

# From home to school

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CHILDREN of the poor spend much of their time in and around their homes. Many are out of school; some earn money for their families and most are absorbed in domestic work. As a result of several features of their lives – the absence of good schools, punitive teachers, difficulty in accessing school, and responsibilities in the home – these children find it easier to avoid going to school and become either school drop-outs or add to the population figures in the ‘illiterate’ column.

While much work has been done to investigate the failure to reach school, the reverse has rarely been focused on. This paper is based on a study that was undertaken with poor communities from three states of India. Within these communities we first identified children who were going to school. Then we tried to understand, through a profile of the family and neighbourhood, what situations facilitate their capacity for entry and attendance of school. In order to understand the situation of the child in these families, first a brief discussion of children’s activities as they were observed during the fieldwork for the study.

The children were mostly found on the streets outside their homes. They spent much of their time with other children of the neighbourhood, caring for the younger siblings, sometimes playing, sometimes buying snacks from vendors, often running small errands for adults and doing domestic chores in the home. The entry of any stranger would result in the clustering of inquisitive groups of children, eager to understand what was going on. Researchers are certainly in the category of strangers, and each day of fieldwork was conducted in the presence of a lively group of children, be it an interview with a mother or a session with a health worker. They would sporadically be chased away quite unsuccessfully.

Regarding food, children were not found to be ‘fed’ consciously. There is very little assistance to children in their eating. Mostly it is breast feeding on demand or eating after taking food from somewhere or someone. There is no separate consciousness of playful activity among children and casual play on the street with other children is perhaps tolerated rather than encouraged or structured.

Children make a remarkable contribution to their families, and one can discern how the short-term contribution is not really placed against long-term investments in children. Perhaps for many of these families, the equation of having fewer children makes little sense. They still believe that having more children will result in greater contribution in the income and workforce of the family. Thus large families are not just because of ignorance; they are believed to be stronger, more resilient and better off.

A child caring for other children is common and this is a major contribution that older children make towards the family. Boys and girls (mostly the eldest in the family) were entrusted with this responsibility. Many a time, young children were seen carrying a younger one around as they spent time on the street with other children. Unfortunately, this also resulted in keeping children out of school.

Disciplining of children seemed to be largely determined by the adult's goals for the children. In general, the reasons for disciplining included 'not listening', 'not doing work', 'loitering'. Although loitering could be seen as oriented towards the goal in favour of the child, there were only a couple of instances of disciplining in relation to attending school. This clearly demonstrates the fact that schooling is not a desired goal! Participation in the economic and social life of the family is, and children are actively trained and socialised for it. In fact, in some cases, a child (this time a girl) could easily be reprimanded or beaten, not for going to school *per se* (as it may seem in the observation), but for failing to see that her contribution in the home is a serious matter.

**I**nfants and young children use any available space in the absence of toilets. It is too much of an effort to go far, and in any case faecal matter, particularly that of a young child, was not considered 'dirty'. The older children, as soon as they could walk, accompanied adults who defecate and urinate mostly in open fields.

Similar to health, the child's survival and safety is largely seen as part of destiny and there did not seem to be any particular concern for safeguarding children from falling over into the canal while defecating, or into the *nallah* (canal) while playing.

The children of the poor spend much time in work for the family, a task that assists the adults, often adding to the income, and this is most responsible for keeping them away from school.

**L**et us now look at the dynamics of the families within which these children are born. What are some of the features that impact on their lives with reference to the potential for schooling?

The lives of young children are inextricably linked to the families into which they are born. The socio-economic, ecological and socio-cultural environment largely determines the life chances of the child from the time of conception. In the life of every child there are events, people or resources that will constantly influence the developing system in significant ways. For the specific task of accessing and sustaining participation in school as well, there are certain predisposing factors that seem important.

In this study, we were able to discern several processes that mediate the entrance into and continued participation in school. In some instances, our standard expectations from other studies on schooling were strongly confirmed, while in others they were not. The following sections attempt to capture some of the complex, ground level reality of the child in a poor home, in his or her effort to find the way to school and stay there.

