



## Dwelling in transit: Temporalities of home, identity and belongingness among Bengali migrant children in Ernakulam, Kerala

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### Abstract

Internal migration from West Bengal to Kerala represents one of the most significant contemporary migration corridors within India, driven largely by the search for improved employment opportunities. While internal migration rates continue to rise, most social science scholarship has focused predominantly on adult labour migration, often neglecting the experiences of children. This study addresses that gap by exploring the everyday lives of Bengali migrant children aged 6 to 16 living in Ernakulam district, Kerala. It investigates how children navigate spatial identities, reimagine the notion of 'home', and adapt to unfamiliar cultural contexts within neighbourhoods and institutional settings. Adopting a multi-sited ethnographic methodology, the research draws on child-led mapping, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and creative methods such as play, audio recordings, and storytelling. These approaches foreground children's perspectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of how they interpret and inhabit their worlds. The findings reveal that the children construct 'home' as a temporally and emotionally layered concept, grounded in memory and aspiration. Through bilingual play, mimicry, and affective storytelling, they negotiate exclusion and assert belonging. Their narratives exemplify cultural hybridity, emotional resilience, and the strategic enactment of identity across different spaces. By centring children's voices, this study contributes to the growing field of migrant childhood studies, challenging deficit-based narratives of migrant children as passive dependents. Instead, it positions them as active meaning-makers whose lived experiences reframe conventional understandings of migration, identity, and belonging in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Migrant childhoods, temporal belonging, bilingual play, spatial identity, Kerala migration, cultural resistance, relational agency

### Introduction

Internal migration in India has historically been studied through the lens of adult labor, often obscuring the mobility of children. Yet, children form a significant and growing part of this landscape. According to the Census of India (2011), over 450 million people are internal migrants—a number that includes many children who move with or without families in search of livelihood, safety, or education (World Bank, 2019) [31]. These child migrants are not merely passive dependents in adult-led migration stories. Rather, they shape and reconfigure everyday spaces through their movements, attachments, and practices. In Ernakulam, Kerala, the experiences of Bengali migrant children challenge dominant notions of childhood as rooted, protected, and sedentary. Instead, their lives reveal a form of childhood that is mobile, relational, and constantly negotiated between the places they come from and the spaces they inhabit now.

### Migration and the Child as a Sociological Subject

Earlier migration studies often viewed children as passive dependents within larger family units. However, contemporary scholarship recognizes children as socially engaged individuals and active participants in their own lives. Christensen and James (2008) [5] assert that children must be understood not merely as future adults, but as individuals with agency and voice in the present. Kraftl (2020) [12] similarly emphasizes the importance of "childhood geographies," which examine how children interact with social structures, spatial arrangements, and evolving identities.

In this context, migrant children are not only shaped by migration but actively shape the migration experience itself (Dyer & Rajan, 2023) [9]. The experiences of Bengali migrant children in Kerala—who navigate multiple languages and cultural contexts—are illustrative of this dual process. Nandya (2019) [17] highlights their condition of "flux," characterized by the use of Bengali at home and Malayalam in school, by simultaneously rooting themselves in the present while longing for return. This liminal existence fosters a distinct sense of identity and contributes to broader understandings of mobility, space, and adaptation. These children demonstrate that migration is not merely a physical journey but a symbolic and emotional one.

### Internal Migration in India: A Contextual Overview

Internal migration in India is predominantly driven by rural-to-urban flows. Children often accompany migrating families—sometimes as dependents, sometimes as contributors (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009) [8]. States like Kerala, with relatively high wages, attract Bengali migrants into sectors such as domestic work, waste management, and plywood production (Rajan & Sivakumar, 2019) [22]. These children often live fragmented lives marked by linguistic alienation, social exclusion, and disruptions to formal education. Their emotional and cultural attachments span geographies—between West Bengal and Ernakulam—reflecting what Ni Laoire, White, and Skeldon (2020) [18] term "multi-local childhoods." Yet, institutional frameworks such as schooling systems often presume residential permanence, rendering migrant children invisible. Their

exclusion is both economic and epistemological, rooted in systems that fail to acknowledge mobility as a legitimate aspect of childhood.

