

Challenges in Implementing RTE in Migrant Worker Communities

Dr Pooja Khurana

Associate Professor

Law department

Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT— The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 positions education as a fundamental entitlement for every child in India between 6 and 14 years. Yet, for children of migrant workers—who move cyclically or seasonally across states in search of livelihood—realizing this right remains fraught with structural, administrative, socio-cultural, and economic hurdles. This manuscript examines the multi-layered challenges that impede RTE implementation in migrant contexts, drawing on a mixed-methods survey of 210 households across three migration corridors and qualitative interviews with teachers, community leaders, and local officials. Findings indicate that lack of portable documentation, language discontinuities, discontinuous school calendars, income insecurity, and weak inter-state coordination mechanisms collectively drive high absenteeism, dropouts, and under-enrolment.

Further, systemic biases, limited awareness of entitlements, and inadequate bridge schooling or support centres exacerbate exclusion. The paper argues for a “mobility-responsive” RTE framework that includes portable academic records, flexible admission norms, mother-tongue-based transitional curricula, and convergence among labour, education, and social protection departments. Recommendations also highlight the role of technology-enabled tracking, community mobilization, and employer accountability in

mainstreaming migrant children. The study contributes empirically grounded insights and policy-relevant strategies to reconceptualize RTE delivery for highly mobile, informal-sector populations.

KEYWORDS— RTE Act; migrant workers; educational exclusion; portability; bridge schooling; inter-state coordination; India

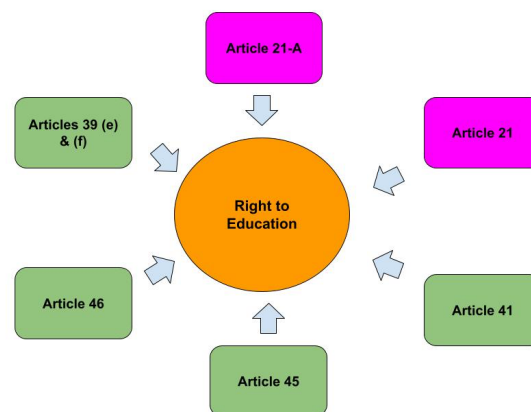


Fig.1 Challenges in Implementing RTE, [Source\(\[1\]\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

India's rapid economic growth is undergirded by a vast informal workforce that is temporally and spatially mobile. Seasonal and circular migration—particularly from agrarian, tribal, and drought-prone districts to urban construction sites, brick kilns, farms, and factories—has become a livelihood strategy for millions. Children accompanying their parents

often live in temporary settlements with precarious access to health, sanitation, and schooling. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act (2009) mandates neighbourhood schools, age-appropriate admission, no detention, and inclusive, child-centred learning. However, the legal promise of RTE collides with the realities of migration: discontinuity of schooling, lack of documentation (transfer certificates, Aadhaar, domicile proofs), linguistic barriers, and discrimination.

implementation for migrant worker communities; (2) To assess the effectiveness of existing interventions (e.g., seasonal hostels, bridge courses, mid-day meals) from stakeholders' perspectives; and (3) To recommend a flexible, portable model of schooling consonant with the Act's equity principles. The paper proceeds with a literature review, outlines the methodology, presents survey findings, and concludes with recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Legal-Policy Framework of RTE

The RTE Act articulates universal access, equity, and quality. Key clauses relevant to migrants include age-appropriate admission, prohibition of screening procedures, and free provision of materials. However, the neighbourhood school clause assumes static residency and does not account for inter- or intra-state mobility. Subsequently, Government of India guidelines and state-level rules have attempted to operationalize enrollment of "out-of-school" children, but portability remains weak.

2. Migration and Educational Disruption

Migration introduces temporal discontinuity in schooling. Studies on seasonal migration in brick kilns and sugarcane harvesting show children missing 3–8 months of schooling annually. Without accessible transitional teaching or credit transfer, these absences trigger grade repetition or dropout. Furthermore, parents prioritize earning opportunities, and schools often "push out" irregular attendees—contradicting RTE's inclusive intent.

