

# Closure of Schools and Migration of Adolescent Tribal Girls

## A Case Study of Surat

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This paper is an empirical study of the consequences of the prolonged closure of schools and other educational institutions for adolescent tribal girls, migrating to the construction sector of Surat in search of work. It attempts to argue that, unlike financial hardship, disruption in education induced by the pandemic brought them to the informal labour market where the entry-level age group is now much younger, exacerbating their existing vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic raging for over two years now has disrupted the entire teaching–learning process across the country (Talesra 2020; Jena 2020). The lockdown-induced closure of schools had prompted the administration to conduct all sorts of teaching–learning activities and evaluation processes like exams in through the virtual medium, ignoring multiple problems, such as access to the internet, availability of appropriate gadgets, and the structural inequalities in access to education, which is already deep-rooted in the country. Most importantly, there exists the digital divide between rural and urban areas. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 2017–18 report, 23.8% households in the urban areas had internet access whereas in the rural areas only 14.9% had internet connectivity (Sahani 2020). Furthermore, across the rural communities in India, the worst affected are the tribals, fraught with the lowest literacy rate and lesser numbers of enrolments in schools, with highest dropout rates after the primary level of education (Brahmanandam and Bosu Babu 2016). Amongst the tribal communities, ownership of computing devices is as low as 2.47% (Ahmed and Siddiqui 2020).

A previous study<sup>1</sup> showed that the trend of tribal girls getting married at a younger age and seasonally migrating to urban non-farm job sectors amidst agrarian distress in rural areas were left with little options and opportunities to continue their studies. However, such women migrating out so far had been between the age group of 20 and 50 years (Hirway 2018). But during the last lockdown, in the months of April to June and during post-lockdown period, there was an unprecedented rise of the adolescent tribal girls aged between 16 and 18 years in the *nakas* (open labour market), alongside the elder women and men, waiting to be hired by labour contractors. Amidst such situation, the rationale of this study is twofold. The initial intervention among the respondents revealed that unlike financial hardship, closed schools are the main reason for the migration of this particular group of girls to the city. The entry-level age group is now much younger in the urban labour market compared to the pre-pandemic time, thereby exacerbating their vulnerabilities. Assuming the urgency of the situation, we planned to study these groups to understand the impact of such a disruption in education on the tribal girls.

### The Field

Surat, considered to be the fastest-growing industrial city (Desai 2020), is an important destination for the migrant labourers coming from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Odisha.

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The home of the largest man-made fibre industry in the country and hub of diamond cutting industry, the city ranks amongst the top destinations for migrant workers. Besides such medium- and large-scale industries, construction is one of the largest sectors to which seasonal migrants come from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and districts of Gujarat. The workers are mostly either single male migrants or couples belonging to the Scheduled Tribe castes.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of any particular space for living, they settle down on the streets, pavements and often places provided by local landowning business class or municipal corporation through negotiations. A rapid study was conducted by Aajeevika Bureau, in the months of June and July 2020, to understand the sudden increase of adolescent girls in the labour market in the post-lockdown period, wherein 100 such young women workers were interviewed. The objectives were to understand their present conditions of education, the reason for migration, the amount of wage they were earning and possibilities of returning to schools or colleges, if the institutes resume after the pandemic.

### Methodology

The methodology followed in the empirical study is both qualitative and quantitative. Purposive sampling has been adopted, given that we had limited access to the field. In order to collect the specific information at the individual level, a survey had been conducted with a structured questionnaire and the qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of the young migrant girls working as construction labourers. Nakas are the open areas in the city where labourers come in the morning and get hired according to the needs of the contractors or any person who wants to employ them in construction work anywhere in the city. According to a previous survey, there were about 20 nakas in Surat (Hiraway 2018), of which we chose 10 nakas situated in different parts of the city and interviewed them according to the availability and convenience of the respondents.

