

When Labour Moves, Childhood stands still:
Gender, Child Labour and the Economics of Migration in India

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Introduction

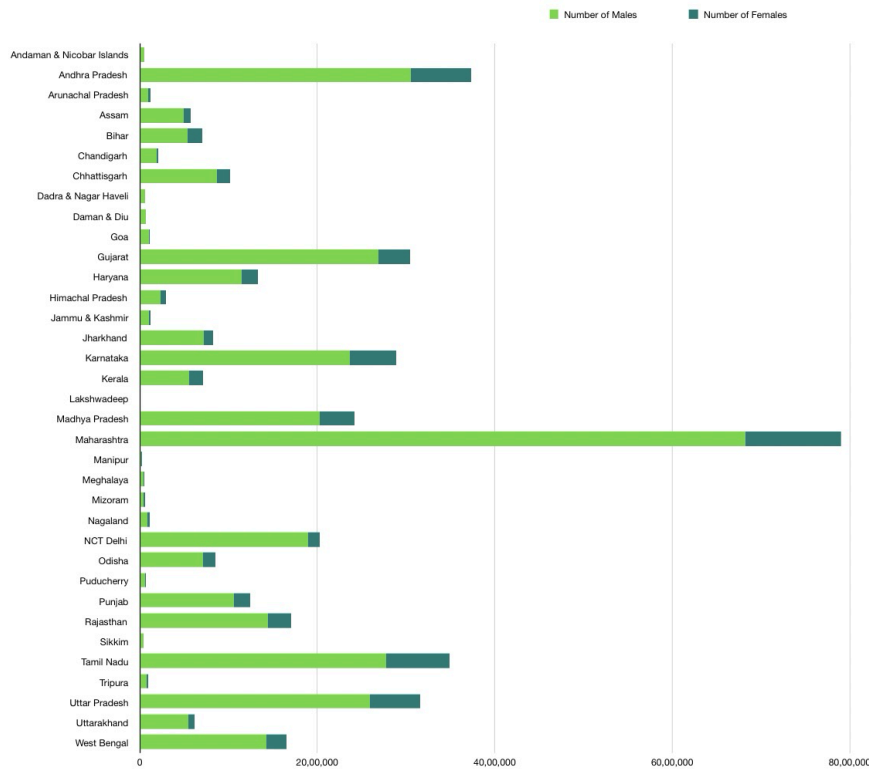
Economic systems predominantly rely on the intersectoral, interregional, and intergenerational movement of people within the economy. It is a common understanding that one of the most significant indicators of an economy's advancement is the movement of the workforce from one sector or region that yields lower productivity to another that yields higher productivity. In economic theory, workforce mobility is generally associated with positive economic advancement, increase in incomes and improvement in aggregate welfare. However, in the Indian context, the workforce is deeply interlaced with inequalities of gender, social class, caste and age. Therefore, migration of the workforce does not represent an economic advancement of a country, but rather an economy with fragmented socio-economic and labour markets, a limited social sector protective system, and a lack of socially upward economic movement.

India has recently witnessed a post-pandemic economic movement that has been called “labour on the move” which presents the migration movement of the labour force as an economic advancement or dynamism of an economy and its “flexible” labour markets. However, economic reports that include migration movement of labour force conceal a more troubling economic reality as the movement of labour force within India does not occur equally and is largely driven by distress. Therefore, regarding movement of labour force, especially distress driven labour movement, individual and free choice is removed by socio economic structural inequalities with age, class, and socio economic caste structures within an economy.

This article attempts to position labour force migration with three main economic concepts which are: labour market socio economic fragmentation, intergeneration cycle of poverty, and incomplete structural transformation. It argues that the mobility of children and women—rather than signalling progress—exposes the economy’s failure to generate secure, productive, and dignified employment.

Child labour and gendered mobility are therefore analysed not as isolated social phenomena but as economic outcomes of labour markets that reproduce inequality across generations. In this context, mobility functions primarily as a survival strategy rather than a pathway to economic advancement.

Fig.1: State-Wise Number of Migrant Workers in India (Census 2011)



Data Source: Ministry of Labour & Employment (Annexure; Census 2011)

Data And Methodology

The analysis employs a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary data from official and institutional sources. These include the Census of India (2001, 2011), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), E-Shram portal statistics, and reports published by the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, the Institute for Human Development (IHD), and other research institutions. State-level and sectoral trends are examined to identify patterns of child labour and gendered migration within the Indian labour market.

In addition, a case study of the brick kiln industry in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh is used illustratively to demonstrate how macro-level labour market structures operate at the household level.

Child Labour And The Illusion Of Economic Mobility

The 2011 Census documented that India had more than 10.1 million children aged 5-14 that were classified as working. Although estimates from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) suggest a decline in child labour over the last decade, progress has been uneven across regions and sectors. UNICEF estimates that 16% of working children remain engaged in the worst forms of child labour.