### Research Gap

Existing literature on internal migration in India primarily emphasizes adult labor and economic factors (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009) [8, 28]. When children do appear in these studies, they are typically framed through a welfare lens—focusing on metrics like enrollment, dropout rates, or nutrition (UNESCO, 2019). What remains underexplored are the subjective, cultural, and imaginative aspects of how migrant children navigate their lives. Studies rarely investigate how they engage with new environments through language, play, and storytelling. Temporal dimensions—such as how children connect past experiences to future aspirations to make sense of "home"—are also largely missing. Furthermore, ethnographic, child-centered approaches such as mapping and narrative methods are infrequently employed in Indian contexts (Spyrou, Rosen & Cook, 2021) [27]. Specifically, little attention has been given to the spatial, cultural, and emotional lives of Bengali migrant children in Kerala.

### Objectives and Significance of the Study

- To explore how migrant children construct meaning and interpret their lived experiences.
- To examine how migrant children, navigate homes, schools, neighborhoods, and broader environments.
- To understand how adult perceptions—by parents, teachers, and community members—shape and impact migrant childhoods.

This study centers the voices of migrant children, who are often marginalized in Indian migration research. Through participatory ethnographic methods such as storytelling and mapping, it documents how children experience identity, belonging, and adaptation in fragmented lives. It positions children as meaning-makers, not merely as passive subjects, and highlights their creativity and agency in resisting or transforming institutional norms. As such, it offers a significant contribution to childhood and migration studies in India.

### Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

#### 1. Children, Migration, and Mobility Framework

Ní Laoire, White, and Skeldon (2020) [1] propose that migration should be understood as a relational, temporal, and spatial process. Their framework accounts for children's own perspectives, recognizing them as active participants who shape and interpret their migratory experiences. For Bengali migrant children in Ernakulam, this lens enables an analysis of how they understand "home" and belonging across multiple spaces. It captures how they confront cultural and linguistic barriers, especially in schools, and how they reconstitute identity through the everyday.

#### 2. Relational Ontologies in Childhood Studies

Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook (2021) [27] argue that children's agency is fundamentally relational—emerging from their interactions with people, material environments, and institutional contexts. Relational ontology resists the notion of the child as a bounded, autonomous individual. Instead, it emphasizes interdependence and situational identity

formation (Shotter, 2021) [26]. For Bengali migrant children in Kerala, this approach reveals how identity is shaped and reshaped in dynamic relation to family, school, and social surroundings. It explains how their "selves" are constantly negotiated through physical environments and institutional encounters. This lens foregrounds children's agency as situated, evolving, and context-dependent.

#### 3. Living Literacies and Meaning-Making

Pahl and Rowsell (2020) [1] conceptualize "Living Literacies" as socially embedded, multimodal practices through which individuals make meaning. Literacy, in this sense, extends beyond reading and writing to include storytelling, art, and performative expression.

In this study, living literacies shed light on how migrant children use bilingual storytelling, mimicry, and play to resist institutional norms and forge a sense of self. These literacies become sites of creative negotiation and identity work, allowing children to transform their environments and assert belonging. This framework validates the everyday creative practices of migrant children as tools of resilience and cultural adaptation.

#### 4. Theories of Home and Belonging

Home and belonging are not solely about geographic location but are shaped through emotional, cultural, and political dynamics. According to Ahmed *et al.* (2003) [1], home is an affective space imbued with power relations and personal history. Tuan (1977) [29] elaborates on emotional geographies—how subjective experiences turn spaces into places of significance. Bhabha's (1994) [3] concept of the "third space" offers a view of hybrid identities formed in intercultural liminality.

These theories provide a framework for understanding how Bengali migrant children in Ernakulam relate to multiple homes and negotiate belonging. Their sense of self emerges in a "third space" where memories of West Bengal intertwine with daily experiences in Kerala, resulting in hybrid identities that are constantly evolving.

### Methodology

#### 1. Multi-Sited Ethnographic Design

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic approach to examine how Bengali migrant children in Ernakulam understand identity, belonging, and home. Ethnography enables close engagement with participants in their natural environments (Prasad & Shadnam, 2023) [21]. The multi-sited nature of the study allows for observation across homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Research was conducted in five migrant-dense communities: Kandanthara, North Vazhakulam, Kalamassery, Mudickal, and Kuttikattukara. Selection was based on (a) high concentrations of Bengali-speaking migrants and (b) the presence of government schools affiliated with the ROSHNI Project, which supports the education of migrant children.

#### 2. Participants

The primary participants were Bengali migrant children between the ages of six and sixteen enrolled in 5 government schools. The sample included a balanced representation of ages and genders. In addition to children, interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, ROSHNI Project staff, and NGO workers. This triangulated sample offered a multifaceted view of migrant childhoods—parents

provided cultural background, teachers and NGO staff offered institutional perspectives, and children shared personal experiences.

