



Education and Livelihood among Ghat Children in Varanasi: A field study

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Abstract: Education is considered the fundamental social instrument for development and empowerment. But for the children living in an economically marginalized environment, either schooling is a paradox or it coexists with lots of responsibilities. The present study tries to dive into the educational status, workplace, and aspirations of children who spent a substantial amount of their daily living on the Ghats of Varanasi. This study follows field-based observations and informal interviews with forty children on the ghats of Varanasi. The observations were thematically analyzed in a qualitative manner and supplemented by descriptive statistics. The study inquires about the schooling, informal work, family economic conditions, and their aspirations for their future. Findings indicate that the majority of students are enrolled in school. But the majority of enrolled students are constrained by the economic pressure, resulting in limited study time. Time spent on ghats simultaneously provides space for livelihood, social interaction, informal learning, and recreation for the children. It also provides them space for selling ritual items and interacting with foreign travellers and local visitors. Though they face challenges daily, still they hold aspirations for upward mobility in their future life. The study highlights the importance of designing flexible educational interventions and community-based programs that address the socio-economic realities of working children in urban informal environments.

Index Terms– Ghat Children, Education, Child Labor, Educational aspiration, Marginalized Children

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in development of human civilization and social progress. It has great contribution in improving living standards, economic growth and social equality. In developing countries like India, universal access to elementary education has been considered as a fundamental right as envisaged in Right to Education Act (2009). Apart from that, various national educational missions aimed to ensure free and compulsory education at the primary stage. Though India has shown remarkable progress in educational access, still there are many who face barriers to schooling due to poverty, migration and marginalization. In various cases children are forced to engage in income generating activities in order to support parents. This trend is visible mainly in urban economy where children are seen working in markets, public places more often. Globally, child labour remains a serious challenge. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 160 million children worldwide are engaged in child labour, representing nearly one in ten children globally (UNICEF,2021). Such work often interferes with children's schooling, limiting their educational opportunities and long-term development. India has made notable progress in expanding educational access over the past few decades. However, child labour and irregular school attendance continue to persist in many regions. Studies have shown that poverty, parental illiteracy and lack of stable employment remain important factors contributing to the persistence of child labour in India. (Rao & Burla, 2025).

Urbanization has also contributed to new forms of social inequality. Rapid migration to cities has resulted in the growth of informal settlements and slums where families often lack stable livelihoods and access to quality education. Children living in such environments frequently spend significant amounts of time in public spaces where they may engage in informal economic activities. One such unique environment is the

city of Varanasi. Known as one of the oldest living cities in the world, Varanasi attracts thousands of pilgrims and tourists every day. Ghats of Varanasi serve as important religious, cultural, economic hub where numerous informal activities take place on daily basis. Children selling ritual items, interact with visitors or other informal activities is a very common scene. The lives of these children depict a complex relationship between education and livelihood of Indian urban economy. Though majority of them are school going students, still their educational space is shaped by the economic responsibilities they carry, their social environment and expectation on them. Understanding their educational need and a strong but adjustable inclusive educational policy is much more needed for this type of children. Relatively limited research has been reported on children working in religious tourism environments on the ghats of Varanasi. The present study aims to contribute to this area by examining how schooling, livelihood activities and aspirations intersect in the lives of ghat children.

2. Review of Literature

Child labour has been a developmental challenge for the society since long. A number of literatures exist on relationship among child labour, poverty, education which highlighted the economic necessary that forces children to participate in income-generating activities at an early age. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, global estimates indicate that 160 million children were engaged in child labour in 2020 across the globe, with a substantial proportion involved in hazardous work that threatens their health and development (UNICEF, 2021). This demonstrates the persistence of child labour despite international commitments to eliminate it. In developing countries, child labour is often closely linked with educational exclusion. Santhya (2024) in her study showed that although school enrolment rates have increased significantly in India, but drop-out rates were also increased as many children struggle to complete their education due to economic pressures and limited support systems. (Santhya, 2024) Preference to work is given over education where children come from economically disadvantaged background. Research on urban street children in India revealed the difficulties in accessing consistent education by these children. Rai and Shekhar (2023) found that many street children remain outside the formal education system due to lack of documentation, unstable living conditions and the need to contribute to family income (Shekhar, 2023). Even when enrolled in schools, such children often experience irregular attendance and poor academic performance. Studies have also emphasized the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping children's participation in work. Bharat (2024) notes that in many communities, children's economic participation is socially accepted as a necessary contribution to household survival (Bharat, et al, 2024). This normalization of child labour can make it difficult to eliminate the practice without addressing underlying socio-economic inequalities. Religious tourism centres represent a particularly distinctive environment within urban informal economies. In cities like Varanasi, where religious rituals attract large numbers of pilgrims and tourists, the ghats function as both cultural landmarks and economic hubs. Children present in these spaces may engage in selling ritual items, assisting pilgrims or interacting with visitors. However, relatively little academic research has focused specifically on children working in such religious tourism contexts. Understanding the educational experiences of these children is important for developing targeted interventions that address their unique socio-economic circumstances.

