accessing education. There is also a wide gender based disparity in regards to access to education and skill development.

In developing countries like India, the situation is even more severe. Due to diversity in languages and cultures across the country, many internal migrants find it difficult to adjust and assimilate into new social spaces. Children of these migrants face greater challenges of social inclusion and assimilation due to the difference in their social and economic backgrounds. This has a tremendous impact on their education where chances of them getting excluded and discriminated against are higher due to existing social stigmas. While primary education has become compulsory and free since the enactment of the Right to Education Act of 2009, children of migrant labourers encounter several difficulties while pursuing higher education, which is necessary to become financially independent.

We as students of Public Policy from University of Mumbai, Kalina, India, strongly believe that **immediate**, **efficient** and **inclusive** policy intervention is needed to tackle this challenge. Henceforth we propose a **THREE PILLAR STRATEGY**, which includes,

- ❖ Creating a separate identification system for migrants which will track down their data and will help in their documentation thus easing out tedious administrative hurdles which they normally face.
- ❖ Another strategy is to create a separate and dedicated educational board catering only to the needs of students belonging to migrating families.
- ❖ While primary education is free, secondary and higher education in India is expensive for children from migrating communities due to their financial

vulnerability. A comprehensive, nationwide system of Educational loans based on income repayment can be beneficial for them. This network will be in alignment with earlier proposed two solutions, hence making it a Unified, Extensive and Inclusive educational structure for children from migrant communities.

All of these solutions are interconnected, serving the same purpose. Which is, to integrate children of migrant labourers into mainstream society and make sure that they get access to quality education especially in higher education. We also suggest a monitoring mechanism mostly inspired from prevalent international standards. We are condensing our project coverage mainly to our country of origin India and that too only to Maharashtra, which is one of the states most affected by the internal migration.

Introduction

Migration has been a historical process since the beginning of human settlement. It involves movement of individuals or groups of individuals from one place to another. The motive behind this movement generally involves future employment opportunities, better education and living conditions or even the desperation of saving one's life. These causes usually categorise migration into **VOLUNTARY** and **INVOLUNTARY/ FORCED** migration. The example of voluntary migration can be seen when a number of individuals, mainly youth, migrate from countrysides to the big cities or metropolitans in search of better employment opportunities and monetary prospects. In India particularly, big cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru, etc. Has witnessed a surge in migrated labour coming from erstwhile states such as, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, etc. the country has also witnessed involuntary migration in form of people coming from hilly regions of Himachal Pradesh and others where they face significant threat to their lives as these regions are prone to natural calamities. Many tribal groups are also migrating due to various environmental threats such as rapid deforestation and rising global temperature. Nonetheless, such a huge movement of people from one place to another poses serious administrative and security risks. It also leads to significant questions of rehabilitation of migrants, their integration into mainstream society and providing them basic necessities which all fall under the duty of the government of that country or region. This additional burden as it is usually referred to, creates a

somewhat negative image of migrants and subjects them to menial and sometimes even discriminatory treatment from others. For example, in India many migrant settlers had to reside in slums devoid of any sanitary or infrastructural facilities. The government on its part is undertaking several projects to resolve the issue. However, this has led to various stigmas attached with migrant communities which further leads to their exclusion from mainstream society.

Despite these soaring challenges, India still lacks a dedicated, migrant specific Unified and Centralised policy planning. Through our three pillar policy approach, we are putting forward an interconnected and compact policy structure which is shaped by considering distinct characteristics of migrant communities in India.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Maharashtra attracts large flows of internal migrants: between **2001–10** some **19.64 million** people moved into the state, and about 39% of them were children. Most migrant children settle in urban centers – around 60% in Mumbai, Thane and Pune – and come from states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Odisha. There are also substantial seasonal intrastate flows (e.g. families from drought-hit Marathwada migrating each fall to the sugarcane belts of western Maharashtra). Such migration is driven by poverty: families are often landless or have minimal land, seeking work in agriculture (sugarcane, drought-relief programs), construction, brick kilns, quarries, etc. In many cases whole families move (or children accompany one parent), and the children's schooling is disrupted.

Migrant families face multiple socio-economic pressures. A Maharashtra RTE survey notes that these households are “mostly from economically weaker sections” and landless, so “migration disrupts primary and secondary education”. Girls suffer disproportionately: when families move, girls are often pulled out of school altogether. Community insecurity and poverty mean migrant children are at high risk of child labour or early marriage instead of schooling. The result is that, nationally, an estimated 80% of children of seasonal workers have no access to education. Migrant children thus fall well outside the standard school system, as they are “**difficult to trace**” and lack continuity in enrollment. In Maharashtra, schools often lack precise data on migrants, so children disappear from rosters when families move.