The family operates in a somewhat organic manner where the presence or absence, characteristics and functional participation of any one member influence the others. For instance, the condition of any given child is inextricably linked to others, especially the siblings, their age, number, position and sex. A child's situation was very different when there were other siblings, when they were only boys or only girls; also their age and birth order were central to what was expected of the child. Similarly, the presence or absence of adults impacted the child in several significant ways, sometimes positively and sometimes not. Thus, the personal-social profile of the

members, their systemic roles and relationships would be potential influences for the child.

**W**e now deal with the multitude of people who come in contact with the child, and who may, in their association, provide the child with support for schooling. It was found that there were several persons who contribute towards this process, and would include, mother, father, brother, sister, another adult in the home (grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle), teacher or helper.

As expected, the mother seemed to have a considerable role in determining the situation of, as well as the choices made for, the child. Indeed, it would not be inappropriate to say that she was crucial to most decisions about her children. It was only in a few situations that the mother had abandoned this position. (For instance, one mother from the UP urban sample seemed quite ineffective and unable to take decisions under the shadow of a very strong and domineering mother-in-law). In cases where the mother was more affectionate towards the daughter rather than the son (a single woman household in Andhra), the situation for her daughter seemed to become enhanced despite the difficulties for the female child who was usually found to be at a disadvantage due to the expectations for assistance in domestic work.

There was some indication, in our reading of the cases, of a positive link between strict mothering and concern for the child. Particularly in one cluster of families in Karnataka, although there was strict disciplining, a sense of its positive affect on the children prevailed. There was also greater control of family size by these women as well as a sense of being in command of their life circumstances. Of course this is not true of all situations, as in some of the cases in UP where harsh beating was used only for the purpose of task completion in the home. Compliance in children was highly valued in all settings, although it was enforced in different ways, ranging from punitive treatment and verbal instructions to silent expectation.

The few homes in which the women seemed to have the greatest control over their own lives were the *devadasi* families, although they evaluated their own situation as inadequate, perceiving an absence of social sanction. In fact, they were found to be more in control of their own lives and therefore of their children. The extended families among whom these women lived (that is the members of the natal home) were usually supportive of the women and their children. The husbands for their part demonstrated an affectionate attitude towards their children.

**T**he practice of offering one daughter as a *devadasi* was found to be linked with the absence of a son in a family. This daughter, thus dedicated, was also expected to care for the parents as they grew old. As she grew older, this woman would have a family of her own, but outside the conventional system of patriarchy. Perhaps some of the prevailing social stigma, scholarships for the children (government aid) and an attached sense of 'shame' is more from the threatened ideology of patriarchy than the actual position of the women. Despite their better socio-psychological profile, these women felt that they were indeed missing something by not having a legal husband. Interestingly, in these (very few) cases, all the relationships with the 'husbands' were stable, affectionate and supportive, despite an absence of legality.

Contrary to our expectations, a working mother per se, seemed to reduce the chance of older children getting to school, especially if she was going to be away from home all day. In some cases,

other adults at home would share the responsibility, but usually it was the eldest daughter or the son who had to fend for the younger children in her absence.

**T**he father matters more for what he means to his wife, the mother of his children, than for the children per se, although some fathers choose to carry around young children, talk of their aspirations for children's education, or praise a 'good' child. The father being educated or in a particular job, or being away for long stretches or even being separated, did not seem to immediately interfere with the child's schooling. When the father was absent, the situation of the family depended a lot on the 'others' in a mother's life. The support of maternal kin, neighbours, or paternal kin, seemed to have specific consequences for the comfort of the mother.

For instance, in a Sikh family in Karnataka, the mother had to bow to the mother-in-law's dominant position and seemed uncomfortable with the dependence on her brother-in-law (since their community did not permit her to work). In one village in Andhra where there were two single mothers in the same village, the substitute arrangements were significant in determining the situation for each. One was supported by her father, whereas the other was rejected by her brother, and therefore had to depend on neighbours for support. She was observed to instruct her son to fetch some curry from the neighbours to eat his rice with.