3. Documentation and Identity Barriers

Enrolment processes frequently demand transfer certificates, Aadhaar, caste and income certificates. Migrant families often lack updated documents or hesitate to engage due to fear of bureaucratic harassment. While RTE prohibits denial of admission on such grounds, school-level gatekeeping

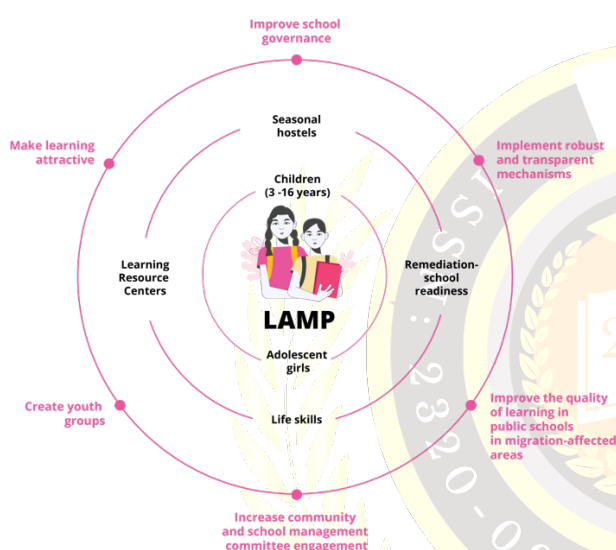


Fig.2 Migrant Worker Communities, [Source\(\[2\]\)](#)

Existing scholarship has identified gaps in enrolment and retention among migrant children, but the discourse often remains fragmented—focusing on a single site (e.g., brick kilns) or a single state initiative (e.g., seasonal hostels). There is a need for an integrated analysis that captures how multi-sited mobility interacts with administrative jurisdictions, and how school-level practices align—or fail to align—with the Act's spirit. This study addresses that need by: (a) reviewing the literature on migrant education and RTE provisions; (b) empirically examining barriers through field surveys and interviews; and (c) proposing policy and programmatic solutions tailored to the mobility patterns of families.

The objectives are threefold: (1) To identify systemic, institutional, and socio-economic challenges that hinder RTE

persists. Migrant settlements rarely have proactive outreach by school authorities, resulting in invisible children.

4. Language and Curriculum Mismatch

Children from tribal or regional language backgrounds confront instruction in unfamiliar tongues upon migrating. Literature on multilingual education emphasizes the value of mother-tongue-based transitional support. Absent such scaffolds, learners experience alienation and underperformance. Teachers receive little training to handle heterogeneous, mid-year entrants.

5. Health, Nutrition, and Learning Readiness

Poor living conditions—crowded shelters, inadequate sanitation, irregular meals—affect attendance and cognitive readiness. While mid-day meals improve nutrition, migrant children may miss them due to late admission or lack of awareness. Health shocks cause prolonged absenteeism, unaddressed in rigid attendance policies.

6. Institutional Coordination Gaps

Education departments rarely coordinate with labour, rural development, or urban local bodies to track migrant flows. NGOs often fill the gap through bridge centres, but scaling remains limited. Some states have experimented with seasonal hostels (Odisha, Jharkhand), mobile schools (Gujarat), and worksite crèches, yet inter-state transfer mechanisms for academic credits or records are embryonic.

7. Technology and Portability Innovations

Emerging pilots use digital student IDs, EMIS (Education Management Information System) updates, and mobile apps to track children. Yet, digital divides and data privacy concerns persist. The literature underscores the need for interoperable data systems and grievance redressal mechanisms accessible to migrant families.

8. Socio-cultural Factors and Discrimination

Caste, gender, and ethnicity layer onto migrant status, producing intersectional exclusions. Adolescent girls often shoulder caregiving, limiting attendance. Teachers may hold stereotypes about “construction camp children” or “kilm kids,” leading to subtle discrimination. Community engagement and sensitization are frequently recommended but under-implemented.

