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Lives of children (6-12 years) in Rural Manipur

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Abstract

The Lives of Children in Rural Manipur aims to explore the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by children living in this region. Located in the northeastern part of India, rural Manipur is known for its rich cultural diversity and natural beauty, but also for its socio-economic disparities and limited access to essential services. Furthermore, cultural beliefs, practices, and norms have significant impacts on children's lives, shaping their identities, opportunities, and aspirations. This study draws on research methods to investigate the complex factors that shape the lives of children. In this context, including cultural norms and expectations, and limited access to education, health care, and other resources. This study is based on a qualitative approach and includes data gathered from interviews, observations, and case study with a total of 8 families, which includes 13 children, 15 parents/adults and 3 teachers. Thus a total of 31 participants were part of the study, out of which all the families depends on agriculture as their source of income. The broad objective of the study was to understand the lives of rural children in Manipur, in which the specific objectives were to understand children's education children in rural Manipur, to acquire knowledge on the involvement of children in agricultural work and to gain understanding on recreational activities in the lives of children in rural Manipur. The responses are subjected to thematic analysis. The key findings of the study was that children as young as 6 years have to move out from the village and go to boarding schools in another village or town to acquire education as the school in the village does not have proper facilities and adequate teachers. Another finding was the participation of children in agriculture. While some children enjoy accompanying their parents to the fields, most children seen it as an obligation which deprive them of other activities like playing or socialising with their friends. The fields are nearly a kilometre or more from the village and the only means of transport was by foot. The village also lacks basic healthcare facilities. The health care centre was understaffed and lack necessary equipment and medicines which can result in preventable illnesses and deaths among children. The health care provider does not frequently visit the village, and when they do, there is frequently a lengthy queue and insufficient time, so not everyone usually were able to receive the necessary medical care.

Keywords: Children's experiences and challenges, socio-economic disparities, cultural influences, agricultural involvement, recreational opportunities

Introduction

Childhood is a special time in human development and a crucial stage in setting up future civilizations to be successful and long-lasting. It is seen as a time of innocence, fragility, and growth. Because of their physical and mental immaturity, children need adult protection and care throughout this time. Children are expected to get a formal education in schools and are shielded from the adult worlds of work, sex, and politics since it is believed that these activities might be harmful to young people. Despite being connected to a particular historical and cultural era, this vision of childhood—which is currently dominant—has been accepted as natural and universal.

It is the stage of development during which the child's personality and character are rapidly developing. Due to the fact that it shapes the pupils' personalities, this period is crucial. Children might rapidly head in the wrong path at this point if they do not receive the proper supervision. Even if the children are starting to reflect, this period is more agitated since the process is still in an immature state of development. Children who live in semi-urban or rural areas frequently experience instability.

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Because of their great poverty, they frequently face danger and are unable to meet basic necessities such as nourishment, access to healthcare, and education. Children as young as five may work on the streets or look after younger siblings in many impoverished urban areas of the global South, but in rural areas where families rely on subsistence farming, girls and boys work in the fields and at home, making significant contributions to the well-being of their families despite their young age. In contrast, young people's economic and personal dependency on parents can occasionally last for more than twenty years in the industrialised cultures of the global north. Children also differ in their labour, education, and social obligations even within the same community or family, and these variances may be attributed to things like gender, birth order, caste, and (dis)ability.



Fig 1: Map of India depicting the state of Manipur (in red)

Objectives

Broad objectives

To understand the lives of rural children in Manipur.

Specific objectives

1. To understand children's education in rural Manipur.
2. To acquire knowledge in the involvement of children in agricultural work.

"# To gain understanding on recreation activities in the lives of children in rural Manipur

Methodology

Participants

Locale of the study

The purpose was to study about children living in rural Manipur. The study was conducted at Soubunglong/Leishok, a village in Noney District under the Khoupum sub-division. Leishok is a rural village dominated by the Rongmei community, who speak only Rongmei language, or

Rongmeilat. The Rongmei people are a native ethnic group of the Naga people in North-East India. The Indian Constitution designates them as scheduled tribes (STs), which is the legal classification. There are 14 households residing in the village. Leishok hamlet residents rely heavily on agriculture as a source of income, with little help from the government or any NGO. The only school in the village is the Primary School. It is about 145 km from Imphal City.