3. Rationale of the Study

Despite Varanasi's unique position in India's cultural and religious landscape, it reflects socio-economic inequalities exists in various colonies. The same has been reflected on Ghats of Varanasi also. Children belonging to economically disadvantaged families often seen spending time on the ghats engaging in small-scale economic activities such as selling ritual items, assisting visitors or interacting with tourists. While some of these children attend school, others do not attend. Though the reason is a matter of investigation, still facing difficulties in maintaining consistent educational participation is a common cause. After implementing RTE Act (2009), it has now become important to examine how far educational policies and programmes reach marginalized children who spend much of their time in outside educational environments. Studying the educational status and aspirations of ghat children can provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by working children and help identify possible strategies for improving their educational opportunities.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

- i. To examine the educational status of children spending time on the ghats of Varanasi.

- ii. To explore the daily routine and economic activities of children spending time on ghats.
- iii. To analyse the aspirations and future goals of ghat children.
- iv. To understand how schooling and livelihood activities coexist in the lives of these ghat children.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design

This study used an exploratory, qualitative field-based design to understand the daily routines, work practices, schooling status and educational aspirations of children working on the ghats of Varanasi. Data were collected through participant observation and unstructured, in-depth interviews conducted at multiple ghats across the city. The purposive sampling targeted children who were observed working or spending extended time at the ghats, so as to capture the lived reality of the population under study.

5.2 Participants and setting

Participants were children and adolescents observed and interviewed on Varanasi's ghats. The sample was purposive and heterogeneous with respect to age, gender and type of activity at the ghat. Interviews were conducted in situ to allow observation of the child's routine and immediate work environment.

5.3 Data collection

Data were recorded as field notes and unstructured interview transcripts (verbatim where possible), and supplemented with observational memos describing time of day, activities, adult supervision and physical conditions. Interview durations averaged approximately 10 minutes, with longer conversations when trust was established.

5.4 Ethics and consent

Because the study involves minors and vulnerable participants, the investigators obtained informed consent from guardians where feasible and children's assent in every case. The research protocol preserved anonymity: all direct quotes included in the paper are anonymized and identifiers removed. Data collection and reporting follow standard ethical safeguards for research with children (no identifying images or names are reported; sensitive material omitted or generalized).

5.5 Tools of Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- Unstructured interviews
- Field observations
- An interview schedule consisting of fifteen guiding questions related to schooling, work activities, earnings, language skills, family support and aspirations.

The questions were designed to capture both educational and socio-economic aspects of the children's lives.

6. Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis as the principal analytic method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic

analysis is appropriate for unstructured interview data and field notes because it allows systematic identification

of recurrent patterns (themes) across narrative.

The analysis followed the six-step procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- I. Familiarization. The investigator read and re-read all field notes and interview transcripts, making margin notes and identifying preliminary ideas and salient features (e.g., reasons for absence from school, nature of daily work, family pressure).
- II. Generating initial codes. Open coding was used to label meaning units in the data (for example: "*works before school*," "*helps boatmen*," "*mother ill/absent*," "*likes to learn*," "*no school fees but food is needed*"). Codes were kept close to participants' wording wherever possible.

III. Searching for themes. Codes were grouped into candidate themes according to semantic similarity and theoretical relevance (for example, codes about alternating school attendance, migration and family income were grouped under *school interruption*).

IV. Reviewing themes. Candidate themes were checked against coded extracts and the entire dataset for coherence and distinctness. Overlapping themes were refined or combined.

V. Defining and naming themes. Final themes were named to capture their essence (e.g., *Survival-first routines*, *Interrupted schooling*, *Education as aspiration*, *Gendered labour and care burden*, *Place-based identity and invisibility*).

VI. Producing the report. Themes were tied back to the study's research questions and discussed with reference to the existing literature and policy frameworks.

Trustworthiness. To enhance credibility, the investigator used prolonged engagement on site and triangulation

between observation notes and interview material. Analytic decisions (e.g., theme boundaries) are documented in

memos. Where applicable, participant wording is preserved in short, anonymized quotes to give voice to the

children's perspective. A reflexive note is included discussing the researcher's positionality and possible influence on data collection (e.g., outsider status, language differences).

7. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the responses collected from forty children present on the ghats of Varanasi reveals important insights into the relationship between schooling, livelihood activities and future aspirations among marginalized urban children. The findings highlight the complex socio-economic conditions under which these children attempt to balance educational participation with economic survival.

The results are presented thematically and supported by descriptive statistics derived from the responses.

7.1 Educational Status of Ghat Children

One of the most significant findings of the study is that a majority of respondents reported being enrolled in school. Out of the forty children interviewed, thirty-three stated that they attend school, while seven reported that they were not currently attending school.

Table 1
Educational Status of Respondents (n = 40)

Educational Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Attending school	33	82.5%
Not attending school	7	17.5%

The findings indicate that a large proportion of ghat children are enrolled in formal schooling system, with few students in government primary schools. However, enrolment alone does not necessarily reflect the quality or consistency of educational participation. Almost all the reported attending school in the morning hours and after schooling spending their time at the ghats till night. This pattern suggests that schooling and livelihood activities often coexist rather than being mutually exclusive. Previous studies have similarly observed that working children frequently combine schooling with economic activities, particularly in urban informal sectors (ILO, 2021). However, such arrangements can place significant strain on children's educational engagement. It was reported by the children that balancing school attendance with work responsibilities reduce the time available for homework, revision and academic preparation, thereby affecting learning outcomes.

7.2. Economic Activities of Children at the Ghats

The ghats of Varanasi function as important socio-economic spaces where children can participate in small-scale economic activities. The interviews revealed that the most common activity performed by children was selling puja items such as flowers, incense sticks and small ritual objects.

Table 2
Primary Activities of Respondents at the Ghats

Activity	Number of Respondents
Selling puja items	26
Talking with tourists / guiding	6
Begging	3
Playing / social interaction	5

The majority of children reported selling ritual items to pilgrims visiting the ghats. This activity is often facilitated by family members who are also be engaged in similar forms of informal trade like selling the same items, tea stall on ghat. Some children reported interacting with tourists or attempting to guide them through the ghat area. Such interactions are obviously for small earnings or tips from visitors. A smaller number of respondents indicated that they occasionally engage in begging, particularly during periods when tourist activity is high. Others reported spending time playing with friends while remaining present in the ghat environment. These children were also engaged in economic activities, but not regularly. These activities demonstrate how the ghats function not only as religious and cultural spaces but also as informal economic environments where children can access livelihood opportunities.

7.3 Daily Earnings and Economic Contribution

Most respondents reported earning small amounts of money through their activities at the ghats. The daily income reported by the children ranged between approximately ₹100 to ₹500 depending on the number of visitors and the nature of activities performed. During major religious festivals or tourist seasons, some children indicated that they could earn even more. These earnings often contribute to the household income and are used to support basic family needs. The economic contribution of children in such contexts is often viewed by families as a necessary survival strategy rather than an undesirable activity. In many economically vulnerable households, every family member is expected to contribute in some way to sustaining the family. Research on child labour in developing countries has consistently highlighted the role of poverty and household economic insecurity in shaping children's participation in work (Basu & Van, 1998).

7.4 Time Available for Study

Although many children reported attending school, several respondents indicated that they have very limited time available for studying at home. A number of children mentioned that they complete homework only when they have spare time. Others stated that they rarely get time to study because their evenings are spent at the ghats or helping their families. Limited study time represents a major barrier to effective educational participation. Children who are unable to devote adequate time to academic activities outside school may struggle to keep pace with their classmates. Previous research has demonstrated that working children often experience "time poverty," which negatively affects their academic performance and increases the likelihood of dropping out of school (Edmonds & Pavcnik, 2005).

7.5 Multilingual Exposure in the Ghat Environment

Another interesting finding emerging from the interviews relates to the linguistic exposure of children working at the ghats. Many respondents reported that they speak Hindi along with English and other regional languages such as Telugu, Tamil or Marathi. This multilingual exposure is primarily the result of daily interactions with pilgrims and tourists from different parts of India. However, when asked whether they could read all the languages they speak, most children responded that they could read only Hindi or had limited literacy in other languages. This distinction highlights the difference between conversational language skills acquired through informal social interaction and formal literacy developed through schooling.

The ghat environment therefore functions as an informal site of language learning where children develop communication skills through everyday interactions with visitors.

7.6 Future Aspirations of Ghat Children

Despite their challenging socio-economic circumstances, the children interviewed expressed a wide range of aspirations for the future.