In sum, the literature illustrates a convergence of structural and micro-level barriers, but actionable frameworks for mobility-responsive RTE remain underdeveloped. This study builds on these insights to craft context-specific recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was adopted to triangulate quantitative and qualitative insights. Primary data collection spanned January–April 2025. The core component was a structured survey with migrant households, complemented by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers, school management committee (SMC) members, NGO workers, and local officials.

Sampling Strategy

- **Sites:** Three prominent migration corridors were purposively selected: (a) Odisha–Andhra Pradesh (construction and seafood processing); (b) Jharkhand–Gujarat (brick kilns and textiles); and (c) Uttar Pradesh–Delhi NCR (construction and informal services).
- **Households:** 210 migrant households (approx. 70 per corridor) with at least one child aged 6–14 were surveyed. Snowball sampling within worksites and temporary settlements was used due to fluid populations.

- **Schools/Teachers:** 18 schools receiving migrant children were purposively sampled for interviews (six per corridor).

Instruments and Variables

- **Household Survey:** Captured demographic details, migration history (frequency, duration), schooling status of each child, documentation possession, language spoken, awareness of RTE provisions, and barriers experienced.
- **Interview Guides:** Focused on school admission processes, teacher preparedness, support programmes (bridge courses, remedial classes), record transfer practices, and perceptions of migrant children.

Data Collection and Ethics

Field investigators were trained in child protection and informed consent procedures. Consent was obtained orally, given literacy constraints, with assurances of anonymity. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission. Translation and back-translation ensured linguistic accuracy.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) in SPSS. Qualitative transcripts underwent thematic coding (open, axial, selective) to derive recurrent patterns: documentation hurdles, language barriers, attendance issues, institutional coordination.

Survey-Based Research Findings

Profile of Respondents

- **Mobility:** 62% of households migrated at least twice in the previous year; average stay at a destination was 5.2 months.
- **Education Status:** Of 356 school-age children captured, 68% were enrolled at origin schools, but

only 37% managed to attend destination schools during migration periods. About 21% had dropped out in the past two years.

- **Documentation:** 54% lacked transfer certificates; 32% lacked Aadhaar for the child; 46% reported difficulty in producing address proof at destination.

Barriers Identified

1. **Admission and Paperwork:** 58% faced delays or denial due to missing documents despite RTE provisions. Parents reported being “asked to come after the headmaster returns” or told to “get a TC first”.
2. **Language and Curriculum:** 41% children reported difficulty understanding the medium of instruction. Teachers acknowledged they had “no materials in the child’s language”.
3. **Irregular Attendance:** Irregular work schedules and lack of transport from worksites to schools meant 49% missed more than 15 school days in a two-month period.
4. **Awareness:** Only 27% of parents knew that schools cannot deny admission without documents under RTE.
5. **Support Services:** Bridge courses or seasonal hostels were available to just 18% of surveyed children. NGOs filled gaps but coverage was thin.

Positive Practices

- Some schools used flexible admission registers, allowing mid-year entries without TCs.
- Two districts piloted digital student IDs to port records; parents appreciated SMS alerts about attendance or meetings.

- SMCs in a few sites conducted outreach visits to worksite camps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results reaffirm that the RTE mandate is poorly aligned with the realities of mobile livelihoods. The frequency of migration and short stays disrupt continuous schooling, yet administrative procedures presume stability. The significant proportion of children enrolled in origin schools but not attending destination schools indicates a “dual enrolment gap”: being formally attached to a school but de facto out-of-school for months.

Documentation remains the most cited barrier, suggesting the need to operationalize “provisional admission” consistently. Language mismatch undermines learning outcomes; without transitional support, attendance does not translate into comprehension. Limited awareness among parents and even school personnel of specific RTE provisions—like no requirement for proof-of-age documents—exacerbates exclusion.

The low prevalence of bridge courses or seasonal hostels implies inadequate scaling. However, where they exist, parents cited improved attendance and learning continuity. Technology pilots show promise, but they must be interoperable across states and accessible in low-connectivity contexts. Inter-state Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on child tracking, shared EMIS platforms, and harmonized school calendars could alleviate discontinuities.