### Profile of the Migrants

It was found that a majority of the respondents had migrated from Kushalgarh district of Rajasthan (Table 1), including districts from other bordering states. It is one of the largest districts of Rajasthan and the respondent migrant girls' families were landless agricultural labourers or had less than five bighas of cultivable land (Table 2).

Those who had some amount of land were asked about the situation regarding their land under cultivation back in their

**Table 1: Place of Origin**

District	State	Number of Respondents
Kushalgarh	Rajasthan	52
Sajjangar	Rajasthan	14
Jhalod	Gujarat	14
Thandla	Madhya Pradesh	6
Chandla	Madhya Pradesh	4
Dahod	Gujarat	2
Padla	Gujarat	2
Limadi	Gujarat	1
Did not specify	-	5

Source: Author's fieldwork.

village. It was revealed that most of the land was unirrigated, and therefore, dependent only on the rains. Besides the lack of

**Table 2: Landownership**

Landowned (Cultivable) (Bigha)	Number of Respondents
0	25
1	20
2	22
3	21
4	7
5	1
6	2
8	1
15	1

Source: Author's fieldwork.

**Table 3: Age of the Respondents**

Age (Years)	Number of Respondents
12–15	25
16–18	57
19–20	18
Total	100

Source: Author's fieldwork.

irrigation facilities, work as an agricultural labourer was also scarce in the village as the cultivators were mostly not interested in farming and were investing in or engaged in non-farm activities. This trend could be observed across the country where small landholding farmers had left agricultural work and had kept their land as an asset or some kind of insurance (Choitani et al 2021). Indebtedness, crop failure and vagaries of monsoon and low productivity are some of the main reasons for the occupational diversification in the agricultural sector (Suri 2006; Sainath 2011; Bhoi and Dadhich 2019). A similar situation could be observed in the present context, and as a result of such transition, families from the villages were migrating to the city, often leaving behind their children to their extended families. Another trend that was noted was that if a couple had infants, then generally they took their grown-up child along with them to look after the infant. However, our respondents were all in the adolescent ages or just above, and the majority were in the age group of 16–18 years. Besides the adolescents, the number of children below 14 years were also quite significant (Table 3). Girls studying in secondary and higher secondary levels stayed back in the village with the grandparents and extended family while attending schools.

### Situation of Education

Keeping the age group of the migrant girls in mind, the focus of our study was to assess their educational situation back in the village. To understand the overall condition of the group, we tried to collect data about their present affiliation to schools or colleges. During the time of fieldwork, it was observed that some of the respondents took the survey sheets from us and filled it up by themselves. Survey questions were written in both Hindi and English, and a few respondents told us that they could read the questions written in English as well. The survey revealed that five respondents had studied till the graduate level and that the majority were educated till the secondary and higher secondary levels while others had received primary education and had eventually dropped out (Table 4). From the same data, it was revealed that among the respondent group, 61% were enrolled in schools at present and 39% had dropped out. In addition to this, 66% of the girls said

**Table 4: Education Level**

Total Years of Education	Numbers of Respondents
13	5
12–8	73
7–5	16
4–0	6

Source: Author's fieldwork.

that they were studying before the lockdown and 33% had already left education. From this particular data, it is already understandable that the 5% of the respondent girls had already dropped out during the closure of the schools and colleges. It could

be inferred that the prolonged closure of educational institutes could adversely affect their studies, when asked whether they would be joining back if the schools reopen after the lockdown. About 52% respondents confirmed that they would like to continue studying once the schools reopened, which means that amongst 66% of the students, 5% had already left the school during the lockdown and that 9% would drop out even if the educational institutes were going to reopen.