There are some state sponsored initiatives like,

- Maharashtra already operates seasonal hostels for sugarcane migrant children (e.g. the Sant Bhagwanbaba hostel provides board, meals and study for children of cane cutters)
- Maharashtra's July 2025 campaign ("Street to School") is a model: local officials canvass hamlets, worksites and slums to locate out-of-school migrant children and enroll them,

Some private institutions and business houses too have implemented certain policies to track down migrants' data in the state. For example,

- Tata Trusts issued digital cards tracking each migrant child's school history, and successfully mainstreamed ~1,800 out-of-school children into schools.

However, lack of unification in these initiatives creates confusion and often mismanagement. Most of the time, Migrant families are not affluent in awareness about their rights and state initiatives. They do not know which agency to approach for their issues. Creating a unified and interconnected administrative structure will save time and will lead to efficiency in governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational access for children of internal migrant labourers in India remains a critical yet under-addressed issue in policy and academic discourse. Migration often leads to discontinuity in schooling, language barriers, and documentation challenges, which significantly hinder both enrolment and retention, particularly in secondary and higher education. As Smita observes, the existing education system is poorly equipped to accommodate children who frequently move across states due to the seasonal or informal nature of their parents' work (Smita 2008). The school system, built around geographic stability, does not align with the reality of migrant families.

Although the Right to Education Act (2009) mandates free and compulsory schooling for children aged 6 to 14, it falls short in ensuring the portability of educational rights across state lines. Ramachandran argues that the current model assumes a sedentary learner, and therefore overlooks the needs of mobile children who may be denied mid-day meals, textbooks, or uninterrupted instruction because of the lack of documentation or transfer mechanisms (Ramachandran 2013). This structural rigidity results in frequent dropouts and a complete break in educational progression for migrant children.

State-specific innovations have attempted to close these gaps. Odisha's seasonal hostels and Gujarat's mobile schools are examples of context-sensitive solutions

designed to reach migrant children in temporary labour settlements. However, these initiatives are generally small-scale and limited to primary education. According to a study by the Centre for Policy Research, migrant youth face significant challenges in accessing higher education due to bureaucratic requirements like domicile certificates and gaps in school records (Centre for Policy Research 2021).

Language barriers further complicate the situation. Migrant children who move across linguistic regions often find themselves unable to understand the medium of instruction in their new schools. Reddy and Sinha note that this not only affects academic performance but also increases the chances of alienation and eventual dropout (Reddy and Sinha 2010). Most schools are not equipped with multilingual staff or bridging programs to support students through these transitions.

A recurring theme in the literature is the absence of a national-level, integrated strategy to address the educational needs of children from migrant households. Migration is typically addressed within labour or urban policy frameworks, while its impact on education is seldom considered systematically. There is growing consensus among researchers and civil society that India needs a more child-centric, inter-state educational framework—one that includes flexible documentation, cross-border curriculum recognition, language-inclusive instruction, and portable financial support systems.

CASE STUDY:

Thailand's "Education for All" Approach:

For our study we have taken inspiration from Thailand's inclusive education policy that offers a useful reference point for addressing the educational needs of migrant children. In 2005, the Thai government implemented a policy allowing all children living in the country, regardless of citizenship or documentation, to access free basic education. Schools were instructed not to deny admission to any child due to lack of legal identification. To support this, the Ministry of Education created a special student ID system for non-citizen children, allowing them to enroll without linking their status to immigration enforcement.

Language support also played a major role in the policy's success. In provinces with large migrant communities—particularly Burmese-speaking children—schools introduced bilingual instruction and transition programs. These efforts were often supported by local NGOs and migrant community groups, helping students adapt academically and socially.

Beyond classroom access, the policy also addressed economic barriers by providing free learning materials, uniforms, and meals in many regions. Although there were challenges in terms of consistent implementation and limited teacher training on multilingual education, Thailand's approach significantly increased school attendance and retention among migrant youth.

For India, this model highlights the importance of flexible enrollment systems, language-inclusive teaching, and localized partnerships to ensure migrant children do not miss out on education. It demonstrates how governments can build systems that move with students, rather than expecting students to fit static structures.