Selection of Participants

The sampling techniques used for selection for selection of participants were purposive and snowballing. Some families were first reached through personal contact after which snowballing method was used to reach other families and the teachers.

The participants in the study consisted of 8 families with children at the age range of 6-12 years. Each family may or may not have more than one child, as well as one or more parents or guardians. Three teachers from the primary school of the village was also part of the study.

There were a total of 8 households chosen, and all of the parents and legal guardians who agreed to participate in the study, as well as the total number of children in the family who were between the ages of 6 and 12 were included in the study.

Therefore, the total number of participants in the study is 31.

Tools of Data Collection

The following tools were used to obtain information from the participants in the study

Interview

A structured interview schedule was prepared for the children, parents and the teachers. It was the main tool of the research study. The interview was held in Rongmei language, so the interview schedule was initially created in English and then translated into that language.

Case Study

One family was chosen for the case study out of the eight households. For ease of access, the family the researcher stayed with in the village was chosen. Methods like interviews, observations, discussions, interactive play were used in the case study.

Observation

Participant and non-participant observation of the play structure and daily activities was done throughout the study. The participant's environment/setting was observed before, during and after the interviews. The observation, for the most part, was done simultaneously as the interview was conducted.

Results and Discussion

Children's education

Location of the school

The location of the school children go to, is influence by quality of education, accessibility, proximity of schools, medium of education and the cost of education.

Out of the 13 children who participated in the study, most of the children goes to school in another village or town depending on the parents choice. 7 children goes to another school in a neighboring village and stays in a boarding school, another 3 children who are siblings goes to school in another village and also stays in a boarding school, 1 goes to school in a town and lives with his aunt and only 2 children goes to

their village's Government Primary School. Children have to go to different villages and town for education due to lack of infrastructure and limited education opportunities in the village.

Of the 13 children, the parents of 11 claim that the challenge they encounter in providing an education for their children is transportation and costs. Travelling to another village or town for education is expensive for the families as they need to pay for the transportation, boarding/hostel, and other expenses. They also said that in spite of all the troubles they face, they send their children to a better school as the school in their village does not function properly.

About the school in the village

The only school in the village was the government-run Primary school. The school has three substitute teachers and none of the permanent teachers were in the village. There are two classrooms. And there is no restroom and insufficient infrastructure and supplies.

When asked about the school infrastructure, Tipliu, one of the village's school teacher, responds that there aren't enough desks and benches for the students, and there isn't even a table for the teachers. Din, another teacher of the Primary School, responded that because the headmaster didn't bring the resources, the students don't receive midday meals on a regular basis when questioned about the resources or incentives they receive from the government. Sometimes, only Maggi is served to the kids. However, at the start of the school year, the kids do get uniforms and school supplies.

Din further said, Alaonun school gang chui ri ri mak na chi. kapui-kapu deng khou bam rap khou lao lai tat tat na school khatsin gang chui mak rap khou cham lou ni sin cham tou me. [The children never come to school regularly. They stay with their parents and follow them to the fields and since they don't come to school, it is impossible to teach them even if I want to].

The teachers claimed that even though the government works to educate children and enacts laws and policies to that end, the upper authorities who oversee such schools and institutions are unable to extract the maximum benefit from them, and as a result, the school is failing. Because they lack the necessary equipments and resources, the school does not even offer extracurricular activities for the children.

The school faces many challenges, even though efforts are being made to improve education in rural areas. It is important to recognise the unique challenges that rural communities face and work collaboratively to provide the necessary resources and support to ensure that all children have access to quality education.

One of the teachers replied that the school informs parents about exams and the curriculum when inquired about if they update on their children's achievement or details.