Much of the planning to avoid the disruption of education during the time of lockdown and school closure involved the continuation of online classroom teaching and online exams. But the digital divide between the urban and rural has remained alarmingly high. As per the NSSO report, only 4.4% of the rural households had a computer and only 8.5% females in rural areas can use internet, of which 7% know how to operate a computer (Chadha 2020).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there is a substantial growth of smartphone users but still a huge section of the marginalised rural people do not have such access. It is imperative here to mention that having a smartphone or an internet connection does not always prove that the person is capable of operating complicated android-based applications. During our fieldwork, we had observed that many migrant construction workers had one smartphone per head, but usually they used it for entertainment purposes or for connecting with relatives or friends in the village. Sending money through the online payment options are also not so popular, as most of the construction workers do not have a functioning bank account. Thus, in this particular survey, we focused on the digital connectivity, wherein the data showed that 67% of the girls did not have a phone and 30% had an ordinary keypad phone. Therefore, amongst our study sample group, only 3% girls had smartphones. This shows that online education through the use of smartphones was not a viable option for these migrant young women workers.

Migrating from the impoverished districts of the bordering states to different cities of Gujarat is not something new. Especially in the construction sector, women have been joining their male counterparts. Hence, to understand the uniqueness of the present condition, we tried to find out the numbers of girls who came to Surat for the first time. About 69% of the girls came to Surat for the first time and 31% said that they had come to the city and worked alongside their parents or relatives before. Poverty and loss of earning during the pandemic are crucial issues due to which the families in the village are in distress. But to our surprise, most of the respondents mentioned that the chief reason for migrating to the city is not particularly to support the family financially (a minuscule number had stated that supporting family financially was the main reason), but due to the lack of opportunity to study (Table 5). School closure had left them with no other engagement in the village. Their parents

**Table 5: Reason for Migration**

Reason for Migration	Number of Respondents
Because of lack of study	81
No particular reason	11
No family member in the village	4
To support family financially	4

Source: Author's fieldwork.

suggested that they come along with them to work in the construction sector, which would at least fetch them some money. Eighty-one respondents said that they had come because of

the lack of opportunity to study, eight respondents stated other constraints and 11 respondents stated no particular reason. This indicated that irrespective of the socio-economic background, absence of functional academic institutions and any alternative option for continuing education in the village primarily pushed these girls to join urban labour market.

According to the qualitative interviews with the parents and the close relatives, it was revealed that leaving school and joining the workforce in the construction sector had never been encouraged by them. However, in the absence of any educational activities in the village, girls preferred to come along with them, and working seemed to be better than staying back in the village. Although the study was focused on the adolescent tribal girls, during the fieldwork, a significant increase of adolescent boys was also observed, who were relatively larger in number than the girls. Nonetheless, those who were coming the second time to Surat had already dropped out of school a couple of years back and were presently supporting their parents financially.

**A Probable Regress of Female Literacy**

As mentioned earlier, the Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, 2021, clearly mentions that the access to online education was not a possibility in the rural areas. The complete disruption of studies worsened the situation to a level where the girls even left the village and dropped out of school. The survey results also specifically mentioned that the marginalised castes and tribal students have been experiencing the worst situation. Contextually speaking, the group of girls who were interviewed mostly belong to the Damor community, which comes under the Bhil tribes and is one of the most marginalised communities from rural Rajasthan. Durga, a 17-year-old girl from Kushalgarh district, studying in Class 11th, who had come with her parents for the first time and worked as a helper in the construction sector said,

Yes, we are all enrolled in school and used to study regularly. When our parents used to go to the cities for work, we looked after our younger siblings and stayed with our extended families or relatives. After the pandemic most of our relatives also left for the city and with schools being closed, we have nothing to do here. Our families are also having a huge amount of debt which could be repaid if I help my parents. Now I would like to work in the construction sector, if possible, I would learn some other work and earn some money instead of going back to the village where no work is available even if we study and pass our higher secondary examination. We have only one smartphone which we cannot carry to the city as there is no safe place to keep it. I wanted to finish school and enroll in college but now it seems to be impossible.

In recent times, though a minuscule number of tribal girls, who have at least got opportunities to finish higher secondary education and get enrolled in college, had attempted to do BEd training. These consequential dropouts would foreclose this option too.