### 3. Methods of Data Collection

A variety of participatory and child-friendly tools were used to collect data. Child-led mapping and spatial drawing exercises enabled children to express ideas visually. Semi-structured interviews with children, parents, and teachers allowed for in-depth exploration of key themes while maintaining conversational flexibility. Participant observation was conducted in classrooms, neighborhoods, and play areas to capture everyday interactions. Voice recordings and creative play activities were also used to document spontaneous reflections and stories. These methods were designed to be interactive and accessible, ensuring that children could participate on their own terms.

### 4. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who fit specific criteria. Children were chosen from families who had migrated from West Bengal and had lived in Kerala for at least one year. All were enrolled in government schools. Selection was stratified based on age, gender, parental occupation, and duration of residence. Most families were engaged in informal work—such as domestic labor, construction, and waste management. Around 10 children, 10 parents, 10 teachers, and 3 NGO/government representatives participated in the study. School staff and community leaders facilitated introductions to potential participants. Children who showed interest in drawing, mapping, and storytelling were encouraged to participate.

### 5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were rigorously followed to ensure the safety and dignity of all participants, especially children. Prior permissions were obtained from school administrators and parents. Informed consent and assent were secured from each participant. All procedures were designed to be child-sensitive and empowering. Identities were anonymized, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained. The study was conducted with a commitment to safeguarding children's welfare while foregrounding their voices throughout the research process (Montreuil *et al.*, 2021) [15].

### Findings and Thematic Review

The following themes emerged from in-depth interviews, participant observations in schoolyards and homes, and informal conversations conducted across three migrant-dense neighbourhoods in Ernakulam between October 2023 and January 2024. Each theme represents an interpretive thread through which Bengali migrant children conceptualize belonging, negotiate identity, and make meaning while living in conditions of constant movement and cultural in-betweenness.

#### 1. Home as a Temporally Layered Construct

For most children, home is not a fixed place but a dynamic concept that links past, present, and imagined futures (Moskal, 2015) [16]. In migration studies, home is similarly seen as a fluid emotional construct rather than a static site (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011) [24]. Among Bengali migrant children, "home" is emotionally plural and temporally

stretched. They speak fondly of people and experiences from West Bengal, describe the rhythms of daily life in Kerala, and articulate hopes of return or dreams of building something "better than before." As one child shared, "We came here because we don't have land back at home... I think of both these places—here also I think, but I also think of home back there" (Mudickal Family 2, Murshidabad, 13 years in Kerala). These recollections of land, festivals, kin, and childhood play reveal a palimpsestic home: one that is remembered, lived, and longed for.

Children occupy overlapping emotional and spatial geographies, producing what Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) [10] call "stretched belonging"—a form of identity that spans multiple affective zones across time. Although they often feel socially excluded in Kerala, their memories act as emotional anchors that help them reconstruct a sense of partial belonging. This layered sense of home allows them to psychologically inhabit multiple worlds at once.

#### 2. Institutional Spaces and Cultural Displacement

Government schools emerge as spaces of both opportunity and exclusion. While infrastructural amenities and teacher behaviour are often better than those in their native villages (Lahiri & Bhattacharyya, 2025) [14], schools also function as sites of cultural displacement. Malayalam dominates the medium of instruction and the cultural life of the school (Saxena, 2024) [25], creating barriers for Bengali-speaking children.

For instance, Ritesh (age 11, 2 years in Kalamassery), who transitioned from a Bengali-medium to a Malayalam-medium school, adapted to the new language but lost fluency in Bengali. His mother lamented, "There is no Bengali-language support here." Many children remain silent in class, engage only when prompted, or follow along passively—behaviours described by James and Prout (2015) [11] as "regulated involvement." These patterns resonate with the Cultural and Linguistic Displacement Theory, which argues that adaptation often comes at the cost of cultural continuity.

However, silence should not be simplistically read as disengagement. It can also be understood as a survival strategy—an act of partial participation that safeguards one's cultural identity while navigating unfamiliar terrain. Despite some teacher-led efforts to include these children, systemic gaps in language support and culturally responsive pedagogy remain.

#### 3. Bilingual Play and Cultural Resistance

The children's capacity for fluid bilingualism between Bengali and Malayalam acts as both a social adhesive and a form of cultural resistance (Cherian & Rajan, 2024) [4]. Through play, children create hybrid cultural zones where exclusion is transformed into connection. In narrating stories, enacting skits, imitating adults, or joking in both languages, they generate what Bhabha (1994) [3] refers to as "third spaces"—in-between zones where new identities are formed.