METHODOLOGY

Our core area of focus is the problems faced by children of migrant labourers in Higher Education and for that,

We have adopted a policy based perspective. Under which, we will be developing A **THREE PILLAR POLICY MODEL**, focusing on **ACCESSIBILITY, INCLUSIVITY** and **EQUITY** in education for migrating children. We have tried to develop a multistage. interlinked policy model. which includes,

1. **UMIS (UNIVERSAL MIGRANTS IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM)**

Many migrant families face problems in accessing government beneficiaries mainly due to lack of legal documents that can verify their claim and eligibility to these schemes. While many inter-state migrants are traced, intra state migrants who move within their originating states are harder to track. This lack of records affects policy making and distribution of resources. UMIS with its centralised unified structure tackles this issue. It adopts a nationwide approach thus having a wider scope. It will serve as a singular digital platform whereby all the data related to migrant families will be stored and can be easily accessed via the internet. It will focus on data related to,

→ How many individuals are there in one family

- ➔ It will also store their essential documents like, AADHAR CARD, PAN CARD, VOTING ID CARD and RATION CARD digitally, all of which serves as an identity proof and are important while accessing any public scheme in India.
- ➔ It will also include data related to their education, primarily focusing on their schooling and college.
- ➔ Data regarding their health access will be also collected so that they can easily get access to many Central and State sponsored schemes.

This idea is inspired from India's successful implementation of AADHAR SYSTEM, under which the Indian government has successfully brought Bio Metric information of almost all citizens of the country under one platform. However, similar to other initiatives AADHAR too, ignores specialised needs of Migrant Labourers. It also falls behind while catering to the needs of migrants primarily because its intention was to record permanent data of Indian citizens, like address and place of birth. However, in the case of migrants these things keep continuously changing. Hence, a separate identification system is needed that can cover these changes from time to time to track accurate and up to date records.

2. NEBMC (NATIONAL EDUCATION BOARD for MIGRANT CHILDREN)

According to the 2011 Census, India is home to more than 200 native languages and dialects. Each has more than 1000 speakers. This diversity in languages though is a cultural asset for the country, it proves to be a major hindrance in education for children from migrating communities. They face severe issues of

social cohesion and academic inclusivity due to language differences. Though use of English in education is on the rise, many government schools still teach in native language of the state or an area.

Besides language, each state in India has its own educational board with the aim to preserve its regional history and cultural pride. While it is a good thing, migrating children find it hard to understand and analyze this sudden shift in their academic environment. Even though there is a centralised board in the country in the form of CBSC, which maintains unity of curriculum throughout the nation, it was initially designed for children of Civil Servants and Army personnels whose job profile requires constant moving within the country. There are only a few national universities in the country and that too located in specific regions like, New Delhi and Mumbai. Many migrant children whose financial conditions are precarious can not have admissions into these schools or colleges. Hence, we propose the creation of a new national educational board for children from migrating communities, which will be designed according to their needs. It will be based on,

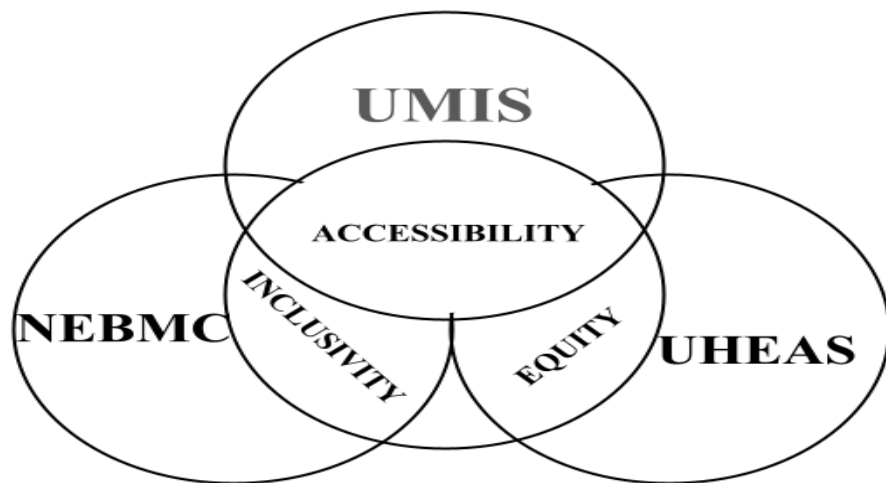
- A nationwide unified curriculum standards
- Multilingual and bilingual instruction capabilities
- Teacher training programmes
- Income friendly fee structures
- Mobile infrastructural facilities
- A singular digital platform which can give access to books and libraries

The goal is to maintain educational continuity while ensuring geographical mobility possible for migrating children.