Table 3
Future Occupational Aspirations of Respondents

Occupation	Number of Respondents
Shop owner	12
Government officer	7
Teacher	4
Boatman	4
Traveller / tourism work	5
Other / undecided	8

The most frequently mentioned aspiration was running a shop. This may reflect the influence of the local economic environment where small businesses and informal trade are common. Several children expressed the desire to become government officers or teachers, indicating aspirations for upward social mobility. Some respondents indicated that they would like to become boatmen, which reflects the traditional occupational structure associated with the ghats. The presence of such aspirations suggests that children maintain hope for improving their socio-economic status despite facing considerable challenges. Research on marginalized youth has similarly shown that aspirations often remain high even when structural barriers limit opportunities (Hart, 2016).

7.7 Emotional Experiences and Perception of Childhood

The interviews also explored children's emotional responses to observing other children enjoying leisure activities. Many respondents stated that they feel unhappy when they see other children playing freely without responsibilities. However, several children reported that such feelings “do not affect them anymore”. This response suggests a gradual psychological adaptation to their circumstances. Over time, children appear to normalize work responsibilities and adjust their expectations regarding leisure and childhood experiences. Such findings highlight the broader transformation of childhood among economically marginalized groups where responsibilities associated with survival often replace traditional notions of play and leisure.

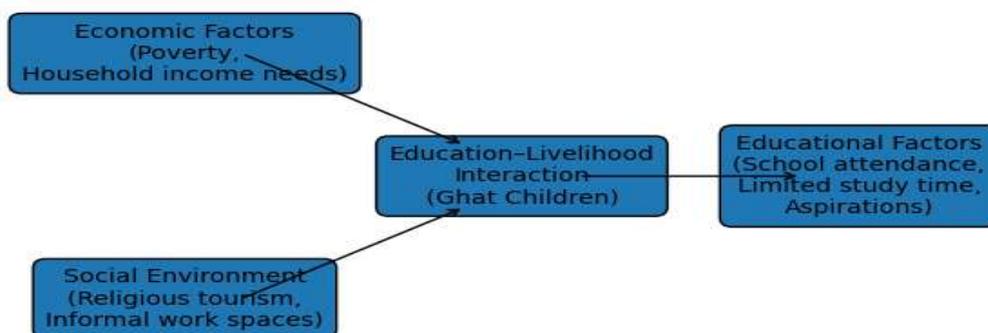


Figure 1
Conceptual Model of Education and Livelihood among Ghat Children

The findings of the study suggest a conceptual model in which three major factors interact to shape the lives of ghat children:

Economic Factors

- Poverty
- Household income requirements

Social Environment

- Religious tourism economy
- Informal labour opportunities

Educational Factors

- School enrolment
- Limited study time
- Aspirations for upward mobility

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction between economic conditions, the socio-cultural environment of the ghats, and educational participation. Economic pressures such as poverty and household income need push children toward informal livelihood activities at the ghats. At the same time, the religious tourism environment creates opportunities for informal work and social interaction. These factors interact with educational variables such as school attendance, limited study time and occupational aspirations, shaping the educational experiences of ghat children.

8. Conclusion

The present study examined the educational status, work participation and aspirations of children spending time on the ghats of Varanasi. The findings reveal that while a majority of respondents reported attending school, their educational experiences are shaped by economic responsibilities and limited study time. The ghats serve as multifunctional spaces where religious rituals, tourism and informal economic activities intersect. Children present in this environment engage in small-scale economic activities such as selling ritual items or interacting with visitors while maintaining varying levels of participation in schooling. Despite the challenges they face, many children expressed aspirations for future careers such as teachers, officers or shop owners. These aspirations demonstrate resilience and hope for upward mobility. The study highlights the need for educational policies and programmes that recognize the socio-economic realities of working children. Providing flexible learning opportunities and community-based educational support can help improve educational outcomes for children living in such environments.

9. Educational and Policy Implications

The findings of the study have several implications for educational planning and social policy. First, flexible schooling arrangements may help working children maintain consistent educational participation. Second, community learning centres near ghat areas could provide academic support and remedial education for children who have limited time to study at home. Third, government and non-governmental organizations should work together to create programmes that reduce the economic pressure on families and encourage continued school attendance. Fourth, educational programmes should recognize the informal skills developed by children through interactions with tourists and incorporate these skills into learning activities such as language development and communication training.

10. Limitations of the Study

The study is based on a purposive sample of forty respondents and therefore cannot be generalized to all working children in urban India. The data were collected through informal interviews, which may be influenced by the respondents' willingness to share information. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the educational experiences of children living and working in the unique socio-economic environment of the ghats of Varanasi.

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