The economic dimension underlying child labour reflects an intergenerational cycle of poverty. When households have to use children's labour due to their economic structure, they have to focus on short term consumption instead of the long term human development they will have to forego. This will entrench lower-than-minimal productivity and ensure that the children of informal workers get sucked into the same low wage sectors as their parents. This inter-generational scenario of employing children does not signal economic improvement, but rather, the opposite, a stagnant system.

In India, child labour is mobile and child workers often migrate seasonally with their parents and then enter the informal employment sector in cities and their suburbs. This pattern of movement shows a facade of economic development, although children are not acquiring the skills that would make long-term economic advancement possible. Economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 lockdowns, further reveal the precariousness of the households' subsistence. According to a joint report by the ILO and UNICEF, school closures during the pandemic resulted in a spike of 1.6 million children entering informal work, underscoring the lack of social protection systems in the country.

Thus, the children working in the informal sector are not just a byproduct of poverty. The continued existence of child labour is a manifestation of a lack of adequate structure within the system. Within this environment, the work of parents and children is predicated on the demand of being in a subsistence and poverty driven condition. The resulting pattern is one of a loss of educational opportunities for children while their parents work. This adds to the cycle of informal employment, precariousness, and low economic output.

Table 1: State-Wise working children (2001-2011)

State/UT	Working Children (2001)	Working Children (2011)	% change (2001-2011)
Andhra Pradesh	13,63,339	4,04,851	-70.3%
Assam	3,51,416	99,512	-71.7%
Bihar	1,117,500	451,590	-59.6%
Chhattisgarh	3,64,572	63,884	-82.5%
Delhi	41,899	26,473	-36.8%
Gujarat	4,85,530	2,50,318	-48.4%
Haryana	2,53,491	53,492	-78.9%
Himachal Pradesh	1,07,774	15,001	-86.1%
Jammu & Kashmir	1,75,630	25,528	-85.5%
Jharkhand	407,200	90,996	-77.6%
Karnataka	822,615	249,432	-69.7%
Kerala	26,156	21,757	-16.8%
Madhya Pradesh	10,65,259	2,86,310	-73.1%
Maharashtra	7,64,075	4,96,916	-34.9%
Odisha	3,77,594	92,087	-75.6%
Punjab	1,77,268	90,353	-49.0%
Rajasthan	12,62,570	2,52,338	-80.0%
Tamil Nadu	4,18,801	1,51,437	-63.8%
Uttar Pradesh	1,927,997	8,96,301	-53.5%
West Bengal	8,57,087	2,34,275	-72.7%

Source: Census of India — Child Population and Child Labour Data (2001 & 2011)

Gendered Mobility And The Missing Women In India's Workforce

India's female labour force participation rate stands at 37%, substantially below the global average. Such a rate has continued to remain the case considering the many improvements made in female literacy, education, and life expectancy. This phenomenon reflects the paradox of structural decline in women's workforce participation; improvement in human capital has not resulted in sustained incorporation in the labour market.

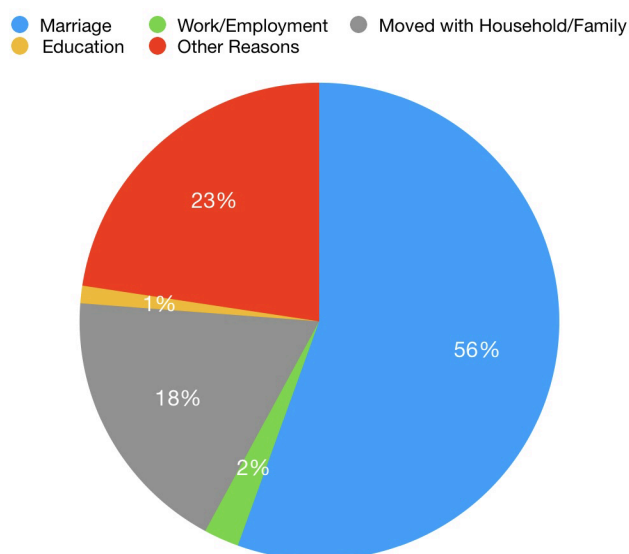
The paradox may be most accurately explained through the perspective of labour market segmentation. Women's concentration in agriculture and informal services remains disproportionate given that there is limited access to formal salaried employment. According to the most recent

Economic Survey, less than 10 percent of working women are employed in formal jobs. The migration of women, if it occurs, is often said to be “accompanied” as it is tied to marriage or family relocation, and not as a result of economic decision-making on her part. The Centre for Policy Research (2022) reports that 78% of female migrants migrate for family and marriage, while 4 % of male migrants do the same.

The unpaid care work women take on, the lack of infrastructure for childcare, and safety issues at work all reduce women’s ability to move across any given region or field. This results in women’s mobility being lateral instead of the desirable upward movement whereby women in informal, low-paid work move to a higher earning position. The stagnant gender wage gap ensures that this movement is even more minimal, as women earn approximately 77 percent of male wages for comparable work.