The father seemed to go almost unnoticed when he was not present, but had a potentially powerful role when he was supportive. For instance, when the man was *not* into drinking and gambling, women tended to mention this fact with great pride. Similarly, among devadasi families, there was a suggestion of a supportive father (one praised the daughter for her beauty) although the mother and daughter dismissed the need for noting his name since the marriage was not legal. In the few cases where there was a father with disability, the demand on the work schedule and earning of the members was excessive, and usually resulted in greater poverty. An ailing father in one case prevented his wife from going for a tubectomy saying he was already sick and that she too would become unwell. Not that the ailment prevented him from begetting more children! When the relationship between the mother and father was positive, it enhanced the child's situation.

**W**hether brother or sister, it seemed that the birth order of the child was crucial in determining the responsibilities that these children would be given in the home. However, having an older brother meant that there would be someone to do chores outside the home or earn extra income. Having a younger brother often meant that the girl would have to care for and indulge the young boy. Of course, it would also depend on whether there was an older sister in the family, because then the latter could take over some of the responsibility.

It was found that the oldest daughter in many of the homes was extremely responsible and hard working. Usually this child was above 10 years of age, would clean dishes, wash the house, bathe the siblings, cook the food and, in some cases, attend school and perhaps even do well. As in the case of one family, the young girl was the star of the situation and deeply appreciated by the parents. In some homes the focus was pointedly on male children, sometimes at the expense of the girls. However, in one family, the girl child was indulged more than the boy, which he seemed to resent, especially when he had to carry her to school with him. Many times, older children had to

carry younger ones to school or to the anganwadi.

The lives of boys and girls seemed quite different in their expectations about work, more in the domains than in the total amount of work. Whereas girls were mostly involved in housework, the boys could be expected to earn extra income for the family. In two cases in an urban settlement in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the girls also undertook domestic work outside the home in an urban slum. Such work responsibility was the major deterrent for schooling for many children.

Being the youngest in the family was generally an advantage for the child. On one side, there were older siblings to get the extra earning or do housework, and on the other, the mother continued being indulgent for a longer time. Of course, only if there were no more children on the way. In that case, and also when the family was large, this indulgence was short-lived!

Although having other adults in the home, beyond the nuclear unit, seemed to be an advantage in the overall care of the child, there were exceptions. In one case, where the mother-in-law was overbearing, it seemed to affect the profile of the mother since the older woman was not supportive. In other cases, the presence of an older woman, aunt or grandmother provided a clear advantage, as a widowed aunt in one case who was supportive of schooling for girls, or the maternal grandfather who was particularly involved in the care of a young girl with disability. In contrast the presence of an older male, for example, the husband's brother who just sits around the house, can indeed push the limited resources of the family further down.

For working mothers the support was particularly useful as they were out of the home for long hours. In general, women found greater support from their own natal family than their in-laws. Where there were multiple caregivers the situation was found to be positive and supportive, particularly for the children.

The teacher played a central role in the pull towards or a push away from school. In many cases an initial 'dropping out' of school had taken place as a result of punitive action by the teacher. Children and adults had clearly been stung by derogatory and sarcastic comments about the families and communities to which the children belonged: 'Do you think you will become the DM (district magistrate)?' or, 'You are going to tend to cattle in any case.' Or, 'You are an idiot, and nothing goes into your head.'

Echoes of many of these statements (particularly 'I dropped out of school because nothing gets into my head') were heard among the children. In many cases, therefore, the teacher was responsible for keeping children away from school. By the same equation the teacher could be a strong potential influence in pulling the children to school. In this regard there needs to be an investment in the process of teacher training and particularly in sensitising the teacher and other employees towards children of the poor.

Despite poverty, there was a difference observed among the families on the basis of the economic situation that clearly influenced the child's circumstances as far as schooling was concerned. It must be said, however, that the strength of these factors within the group seemed to be far less influential than personal-social factors, but this is perhaps also because of the fact that the

range of variation in the economic situation was low.