On the contrary, Di, a guardian of a primary school student, claimed that although there are no exams conducted at the school, the students are still promoted to the next grade.

All of the parents says that the school in the village are not able to provide the necessary education for their children. The school does not have all the subjects too. The only subjects taught in the school are social science, science and grammar. It doesn't have necessary subjects like English, Hindi, General Knowledge, moral science, and meitei Mayek (Manipuri script), and Maths.

Most of the subjects were not taught and so they don't have a choice but to send them to another village or town where there is better education system or English Medium school.

When the teachers were asked what can be done to improve the state of the school, Din said that the headmaster should bring all the resources provided by the government and pay the substitute teachers more to improve the school. There will soon be a new school building, but if they do not provide the substitute teachers better salary, nobody will want to be a substitute teacher and the school will not progress in any case. So, in order to enhance the state of the schools, it is vital to hire competent instructors and pay them well.

Goals and dreams

The teachers were asked if the children have their future goals, they said that all the children have dreams to be someone in life, like they want to be doctor, police officer and some wants to be able to drive vehicles. The goals and ambitions of children in rural Manipur are shaped by their cultural background, economic status, and access to education and opportunities. While most children in rural Manipur have similar aspirations as those in urban areas, others may have more limited aspirations due to the challenges they face in education.

The children were asked what they want to be in the future, they said they want to be doctor (3), IAS officer (2), police officer (1), footballer (1 striker, 1 midfielder and 1 to be like Messi), scientist (1), mechanic (1), engineer (1), lecturer (1). The girl who wants to be lecturer said, Oja su ni ye, lecture sa mei jat toi [I want to be a teacher, the one that is called lecture]. And when asked if it is lecturer, she happily agreed to it.

All parents are also supportive about their choices and goals and said that whatever they wish to become, the children will be supported. Rang, father of Kadun, Kindin and Gai said that he wants one of their children to be a workshop mechanic. All of the children have a strong interest in education and value the opportunity to learn new things and pursue their goals.

When the children were asked, 'If you met a fairy and you were granted one wish you wanted - what would that be?'. To this question, 5 children answered that they would ask the fairy to make them achieve their aim in life, 4 said that they would ask for toys which include toy guns and football, 1 for eatables, 1 for toys, 1 said that she will ask for superpower and 1 little child who stated that she intended to become an engineer when she grew up claimed she would ask the fairy to turn her into a chowkidar.

Why education is necessary ?

All of the children says that they like going to school so that they can achieve their goals. Kadun, a class 2 student says that, education is necessary because he wants to be a famous footballer and he will need to speak English when he goes out of the state for tournament.

The majority of parents concur with their children's understanding of the value of education. They all agreed that educating their children is essential if they are to one day realise their potential and make something of themselves for themselves. One among the 15 parents said that,

Kadai su na Bible pa pat ngam khang the larik cham na [the important thing why education is necessary is to be able to read the Bible]. Another parent said that, Seidou tho charuang khou lung chui na lung ngam khang larik thai mei kage nai the [in today's time, in order to live in a society, education is necessary].

The parents said that education will help the children to promote their personal development, economic development,

health and well being, and social development. Providing access to quality education is critical for the long term success and prosperity of the community.

Plans after the children's education

The parents were asked that after their children's education, if they want their children to move out in the city or stay in the village and help the parents in their work. Most of the replies received are to settle down in the city, build a good house and live there. But one among the 15 parents says that it depends on what her children become when they grow up but she would prefer them to live there in the village.

Almost all families encouraged their children to move to cities in search of better education or job opportunities, particularly because they feel that there are limited opportunities in the village. They see migration as a way for their children to improve their economic prospects and support their families.

One among the 8 families are hesitant about their children leaving their community and prioritised cultural and familial ties over economic considerations. They worry about the potential challenges and risks associated with moving to cities, such as increased living expenses, exposure to urban violence and crime and loss of cultural identity.

Children's involvement in agricultural work

The findings on children's involvement in agriculture, household chores, and young children's responsibilities is presented in this section. It also outlines a way for balancing agriculture and education for kids from the viewpoint of the teachers.