3. UHEAS (UNIVERSAL HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ACCESS SYSTEM)

As mentioned earlier, children from migrating communities face dangers of financial instability as their parents are often engaged in seasonal work limited only for a particular period during the year. This income instability also acts as an obstacle in achieving higher education. While many universities and banks do provide for student loans in India, migrating children often find it hard to get them due to lack of government documents and other education related data. Those who somehow manage to get loans suffers from high interest rates on these student loans. Therefore we propose an unified and centralised student loan system linked with UMIS, under which,

- There will be collateral free educational loans
- Income based repayment schemes
- Targeted scholarship programmes for more vulnerable groups within migrating communities
- Provision for moving hostels, etc.



To implement our model, we have inculcated an interdisciplinary approach, wherein principals of public policy interlinks with various statistical tools for data monitoring and storage. Use of digital media and AI for tracking is also appreciated.

IMPLEMENTATION

Though we are considering the entirety of Indian Nation, its geographical size and population density makes any policy implementation rather laborious. Hence, we will be going through a district and village based approach.

Implementation Plan

To operationalize the proposed interventions effectively, a district-centered, phased implementation strategy will be adopted. This localized approach ensures responsiveness to the specific migration patterns, administrative capabilities, and linguistic dynamics of each region, while remaining scalable at the national level. The plan focuses on collaboration between local government bodies, schools, financial institutions, and civil society.

Phase 1: District Selection and Institutional Framework (Months 1–6)

❖ District Identification

Pilot districts will be chosen based on:

1. High rates of seasonal and long-term internal migration
2. Existing gaps in secondary and higher education enrolment
3. Readiness of local institutions and digital infrastructure

Proposed pilot districts include:

- Gaya (Bihar) – high out-migration
- Murshidabad (West Bengal) – both sending and receiving migrants
- Nanded (Maharashtra) – known for inter-state migrant influx
- Medak (Telangana) – major labour destination district
- North-East Delhi (NCT) – high concentration of informal workers

❖ Formation of Local Task Forces:

Each district will establish a District Migration Education Task Force (DMETF), led by the District Magistrate or Collector. The task force will include:

- District Education Officer (DEO)
- Local labour department representatives
- School administrators and teachers
- Civil society actors and community leaders.

- This body will oversee coordination, resource allocation, community engagement, and periodic review.

Phase 2: Infrastructure, Curriculum, and Training (Months 7–18)

1. Migrant Student Identification Registry

Local schools and mobile enrolment teams will collect and digitize the data of migrant children, including their educational history, preferred language of instruction, and state of origin.

The district-level registry will be linked to a centralized national platform that allows for seamless educational transitions across states and institutions.

2. Curriculum Adaptation and Language Inclusion

The proposed Migrant Education Board will collaborate with SCERTs and DIETs to create a core curriculum pack available in multiple languages (Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Urdu).

Schools in each district will receive bilingual materials and teaching guides.

“Bridge Teachers” trained in multilingual instruction will support academic continuity for migrant students.

3. School Readiness and Teacher Capacity

30–50 schools per district will be designated as “Migrant-Friendly Schools” and equipped with basic tech support, inclusive learning materials, and additional teaching staff.

- A. Teachers will receive training modules focused on:
- B. Managing linguistic diversity
- C. Supporting students with interrupted education
- D. Using digital tracking tools to monitor student progress

Training will be conducted in partnership with state education departments and NGOs such as Pratham or Aide et Action.

Phase 3: Financial Access and District Outreach (Months 19–30)

1. Student Loan Facilitation

- ★ District-level partnerships with public sector banks (e.g., SBI, Canara Bank) will enable simplified loan processing through Common Service Centres (CSCs) and school-based help desks.
- ★ Loan eligibility will be linked to the new migrant ID, reducing paperwork and bypassing barriers like domicile and local address proofs.
- ★ Awareness campaigns will ensure migrant families are informed about loan schemes and repayment terms.

2. Community Engagement

Campaigns will be organized through local panchayats, Anganwadi centres, religious institutions, and workplaces (brick kilns, construction sites, factories).

Education camps and career guidance fairs will be held in partnership with youth groups and NGOs to increase awareness about higher education options and financial support.

Phase 4: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Expansion (Months 31–48)

1. Local Monitoring Dashboards

Each district will maintain a live dashboard tracking:

Number of migrant children enrolled

Rate of secondary-to-higher education transition

Student loan applications and disbursements

Use of bilingual curriculum resources

The dashboard will be reviewed monthly by the DMETF and quarterly by a national oversight body under the Ministry of Education.

2. Evaluation and Policy Adjustment

Independent evaluation partners (e.g., TISS, NIEPA) will conduct impact assessments using both quantitative indicators (retention, pass rates) and qualitative insights (student/parent interviews).

Feedback will guide revisions to the ID platform, financial processes, and teaching materials.

3. Scaling Strategy

Based on pilot performance, additional districts will be brought into the program.

Strong-performing districts will serve as mentoring hubs for new regions.