Freedom of mobility does not equate to economic empowerment of women. This so-called “empowerment” only serves to highlight how women’s work is still unappreciated, as women are forced to work within and around very strict socio-institutional boundaries.

Fig.2: Reasons for female internal migration in India



Data Sources: Pattern of Migration in India (Population Research Centre, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017), Migration in India 2020-21 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, GOI)

When Childhood And Gender Collide

The intersection of child labour and gendered mobility is embodied in the feminisation of the informal sector. During seasonal migrations, young girls are pulled towards unpaid or low-paid labour, especially domestic work. ILO (2022) states that in South Asia, nearly 60 percent of child domestic workers are girls.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these conditions. The closures of schools and midday meal programs increased unpaid care work responsibilities, mostly falling on adolescent girls. With schooling no longer available, there was an increase in domestic work, leading to a form of immobility in the domestic sphere where girls were withdrawn from public spaces and from formal education. This reinforces gendered poverty traps, resulting from an early withdrawal from education, thus restricting future participation in the labour market.

The coexistence of child labour and female labour exclusion reflects a structural paradox. While households absorb economic shocks through child labour, adult women remain excluded from decent employment. These outcomes are not accidental but are produced by segmented labour markets that fail to provide secure, remunerative work across age and gender.

A Case Study: The Brick Kilns Of Bihar—Families On The Move

The brick kiln industry in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar illustrates the micro-level functioning of a segmented labour market. Whole families, under informal arrangements, migrate seasonally for work, with men, women, and children all contributing to production. The ILO India Country Report (2022) states that children make up 20-25% of the workforce and women are nearly half of the workforce, about 45%.

The Institute for Human Development (2023) conducted some field studies which report that children as young as 8 years old are part of the workforce and help with the production of bricks. Girls, in particular, take on a dual workload of manual work and domestic chores. Males, as the heads of the families, receive the entirety of the household's wage in a piece rate system, perpetuating the cycle of economic dependence and male dominance. The seasonal nature of this

work causes the whole family to migrate during the school year, leaving children at risk of school dropouts, poor nutrition, and the family exposed to the risk of occupational ill health.

Weak enforcement of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 is evident by the E-Shram data (2024), which show that only 21 percent of workers in kilns are linked to any form of social protection, and less than 10 percent of women claim to have signed contracts (if there are any).

This case study illustrates that there is no structural transformation from the mobility of labour without institutional mechanisms. Instead, it reproduces informality and intergenerational dependency. Movement in the face of adverse conditions is primarily intended to mitigate distress, which is why the migration of those highly constrained is of little economic benefit.

Table 2: Migrant Children in Bihar Brick Kilns (2017-2022)

Year	% Children working	Children per family (Ratio)	Stay in kilns (months)	% out of school
2017	38.0	1.74	5.2	41.7
2019	47.5	1.86	5.6	52.3
2021	42.8	1.82	6.1	49.1
2022	35.4	1.80	5.4	44.8

Data Sources: TISS—HARVARD JOGH (2017), APU—ICPS (2019), ILO India brick-kiln assessment (2021), IHD Bihar brick-kiln study (2022)

The Economics Of Immobility: Structural And Policy Failures

The primary challenge is not the absence of a labour movement, but the absence of a labour movement which is meaningful. With the shift in structure from agriculture to services, there has been limited expansion in the provision of decent formal jobs. According to the PLFS(2023), over 80% of India's workforce remains in the informal sector, with limited prospects for upward mobility. The lack of formal jobs within the labour market, coupled with the regional inequality and weak social protection, low productivity, and gendered immobility, sustain conditions that allow child labour to persist. This is the consequence of a labour market that is failing to support fluidity among its participants.

There is no doubt that the NCLP and E-Shram government initiatives are important as steps towards formalisation, but these remain partial and insufficient. Providing a social protection system to workers in the informal sector is pivotal (less than 30 percent of informal workers have access to a social protection system, according to the World Bank (2024), India Development Update informal workers have a social protection system). This problem is multi-dimensional for women. Challenges exist in the realms of childcare and care infrastructure, security in transport, and workplace flexibility. The absence of accessible childcare remains a primary constraint on India's female labour force participation. This shows the problem of gendered immobility is socio-political as much as it is policy oriented.

Conclusion: Towards Equitable Mobility

Labour mobility in India must be reconceptualised beyond physical movement. Genuine mobility implies the ability to transition across sectors, regions, and social hierarchies with dignity and agency. The persistence of child labour and gendered exclusion indicates that such mobility remains elusive.

To dismantle these cycles, policy interventions must address both prevention and empowerment. Investments in universal education, childcare infrastructure, safe and remunerative employment for women, and comprehensive social security for informal workers are essential. Mobility should not be driven by desperation but enabled by opportunity.

Only then can "labour on the move" represent not the reproduction of inequality, but India's progress toward a more inclusive and humane economic order.

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