Children's participation in farming

In rural areas of Manipur, children participation in farming is often common due to the agrarian nature of these communities.

9 out of 13 children says that they go to the fields with their parents or elder siblings. Although some children enjoy going to the fields, others doesn't have a choice but to go. Juang, a 9 year old girl said,

Lao tang khou tho nungai de kumsin cheng du lang na tat rianra e [While it is fun when we arrive at the field, the journey there is incredibly long and exhausting].

The fields are roughly one kilometre or more away from the village. Some portion of the path is extremely steep and narrow. The reason the fields are so widely apart from the village is that they practice slash and burn technique, which involves changing the fields every year in order to harvest good crops and burning down the forest for crop cultivation.

The work they do in the field are weeding, sowing, gathering fruits and vegetables, harvesting, taking the buffalos for grazing or sometimes just accompany their parents and play there.

3 out of 13 children said that they like going to the fields but it was seen as family's responsibility while the other 10 said they dislike it. Every child has their own preferences and experiences. However, for 9 children out of the 13 children, going to the fields is a part of their daily routine and is an important aspect of their families' livelihood.

For some children, going to the fields is normal and even an enjoyable part of their daily routine as it is an important aspect of their community and culture. Additionally, children who are involved in farming derived a sense of satisfaction from being able to contribute to their family's livelihood and seeing the fruits of their labour.

However, the other children do not enjoy going to the fields and view it as a chore or obligation that takes away from other activities, such as playing or hanging out with friends.

Other works the children are involved in

Almost all of the children helped their family in the household chores. Washing clothes, sweeping the house and the lawn, moping, cooking, washing utensils, fetching water, and gardening are some of the works the children do in their everyday life.

According to the parents, all of the children except one help their family in household chores. They all provide some help in the family. One parent said that their children do all the work assigned or told them to do and they do it quite well but they do not know how to use a knife yet.

The children have a range of household chores and responsibilities depending on their family's need and circumstances. While these tasks can be challenging and time-consuming, they also teach children important life skills and values such as responsibility, self sufficiency and respect for the natural environment.

Additionally, it was observed that gender roles in household work are defined by traditional norms and expectations. Girls are typically expected to help with tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings, while boys are often responsible for heavier outdoor chores such as farming, herding and collecting firewood.

However, not all families experience this. In 2 out of 8 households, there are no obvious gender roles at play. In a patriarchal society, boys are portrayed doing all the household tasks that ladies would ordinarily perform, such as sweeping the floor, washing the dishes, and cleaning the kitchen.

Impact of agriculture on children's education

When the teachers were asked how agriculture has affect the children's education, they said that it has impacted a lot as children go to the fields instead of coming to school. Din said, "Alao nun school gang ji na kapui-pu thei lao lai tat tat bam tuang di the" [the children do not want to come to school so they accompanied their parents to the fields].

Due to the school's poor operation, not even the parents bother to take their children to school. They believe they can at least get some work done or assist with running errands without having to send them to school. Despite the fact that all parents and children believe that education is crucial for children's lives, few parents actually take their children to school.

Method to balance education and agriculture work

The teachers said that since the children often go to the fields or often are busy with household work instead of coming to school, they are not able to balance their studies with other responsibilities. Soso, a substitute teacher at the primary school, said that if the children realise how important education is, they will start coming to school. So one step is to emphasise the value of education to both the parents and the children.

Another teacher, Tipliu, said that the school is only for half a day. They get the other half of the day to do their work or help their parents in the fields or household chores. The children need to be motivated to learn and manage their time well.

Understanding the children's recreational activities Children during their free time

When the children were asked what they do during their free time, all the 7 boys replied that they go to play football at the church ground. It was thought that, the just concluded Fifa World Cup 2022 had influenced the kids to enjoy football more. The girls also mentioned that they frequently engage in pretend play together. The boys are more engaged in active play and toy guns and cars while the girls are more fond of pretend play like 'mummies and daddies' and with dolls and teddies.