Living in the open areas in the city increases the vulnerabilities of women, as compared to other non-farm factory-based jobs, such as powerlooms where the work is machine-based and relatively secured accommodations, such as shared rooms or messes are available. Women are especially bereft of any security and health support and often experience severe illness after regular involvement in hard manual jobs, such as carrying bricks as helpers in the construction units (Hiraway 2018). Along with the information related to their access to education, we had also

collected data about their health and hygiene. The data showed that during periods, 68% of the respondents used cotton cloth, while the rest used sanitary pads as and when they could afford to buy. Mostly younger women get paid the lowest wages in the construction sector as helpers; 82 girls out of 100 are paid ₹400 in a day and get work for four to five days a week. Due to the absence of a safe place to live, sexual harassment and regular threats of evacuation from the municipal corporation are common. Moreover, all the respondents live in the temporary shanties that have no electricity connection, and which make it impossible for them to continue any sort of educational activities. One of the respondents during a focus group discussion session remarked, “now that you have seen us the way we live here, tell us how any study could be possible in this condition?” Such feelings were widespread, mostly amongst the first-timers who were studying in the secondary level and have recently discontinued studies due to school closure. In addition to this, one of the baseline studies done by Aajeevika in Kushalgarh during 2019 inferred that marriage was perceived as the cause of migration of a woman, for the dowry became a debt burden and to repay the debt couples usually worked in the city.<sup>4</sup>

The members of the Kushalgarh research team reported on a telephonic interview,

Their discontinuation of study at the age closer to marriage would further lead them to [get] married and they would eventually fall into

the vicious cycle of dowry and debt repayment. After the reopening of schools so far, only a handful of girls have returned to schools.<sup>5</sup>

Since independence, through rigorous initiatives like the right to education, the emphasis on the retention in school and eradication of child marriage, India has moved forward in increasing the literacy rate, with special attention given to the girl child education. But it is evident from 75th round of National Sample Survey conducted between July 2017 and June 2018 that in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and MP, female attendance ratios (aged between 14 and 17) are 65%, 69% and 66%, respectively, which is much lower than the national average of 75% (Shah 2019). This shows that the condition of female education still has a lot of room to improve. Hardships like distance from school, pressure for marriage from parents and lack of employment in the rural areas are still obstacles that a rural girl has to face. Due to economic and infrastructural constraints, many of them leave schools in urban and rural areas right after secondary education (Joshi et al 2013; MoHRD 2016). In the post-pandemic context, marginalised and poor rural families are on the verge of losing supportive income from the non-farm sources due to job losses and wage cuts. This study is indicative that the prolonged closure of schools is now accelerating the number of dropouts, especially in the case of tribal adolescent girls, which can possibly affect the advancement female literacy rate in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and MP.

## NOTES

- 1 See “A Research Study on Migrant Tribal Women Girls in Ten Cities: A Study of Their Socio-cultural and Economic Reference to Social Intervention.” This report was submitted to the Planning Commission by Tirpude College of Social Work, Civil Lines, Sadar.
- 2 See the study conducted by Dhas Gramin Vikas Kendra, Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath in 2008 titled “A Rigorous Journey—Bhil Labour Migration to South Gujarat,” analysed and written by Rahul Banerjee, <http://www.clra.in/files/documents/Surat-migration-report-final.pdf>.
- 3 See Social and Political Research Foundation (SPRF) report 2020 by Kashika Chadha. According to the Indian Cellular and Electronic Association (ICEA) there are 500 million smartphone users in the country that could reach 829 million by 2022, but there are still 800 million people who do not have access to smartphones.
- 4 Unpublished Base Line Survey by Prerna Nijhawan as a part of her India Fellowship programme in 2019 at Aajeevika Bureau, Banshwada Unit, Rajasthan.
- 5 Aajeevika Bureau’s Banshwada unit was part of this survey and research work. Prema and Anita are from the Banshwada, Kushalgarh team who told the author about the current possibilities in the Kushalgarh area. This study was part of a collaborative initiative between Aajeevika Bureau’s source (place of origin) and migrant’s destination. The Kushalgarh team was primarily involved in studying the families migrating from Banswada, Kushalgarh areas to Surat.

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