



Migrant Children's Struggle for Education

CASE STUDY BY SEWA DELHI



Left Behind: Migrant Children's Struggle for Education in Sangam Vihar

Sangam Vihar, located on the southeastern edge of Delhi, is one of the largest unauthorized colonies in the city. Established in 1979, it has grown through a continuous influx of labor migrants seeking affordable housing and entry into the city's economy. Spanning 5 square kilometers, it is surrounded by starkly contrasting areas such as the affluent Sainik Farms and the working-class neighborhood of Khanpur. Currently, Sangam Vihar is home to an estimated one million residents, primarily migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal. As an unauthorized colony, it exists outside zoning regulations, resulting in poor access to public infrastructure, undefined land ownership, and limited essential services.



In June 2024, SEWA Delhi established its first SEWA Shakti Kendra in the F1 block of Sangam Vihar. While conducting a survey on child nutrition in the area, our team came across several serious challenges that the community is facing, particularly related to their migratory status. One major issue identified was that many **children who have migrated with their parents are either not getting admission into schools or are dropping out.**

Upon deeper interaction with the community, it became clear that the main reason behind this exclusion is the lack of proper documentation. Despite the fact that, under the Right to Education Act, the government cannot deny admission to any child up to the age of 14, schools are still insisting on documents like address proof and Aadhaar. Many community members were not even aware of this right and therefore had never tried to claim it.

SEWA identified this as a critical area for intervention, ensuring that migrant children have access to education and basic entitlements. **This case study highlights the efforts of our field mobilizer, Niresh Ben,** who went the extra mile to support these children. She not only accompanied children to schools to ensure their admission but also actively advocated for their right to education.

While her efforts have successfully led to admissions in many cases, the process is often delayed due to schools demanding documents like bank account details, Aadhaar cards, and proof of address — none of which are mandatory under the law, but often insisted upon. Navigating this requires constant dialogue and collaboration with school authorities.

During this process, Niresh Ben also raised another important concern: **many of these children, while waiting for school admission, were getting involved in waste work alongside their parents. Recognizing the risks and hazards involved,** she proposed starting a small tuition or tutorial space for the children. This initiative would help them stay engaged with studies while the admission process is ongoing.

This case study showcases not just the systemic challenges migrant communities face but also how grassroots leadership and proactive steps, like those taken by Niresh Ben, can create meaningful change.

Demographics and Livelihoods in Peepal Chowk

Peepal Chowk, located in the F2 block of Sangam Vihar, is densely populated by families who migrated from the Nadia district of West Bengal. In these households, men typically work as waste collectors and sorters, while women are employed as domestic workers and often participate in waste segregation. These families live in small chawls, with kutcha houses resembling jhuggis, built on plots of approximately 25 square yards.

Some families have lived here for over a decade, while others continue to arrive in search of work and stability.



The Problem: Vulnerability of Migrant Children

Peepal Chowk consists of five such chawls, housing nearly 50 families, each with young children. During area visits and interviews, women expressed deep concerns over the growing issue of substance abuse among children. As both parents work, children are left unsupervised for long hours. Women typically return in the late afternoon to cook and handle household chores before resuming waste segregation. In the absence of structured engagement, children often sift through waste as a form of play.

A particularly distressing case involved a child who discovered a discarded alcohol bottle and, after consuming the leftover contents, developed a habit of seeking out similar bottles. This behavior soon spread among other children in the community, as there was no adult supervision to curb such activities. Moreover, children are constantly exposed to hazardous waste in their living environment, increasing health risks. SEWA Delhi recognized the urgent need for intervention and initiated steps to address these concerns.

Migrant children left out of schools



Interviews with the families of the children uncovered multiple barriers preventing children in Sangam Vihar from accessing education. The primary obstacles stem from both geographical and institutional factors.

Although Sangam Vihar has numerous private schools, government schools are scarce, with only two serving the entire area. As a result, children must travel long distances to attend school. Parents, particularly those with young daughters, expressed concerns about safety and the risk of violence or harassment, leading many to discourage school enrollment or withdraw their children prematurely. Additionally, the poor reputation of local government schools further dissuades families from sending their children to school. One parent noted, “Yahan par government schools ki halat bahut kharab hai” (The condition of government schools here is very poor).

For children in Peepal Chowk, the primary barrier is not distance but the lack of appropriate documentation. Many migrant families arrive without the necessary papers, such as transfer certificates, Aadhaar cards, or birth certificates, due to a lack of awareness. Similarly, children born in Sangam Vihar often lack formal birth registration, and consequently, essential ID proofs like Aadhar, preventing their enrollment in school. This gap leaves many migrant children without access to education.

On-site Classes initiative by Sewa Delhi

The Right to Education Act (2009) mandates special provisions for the education of migrant children, and even the New Education Policy (2020) acknowledges their vulnerability. Despite these legal protections, SEWA Delhi's initial attempts to engage with school authorities and secure admissions for these children proved futile, as officials cited documentation requirements as a rigid barrier.

A melange of state and centre policies and intentions, whether it be the push for universal Aadhar coverage, linking of Aadhar to bank accounts, or, now, the unique APAAR ID for school children, have ironically ended up leaving out children from education. The requirements imposed for Aadhar cards and linked bank accounts of children for admissions and to also allow for disbursement of scholarships for purchase of uniform, stationery, etc, to children are usually cited by officials to bar admission of children of migrant workers who often fail to produce these documents.

Recognizing the immediate need for an alternative, SEWA Delhi launched on-site temporary classes in October 2024. These two-hour sessions are held every alternate day within the chawls of Peepal Chowk, making education accessible to children aged 4 to 12. The curriculum focuses on foundational subjects, moral values, decision-making skills, and personal hygiene. Currently, 14 children from the area attend these classes regularly.

The initiative has received a positive response from the community. Pinki, a mother of three, shared that her daughter's school admission was rejected due to missing Delhi-based documents. However, the street school provided her children with an opportunity to learn and grow. She observed noticeable improvements in their behavior and engagement in household activities. Similarly, Tasleem Begum, another resident, faced difficulties enrolling her daughter in school due to documentation issues. While her son, who has the necessary paperwork, struggled to commute to a distant school. SEWA's initiative has provided a crucial educational alternative for her children.



Impact

To raise awareness on migrant workers' issues, SEWA Delhi organised a public hearing with relevant stakeholders in Sangam Vihar on 21st March 2025. The hearing was attended by representatives of ward councillors, Anganwadi workers, and the MCD primary school principal, along with members from the community. Addressing the issue of documentation highlighted the fact that under new regulations, a unique Apaar ID for students has to be created, which is not possible without Aadhar cards or birth certificates. However, he agreed to temporarily admit the migrant children to school until appropriate documentation can be arranged.

Through the initiative and a public hearing with school authorities, 25 migrant children were granted school admissions — regardless of whether they had proper documentation. The schools agreed to enroll all migrant children without delaying or denying admission due to documentation issues.