These play spaces function as microcosms of cultural belonging. They allow children to claim authorship over their social worlds and resist linguistic or cultural erasure. Games, therefore, are not simply recreational but also profoundly political. As Corsaro (2005) [6] argues, play is central to identity construction in childhood. Here, it becomes a means of negotiating marginality and asserting selfhood.

#### 4. Performing Identity in Neighbourhood and School

Children's performances of identity are deeply embedded in the spatial routines and social rituals of everyday life. The routes they take to school, the friends they walk with, and the spaces they choose for play all reflect negotiations of belonging (Nind, Köpfer & Lemmer, 2025) <sup>[19]</sup>. These spatial choices are not random—they are loaded with cultural meaning and indicate zones of relative safety or acceptance.

School-based performances such as art competitions, group projects, or public speaking events allow children to express a hybrid identity—Malayali in school, Bengali at home. As Sadiya (12 years old, 7 years in Ernakulam) remarked, "At school, I feel Malayali. At home, I am Bengali." These shifting identities are not fragmented but flexible, shaped by context and audience.

Performances of self in public spaces serve as subtle affirmations of "I belong here too." They are not merely acting of assimilation or mimicry, but creative expressions of situated identity. Through these performances, children construct belonging as an ongoing practice, enacted across the boundaries of language, culture, and space.

### Discussion

#### 1. Rethinking Home and Belonging in Migrant Childhoods

Migration is often conceptualized as a singular, linear event. However, for Bengali migrant children in Kerala, it is an ongoing and recursive process, shaped by memory, aspiration, and daily negotiation. These children do not "arrive" in one place and leave another behind. Rather, they inhabit multiple temporal and emotional geographies simultaneously. Home, for them, is not merely a place—it is a layered, dynamic idea, imagined through smells, sounds, stories, and digital touchpoints like WhatsApp videos and phone calls.

As Sabir (8 years old, 5 years in Ernakulam) reflected, "When I speak in Bengali, it feels like I'm in WB, but I don't do it outside." His words illustrate how language itself becomes a form of time travel, reconnecting him to his past while negotiating his present. This partial belonging challenges dominant sedentary paradigms, which assume belonging must be rooted in permanence and proximity. Instead, these children practice what might be called "archival belonging"—a form of identification built through remembering, anticipating, and selectively performing home. Belonging, here, is stratified, contingent, and made through continual emotional labour.

#### 2. Child Agency as Relational and Spatial

The agency of migrant children is often overlooked because it does not conform to adult-centric, overt forms of resistance. Yet, as this study demonstrates, agency is not absent—it is quiet, relational, and highly contextual. It appears in the way children navigate linguistic boundaries, form friendships across difference, choose when and how to speak, or decide how much of their identity to reveal in a given moment.

Such acts are not incidental. They represent intentional decisions made within social and institutional constraints. As Valentine (2011) <sup>[30]</sup> reminds us, child agency is always mediated by space, power relations, and social positioning. The children in this study do not reject adult authority outright; instead, they find pathways of expression within

the interstices of daily life. Whether walking to school with a chosen peer, choosing silence in a classroom, or participating in a school event with selective enthusiasm, these are all examples of what might be called "embedded agency"—subtle but purposeful acts of negotiating space and selfhood.

#### 3. The Power of Play and Language

Play and language are not just coping mechanisms for migrant children—they are generative tools of world-making. Through bilingual games, mimicry, roleplay, and storytelling, children craft hybrid cultural spaces that both protect and express their identities. These performances are creative and intentional, allowing children to construct meaning amid flux and uncertainty.

Rather than seeing these acts as minor or peripheral, they should be understood as central to children's social reproduction and cultural resilience. As Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian & Rousseau (2024) <sup>[2]</sup> suggest, play allows children to build "internal scaffolding" for identity during times of dislocation. Humor, imitation, and code-switching are acts of authorship that resist erasure. These children are not merely surviving their new environments—they are actively shaping them through play, crafting what Bhabha (1994) <sup>[3]</sup> terms "third spaces" of cultural fusion and resistance.

In this light, play becomes a performance of identity rather than a retreat from struggle. It is a form of agency in motion, one that reveals the child as both participant and producer in the cultural life of migration.

### Implications and Recommendations

#### 1. Reconsidering Educational Inclusion

Rather than viewing migrant children as temporary additions to the classroom or as language-deficient learners, there is value in seeing them as students with plural histories and cultural knowledge. Current education systems—largely organized around dominant linguistic and cultural norms—often leave migrant children feeling emotionally and academically peripheral (Rajan, 2021) <sup>[23]</sup>. While some schools and teachers do attempt to be inclusive, more sustained attention to multilingual pedagogies and cultural responsiveness could make classrooms more welcoming.