**F**ood was usually limited. In UP, for instance, the villages studied seemed to have less food in comparison with the urban study area, but the reverse was true of the other locations. By and large, the youngest children depended mostly on breast milk and on food as and when the child was old enough to eat. Meanwhile, without going into the consequences of poor nutrition on the health of children, this did not seem to affect the schooling in any way. Children did have something to eat before going to school, even if it was leftovers from the previous day.

In some homes, the process of feeding was given more importance than in others. Cleaning up, eating and leaving for school was an established daily pattern for most school-going children. Interestingly, some of the food consumed was largely unaccounted for by assessments. For instance, in one case, a child said to depend exclusively on breast milk, was observed eating a *sharifa* (custard apple). Thus, once the child is a little older (that is old enough to take from a specific place or from another person) there is some intake apart from breast milk.

Food processing was also an important domain of work for the family. Young children participated in activities like chaffing of pulses, cleaning the grain and cooking food. Although purchasing was mostly done by the men and boys, the women and girls spent long hours in this work. Sometimes a young girl would be occupied for hours without distraction. A considerable degree of concentration was required for such long spells of work.

Women, girls and boys mostly handled the chore of fetching water. Men were rarely involved. Since very few places had accessible drinking water, this was an important task that interfered with the regularity and timing of school.

Many children earn for the family. Adults often used money to appease children, and for their part children were often seen demanding money from adults to buy sweets or snacks from the local shop.

The situation of clothing was pathetic. Young children were mostly without underclothes and sometimes without clothes. If having clothes and wearing them was essential for going to school, these children would be at a definite disadvantage.

**T**he children usually managed in small spaces, shared by all. For them there was one living area, and food was cooked either just outside the home or in a small courtyard. As expected, the situation of space and safety seemed more difficult in the urban areas. Children mostly bathed in the courtyard. Sometimes water was heated for them, more often not. The older children used the outer spaces, as did adults, for toilet facilities. No homes had arrangements for toilets, except in one area where they were under construction. As expected, the facility for keeping schoolbooks, bags and uniforms safely was given low priority.

Generally families relied on local branded medicines given by local private ‘doctors’ (shopkeepers actually) and on self-medication. Unfortunately, there was little reliance on local

indigenous forms of medication like neem leaves, ginger and so on.

Events in the lives of the families, both real and imagined, of the past, present and the long term, result in different evaluations of experiences that significantly affect their choices. Many of these events clearly have a bearing on participation in school.

**F**amilies abruptly leave for other locations for festivals, ceremonies, illnesses or family visits, a feature that to a large extent seemed to interfere with attending school. This feature was not treated lightly by the school, which for their part just struck off children’s names. Thus, many children were out of school just because their families took them away without warning or preparation, and the schoolteacher did not seem to understand or empathise with this situation. The case of one little boy who just sat in a class (lower for his age) because his name was struck off, seemed a rare instance of the struggle to stay within the system despite all odds.

<b>Snakes:</b> + Mild ++ Strong +++ Very strong ++++ Exceptionally strong				
<i>Snakes</i>	<i>Mild</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Very strong</i>	<i>Exceptionally strong</i>
Being a girl		++		
Being the oldest child			+++	
Having no sisters		++		
Being one of many children		++		
Having a parent with disability		++		
Having a mother who goes to work for long hours			+++	
Having an uncaring mother			+++	
The father and mother are addicted to alcohol			+++	
A brother or sister who has a disability (for girls)		++		
A school that is too close (the children then reportedly run home)	+			
A punitive teacher who yells and denigrates children of the poor		++		
Being from a lower caste, poor family		++		

Having erratic participation in school due to work or social visits			+++	
Being sick or disabled			+++	
Having local youth or adults who have not benefited in terms of employment or income after being in the school		+++		
Drought		++		
Hunger	+			

Whether the campaign is for enrolment or for polio immunisation, they have a positive effect on practices at the local level, and could be a useful method of getting messages and services to the people.