Central-level advisories will support formal integration of successful practices into Samagra Shiksha, NEP 2020, and UDISE+ systems.

Cross-Cutting Enablers

Digital Infrastructure: Leveraging DIKSHA, DigiLocker, and CSCs for tech-based delivery and tracking

Partnership Models: Collaboration with CSR-backed foundations for digital tools, scholarships, and awareness campaigns

Legal and Institutional Backing:

Issuance of state-level executive orders (GOs) to recognize the migrant ID and curriculum as valid equivalents

This implementation plan ensures localized control, scalability, and policy alignment, while prioritizing the unique challenges migrant families face across India's federal education landscape.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

To ensure that the proposed interventions deliver measurable impact and remain adaptable over time, a structured and dynamic Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework will be implemented. This framework is designed to track progress, evaluate outcomes, and provide real-time feedback for continuous policy improvement. It will operate at both district and national levels, involving educational authorities, independent evaluators, and community stakeholders.

Each pilot district will maintain a dedicated Migrant Education Monitoring Dashboard, managed by the District Migration Education Task Force. These dashboards will capture essential indicators such as the number of enrolled migrant students, dropout rates, loan application and approval data, and student performance across key academic milestones. The dashboards will also document the use of bilingual learning materials and the functioning of language support programs. School-level data will be reported monthly and integrated into national platforms such as UDISE+ and DIKSHA to ensure consistency with existing government systems.

To assess policy effectiveness, the program will be evaluated in three stages: baseline (pre-implementation), midline (after the first academic cycle), and endline (at the end of the pilot phase). Evaluations will be conducted by neutral academic institutions or policy research organizations with expertise in education and migration. These assessments will combine statistical analysis of key metrics with qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and field

observations. This mixed-method approach will ensure that both quantitative outcomes and lived experiences are considered in judging the success of the policy.

The proposal also incorporates a strong feedback mechanism. Suggestions and concerns from students, parents, teachers, and community workers will be collected through school-based surveys, community outreach events, and digital platforms. This feedback will guide timely modifications to the implementation process, whether in curriculum delivery, digital access, or financial services. Additionally, grievance redressal systems will be built into the Migrant Student ID platform and made accessible in multiple languages.

Progress reports will be submitted every quarter to a central oversight unit within the Ministry of Education, which will review the data, analyze trends, and identify best practices. These reports will also inform annual strategy meetings involving representatives from pilot districts, state education departments, and key civil society partners. Based on these findings, policy adjustments — such as updates to the core curriculum, inclusion of new language modules, or refinements in loan eligibility criteria — will be recommended and implemented in the subsequent cycle.

This continuous cycle of monitoring and evaluation ensures not only the transparency and accountability of the program but also its adaptability to local contexts. In the long term, this framework will generate a valuable body of evidence to support the national expansion of the model and guide future education policy for migrant children. By embedding data-driven decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and periodic review into every phase of the initiative, the

M&E strategy will play a crucial role in transforming the way India addresses educational exclusion among its most mobile and marginalized populations.

CONCLUSION

The children of migrant labourers in India face an uphill journey when it comes to accessing and completing higher education. Their lives are often shaped by constant movement, economic hardship, and administrative exclusion — all of which create major obstacles to educational continuity. While policies have focused on improving primary schooling, there remains a significant gap in support systems that enable migrant youth to pursue and succeed in higher education. This proposal aims to fill that gap with a practical, scalable framework that recognizes education as a right that must travel with the child, no matter where they go.

The introduction of a portable digital identification system, a dedicated education board for migrant children, and a flexible student financing mechanism represents a bold but necessary step toward transforming how India supports its mobile populations. Grounded in local implementation at the district level, these solutions are designed to respond to the real-life challenges faced by migrant students — such as language differences, documentation barriers, and financial exclusion. At the same time, the proposal draws inspiration from international examples like Thailand's inclusive education model, showing how global lessons can be thoughtfully adapted to India's context.

By embedding strong monitoring and feedback systems and ensuring coordination between government departments, schools, banks, and civil society, this policy approach moves beyond short-term fixes. It builds the foundation for a system where migration does not interrupt education, but where systems adapt to the mobility of families. In doing so, it affirms that children of migrant labourers are

not invisible, and that they are not liabilities but are future assets worth investing in.

Looking ahead, this framework aligns closely with India's national development priorities under the National Education Policy and strengthens its progress toward global goals like SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). But more than policy alignment, this proposal is about restoring opportunity and dignity. It envisions an India where no child is denied education because their parents had to move for work — an India where every child, regardless of background or location, can dream, learn, and succeed.

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IMAGES