This does not mean overhauling curricula entirely, but rather incorporating small, meaningful gestures—acknowledging home languages during lessons, referencing diverse cultural practices in examples, or creating moments of collective storytelling. These shifts can help children feel seen and heard, reducing the emotional dissonance they often experience in formal settings. The aim is not to 'integrate' migrant children into an existing system, but to co-create learning spaces where difference is not merely tolerated, but valued.

#### 2. Towards More Child-Centered Urban Design

Migrant children's lives extend far beyond classrooms. They play, observe, walk, and participate in the informal rhythms of their neighborhoods. Yet, many urban spaces do not reflect this reality. Parks may lack inclusive programming, festivals may be linguistically exclusionary, and everyday public spaces may not accommodate diverse cultural scripts (Dar & Chopra, 2022).

What might it look like to think of public space from the child's point of view—especially a child negotiating

between multiple cultural contexts? While comprehensive answers may be elusive, involving children and their families in local planning processes can offer insight. Neighborhood designs that accommodate varied play cultures or provide signage in multiple languages can gently expand the circle of belonging. These are not solutions so much as small openings—attempts to make urban life more porous for children who live across cultures.

### 3. Valuing Children's Cultural Knowledge in Schools

Children are not blank slates arriving at the school gate; they come with memories, languages, and frameworks for making sense of the world. Teachers, often under pressure from policy and performance metrics, may not always have the resources to engage deeply with these aspects. However, teacher education programs can begin to introduce ideas of listening to children—not just as learners but as knowledge holders.

This involves asking: What do children know that adults may not see? What can their stories, metaphors, and play reveal about migration, loss, and resilience? By creating space for these expressions—be it through classroom conversation, art, or play—teachers can begin to build relational pedagogies. These approaches do not offer easy fixes, but they do shift the emphasis from deficiency to dialogue, from adjustment to co-creation.

### Conclusion

The lives of Bengali migrant children in Kerala unfold across layers of memory, movement, and adaptation. Their everyday practices—navigating institutions, switching languages, recalling home, or choosing where to play—reveal identities that are in flux but far from unformed. Migration, for them, is not a single event but an ongoing condition that reshapes their sense of place, self, and belonging.

What emerges from this study is not a singular story of loss or assimilation, but a more textured account of negotiation. Home, for these children, is not fixed to one geography; it is remembered in fragments, lived in the present, and imagined in futures they articulate through speech, silence, and play. They do not simply leave one place behind and enter another—they carry both, stretching their emotional attachments across space and time. This multi-temporal construction of home reflects a form of belonging that is partial, mobile, and emotionally layered.

Their agency, too, does not always announce itself through defiance. It is subtle, situational, and deeply relational—seen in the decision to depict a native village in an art class, to speak Bengali only at home, or to make jokes in both languages. These moments are neither trivial nor accidental. They are everyday performances of identity and ways of asserting presence in spaces that may not always acknowledge them fully.

At the same time, these children navigate exclusion—be it institutional, linguistic, or epistemic. Schools may unintentionally reinforce a framework of deficiency, overlooking the cultural fluency and emotional intelligence children bring. Public spaces may fail to recognize them as legitimate users or participants. Yet within these gaps, children create what Bhabha (1994) <sup>[3]</sup> describes as “third spaces”—zones of hybridity where they blend identities, languages, and practices to quietly reshape the world around them.

Rather than offering a roadmap to ‘solve’ the challenges of migrant childhoods, this research invites a shift in perspective. It asks that we see migrant children not as passive recipients of policy or care, but as makers of meaning—children who draw maps of belonging across unlikely terrains, who reassemble home from WhatsApp videos and memories of Durga Puja, who claim space through play and silence alike.

In listening to their stories, we are not offered easy answers. But we are reminded that migration is not only a matter of movement—it is also a matter of imagination, endurance, and everyday creativity. Bengali migrant children are not merely adapting to a world in motion; they are actively reshaping it, insisting—often quietly—that belonging need not be rooted to one soil, one language, or one narrative. Their lives compel us to ask: What does it mean to belong in fragments? To grow up while living between homes? And how might we build worlds that make room for such in-between-ness?

### Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) under the Doctoral Fellowship programme [File no. RFD / Inst / 21-22/ ISEC/ GEN/28]. The author thanks Dr. Lekha Subaiya for guidance throughout the project and helpful comments on earlier drafts. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the ICSSR. Any remaining errors are the author's own.

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