**I**n the event of a death, the functional role of a person is quickly taken over by others, whether it is a child, a parent or a grandparent. Disability was treated naturally as in the case of one girl who was considered very bright although disabled, and was repeatedly asked to present her knowledge of names of relatives, or actions of saluting or imitating the father. Generally, children with disability were outside the school ambit when unable to walk. Chronic illness seemed to pull the family down far more seriously than death or absence. This seems like a harsh statement, but caring for a chronically ill person was a major strain on the children.

The larger social setting in which the people live have a direct and indirect influence on their access and participation in programmes. This social reality creates pressures through attractions and distractions from particular goals. It was found that some of these features facilitated the interest of the family as a whole, but stood in clear contradiction with schooling as an activity.

**S**ome of the features of family dynamics were clearly centred on priorities of economic and social dimensions. For instance, children's participation in work, paid or housework, migration patterns, and more specifically their innate understanding of childhood as a stage of life within the life span of a family, did not include school as a significant dimension. Therefore, the families in general did not seem to be struggling to send children to school. It was only when families seemed to have the luxury of having other things (income, food, childcare) taken care of that children were sent to school. In such instances, only the exceptional individual could overcome the socio-cultural conditions, whether it was the exceptional child or an adult. In general, schooling was clearly in conflict with the socio-cultural reality of the families, in addition to being perceived as a luxury by most, because of the economic situation.

**G**overnment policy, caste relations, teacher attitudes, ecological factors, health practices and services, indigenous healing systems are among the issues that came up in the research. Some of the themes were:



- \* Girls need very little schooling if at all.
- \* Immunisation makes children sick.
- \* Government schools and other programmes are not good enough.
- \* Girls have to be married soon after menarche.
- \* A highly educated girl is a misfit.
- \* Education does not carry any long-term benefits.
- \* The sense of agency, that is, being in control of their own lives, is minimal; poverty has a lot to do with the sense of powerlessness.
- \* Health and ill-health is not linked to feeding or immunisation.

<b>Ladders:</b> + Mild ++ Strong +++ Very strong ++++ Exceptionally strong				
<i>Ladders</i>	<i>Mild</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Very strong</i>	<i>Exceptionally strong</i>
A mother who values education for the child			+++	
A mother who is concerned about the welfare of her child			+++	
Being a boy		++		
Having other adults living with the family who can care for younger children and supervise the home			+++	
Having fewer siblings, but not being just one or two			+++	
Having been breast fed	+			
Being in good health		++		
Having teachers who are affectionate or at least those who don't yell and beat up children				++++
Having parents or even one adult in the family who believes in the benefit of schooling			+++	
Having some local success stories who have			+++	

progressed and done better after attending school(as in the case of a UP family where an uncle only wants to marry an educated woman)				
* The list is open ended and more can be added.				

The family is a unit and needs one child to take care of the home (preferably a girl, but if only sons, then a boy), one to assist in income generation if the situation is difficult, and only then will the luxury of sending children to school be addressed.

Seasonal migration for agricultural labour or work, either by the whole family or the parents, or even just the father was common and disruptive in the child’s schooling pattern.

**I**n conclusion, let us visualize getting to and staying in school as a game similar to snakes and ladders, where the board depicts the child’s life circumstances. Each row is a different layer of life circumstances, starting with the most immediate to the most distant. Perhaps one can imagine the snakes as the circumstances in each layer that will bring the child back home, and the ladders will enable the child to progress either to the next layer, or maybe to the school despite odds. Let us try to visualize that board. The length of the snake or the ladder will be determined by the relative strength of that factor.

It can be seen that the situation for most families was so difficult that the present investment in education is outside their worldview. Education for children (particularly girls) is also against the social fabric and the prevailing family ethos wherein the focus is more on economic sustenance and everyday survival of the members. Thus, immediate investment in schooling, if at all it happens, requires a considerable pull from within the situation or a push from the outside. Somehow the community, social services and the government have failed to provide the attraction to children to enter and continue with schooling. The long-term benefits that seem so clear to us are not ‘within sight’ for these families.