Intersectional vulnerabilities—gender, caste, disability—compound migrant status. Adolescent girls’ dropout rates rose when caregiving duties increased at worksites. Schools with active SMCs and NGO partnerships demonstrated more flexible practices, indicating that community engagement can mitigate systemic rigidity.

CONCLUSION

Achieving the RTE Act’s universalist vision requires reimagining its implementation through a mobility lens. For migrant worker communities, the primary challenges include: (1) bureaucratic insistence on documents and transfer certificates; (2) language and curricular discontinuities; (3) irregular attendance due to livelihood pressures and spatial distances; (4) inadequate support structures like bridge courses, seasonal hostels, or mobile schools; (5) fragmented inter-departmental coordination; and (6) limited awareness of rights among parents and frontline officials.

Policy and programmatic reforms should prioritize:

- **Portability Mechanisms:** Digital, portable learner IDs and universally accepted provisional admission norms.
- **Flexible Schooling Models:** Seasonal hostels at source, worksite schools at destination, and credit transfer systems that prevent grade repetition.
- **Language Support:** Mother-tongue-based transitional materials and teacher training for multilingual classrooms.
- **Inter-State Coordination:** MoUs for data sharing, synchronized academic calendars, and labour-department linkages to notify education authorities of migrant flows.
- **Community Mobilization:** SMC outreach to camps, awareness campaigns on RTE entitlements, and employer accountability for child-friendly worksites.
- **Technology with Equity:** Simple, multilingual digital interfaces and SMS-based alerts while safeguarding privacy.

By adopting these strategies, the state can shift from a place-based to a person-centred approach to education. Ensuring that the children of migrant workers learn continuously—

wherever they move—will transform the RTE Act from a static statute into a dynamic, inclusive reality.

REFERENCES

- Government of India. (2009). *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2011). *Model rules under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. Government of India.
- National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2018). *Status of implementation of the RTE Act, 2009*. NCPCR.
- Smita. (2008). Distress seasonal migration and its impact on children's education. *Indian Journal of Social Development*, 8(2), 273–292.
- Jha, J., & Parvati, P. (2010). *Quality issues in primary education in India: Some insights*. NUEPA.
- Srivastava, R., & Jha, A. (2017). Educational exclusion and children of seasonal labour migrants in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(1), 63–71.
- UNESCO. (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, displacement and education—Building bridges, not walls*. UNESCO Publishing.
- UNICEF India. (2020). *Situation analysis of migrant children in India*. UNICEF.
- Aide et Action. (2019). *Towards inclusive education for migrant children: Bridge course centre models in India*. Aide et Action South Asia.
- Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority. (2016). *Evaluation of seasonal hostels for migrant children in Odisha*. OPEPA.
- Kumar, A., & Singh, R. (2021). Schooling barriers for migrant construction workers' children in Delhi NCR. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 110, 101891. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101891>
- ASER Centre. (2023). *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023*. ASER Centre.
- Gujarat Council of Elementary Education. (2020). *Mobile schools for migrant children: Implementation report*. GCEE.
- Mehendale, A., Mukhopadhyay, R., & Namala, A. (2019). Right to Education for migrant and seasonal children in India. *Social Change*, 49(4), 610–627. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085719876009>
- Kapur, D., & Sharma, P. (2022). Digital IDs and portability of welfare for migrant households in India. *Journal of Development Studies*, 58(9), 1705–1722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2021.1953127>
- Centre for Policy Research. (2021). *Inter-state coordination for welfare of migrant workers: Lessons from COVID-19*. CPR.
- Kingdon, G. G. (2020). The private schooling phenomenon in India: A review. *Prospects*, 49, 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09449-5>
- Rajan, S. I., Sivakumar, P., & Srinivasan, A. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and internal labour migration in India. *Indian Economic Review*, 55, 247–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41775-020-00050-7>
- Sharma, S., & Goyal, P. (2024). Multilingual classrooms and learning outcomes among migrant children in India. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 25(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-023-09789-2>
- NITI Aayog. (2017). *Three-year action agenda, 2017–18 to 2019–20*. Government of India.