All 13 of the children said that they also watch YouTube videos or play online games during their free time or when their parents do not allow them to go and play outside. One of the parent said that their children does not return home until the sun sets once they go out and that's why they do not allow them to go out sometimes. Another parent said that their son collects all the damage toy guns from his friends and then repair them.

It was also observed that children were gathering fruits and then sitting down and eating together. And the older boys in the age range of 9-12 were also seen going to the fields to hunt birds with catapult in their hand when they were bored. Sometimes the children were seen roaming around the village passing by each house and playing along as they go.

Almost every children is glued to smartphone. When the kids have free time, they either play outside with their friends or continue viewing videos on the smartphones. Additionally, the parents give them the phone and allow them to use it rather than sending them outside on a hot day.

Activities/responsibilities that parents and their kids share

When the parents were asked about the tasks or activities they do together, all the parents says that the activities they do together are mostly going to the fields together, gardening, collecting firewood and other household chores. Since everyone in the village has a busy schedule and the kids try to leave the house to go outside and play, the only time they often get to spend with their parents is when the kids are doing their duties and helping their parents around the house.

Children's interest and excitement

When the parents were asked what excites the children, the most frequent answer received was when they get the permission to go out to play with their friends, when the parents buy them new toys and when they come back home for vacations. The parents also said that the children are excited when they prepare the children's favourite meal. Another parents said that their children are the most excited when they buy them a new football boot as they love football. A different yet fascinating response received was that, a parent said that their children are excited to get education. Even though the children have to travel to another village and stay in a boarding school, they are always excited to go and never hesitate. He also narrated a tale of his daughter, who cried and pleaded her parents when she saw her older brothers leaving home for school. They agreed to it, and at the conclusion of the school year, she returned home with good exam results.

Additional key findings

Children's difficulties in the village

Access to education is a significant challenge for children in rural Manipur. The school suffers from inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, and shortage of teaching materials. This results in low level of literacy among numerous children, making it difficult for them to succeed

academically in life.

Healthcare is another area of concern for children in rural Manipur. The village lack basic healthcare facilities, it is understaffed and lack necessary equipment and medicines. This can result in preventable illnesses and deaths among children. Even though, there is a health care centre, it was observed that the health care provider does not visit frequently and when they do, there was often a long queue and so not everyone gets to get the necessary medical care that they need.

One family said that they try to earn enough to be able to provide support and education to the children send them for tuitions of subjects they need help in. Another family said,

"Live or die, I'll do my best to provide education and necessities for my children".

The parents prioritise their children's education, offer them emotional support, advocate regarding their health care, encourage healthy habits, foster skill development, and participate in the community in an effort to decrease the challenges their children struggle with. Parents play a crucial role to help the children the difficulties they face and ensure that they have a bright future.

Summary and Conclusion

The lives of children in rural Manipur are shaped by a complex set of social, economic, and environmental factors. This research study aims to explore and understand various aspects of the lives of children living in rural areas of Manipur, which is a state in northeastern India. The study focuses on issues such as access to education, agriculture, recreation and other basic needs, as well as the challenges faced by children in these areas. It may also examine the cultural and social factors that impact the lives of rural children in Manipur, including traditional practices, beliefs, and attitudes towards children. The study aimed to identify ways to improve the well-being of rural children in Manipur and promote their overall development.

This study has underscored the importance of education in the lives of children in rural Manipur. While there is a school in the village, most of the children have to attend school at another town and villages due to lack of resources in their village school. The study has also shown that almost all the children participate in agriculture as that is the sole means of income for the family. While some children viewed it as a chore or obligation that takes away from other activities, some children really like being outdoors and going to the fields with their parents.

The study has highlighted the challenges that children in rural Manipur face when it comes to accessing healthcare. All the families lack access to basic healthcare services, and if they do have to access, they faced significant barriers, such as long travel distances or limited financial resources. Another challenge is the absence of amenities at the school in the village, which forced the children to go to a different village or town with greater facilities while incurring significant travel costs.

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