



# **Transcending Adversity: Successful transitions of urban poor youth in secondary education in India**

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## List of Acronyms

BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India, China
DISE	District Information System for Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
MV Foundation	Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation
NER	Net Enrolment Ratio
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NPE 2016	National Policy on Education 2016
NSSO	National Sample Survey Office
NUEPA	National University of Educational Planning and Administration
RMSA	Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

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## **Abstract**

Despite the growing relevance and expansion of secondary education across the world, transitions to secondary education in India are inequitable, divisive and strained. More so, if youth belong to groups that are subject to marginalisation and exclusion including those living in urban poor locales and particular social categories that have been historically disadvantaged in India. This research is an attempt to bring to the fore and privilege the narratives of urban poor youth who despite these adversities are successfully transitioning to secondary education in an urban poor locale in Hyderabad, India.

By contextualising the distinct gendered complexities of youth in secondary education, the study establishes an intrinsic link between socio-cultural norms and education in India. The research findings point to the strong role of families and youth who carry the burden of negotiating socio-cultural norms to ensure youth successfully transition to secondary education. However, the lack of a clear articulation of an action-plan to tackle issues of socio-cultural norms affecting secondary education in the policy and the lack of collaborative networks among relevant stakeholders to address these issues places the responsibility of transitions to secondary education on families thereby making them tenuous in practice.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Education plays a pivotal role in creating social inclusion. Over the last two decades, the focus on education in India has moved from elementary education to secondary education. However, the Indian education system continues to grapple with issues like inequity in education and transitions to secondary education.

This research draws on the narratives of urban poor youth to understand their experiential processes of negotiating socio-cultural norms to make transitions to secondary education happen. There is substantive education research and quantitative studies on factors that impede transitions to secondary education and factors that force young people to drop out of school. Yet, the experiences and voices of youth who are transitioning to the secondary level has not been fore-grounded to throw light on their processes of transitions and the ways in which they are transcending adversities. This research paper attempts to capture this voice and experience as well as analyse the role of adult stakeholders who facilitate such successful transitions to secondary education in India. Lastly, the narratives of youth in this paper point to areas and gaps that need to be urgently addressed both in the strategies and interventions of state and non-state actors and in the policy on secondary education in India.

## **Keywords**

Transitions, successful, secondary education, youth, urban poor, narratives, adversities, India

# 1. Setting the stage: Trajectories of youthhoods

## Sitara: “*My journey, my feelings*”

Sitara<sup>1</sup> is in class IX in a government secondary school in the city of Hyderabad, Telangana (India). Her mother, Janaki who studied till class IV became a manual daily-wage labourer at a construction site after the demise of her husband seven years ago. Janaki has been emotionally and financially supporting her four children: Sitara, her two older sisters and her younger brother to go to school in the hope that they not be like her.

On days Janaki finds work she earns approximately Rupees 250/- per day<sup>2</sup>. Janaki says she would be lucky if she found work between eighteen to twenty days in a month. Livelihood uncertainty follows Janaki every day. Every morning her day begins wondering if she will find work, where she will find work and until what time she will have to work. It is a struggle to make ends meet: to pay bills, buy groceries, fend for basic necessities for herself and her children and provide note-books and stationery for school. Yet, Janaki prioritizes educating her children. Sitara points out that attending a government school makes transitions to secondary education feasible for them. Incentives like a tuition waiver, free uniforms, text books, lunch and sports facilities are provided in school.

“It is very unusual in our community for three females to be around fifteen years or more and to be studying or working. All my female cousins and neighbours at this age are either pulled out of school to do domestic chores or they are married off” (Sitara 2018, personal interview).

Sitara is very confident of her transitions through secondary education and beyond because her two older sisters with the support of their mother have paved the way forward by challenging socio-cultural norms practiced in the community. The eldest sibling (19 years) has successfully transitioned through class XII, is unmarried and is currently working because her mother could no longer afford her higher education. The salary of the eldest sibling has helped the other sister (18 years) to not only successfully transition through class XII but to also pursue her undergraduate studies to completion in Commerce and Computer Science.

This research paper attempts to privilege and highlight narratives like Sitara’s which help contribute a better understanding of the experiential processes of urban poor youth negotiating socio-cultural norms and successfully transitioning to secondary education in India.

## Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development and is crucial for creating social inclusion (Biswal 2011: 1). Currently, India faces the challenge of realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG Goal 4) which aims to achieve equitable and quality primary and secondary education with effective learning outcomes for both boys and girls (United Nations India n.d.). However, the transition point from elementary (classes I-VIII) to secondary (classes IX-X) in India is both inequitable and strained (Annex 1). In 2015-2016, India reported a Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) of 51.26% in secondary education which means that only half the population of youth were enrolled at this level (National University of Educational Planning and Administration 2016: 67). Therefore, much of the literature in India

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<sup>1</sup> All study participants are addressed with pseudonyms in this research paper.

<sup>2</sup> Below Poverty Line: People who earn approximately Rupees 120-130/- (1.90 \$) per day or less (Asian Development Bank 2018).



focusses on the problems or the *accelerated adversities* that impede transitions and force youth to drop out at the secondary level (Chugh 2011: 2, Kingdon 2007: 172-175, Siddhu 2011: 396-400, Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 6-8). Yet, very limited research is available focussing on transitions (Hunt 2008 as quoted in Siddhu 2011: 395). Thus, this research paper attempts to understand transitions as a process and as an experiential journey of youth through their upward movement in school from elementary education to secondary education. In this research paper transitions refer not only to the academic transition onto secondary education but also youth transitions as youth prepare to move from a state of dependence to independence from school to work. Against this backdrop, this paper highlights how certain youth successfully transition to secondary education despite adversities. This paper uses the term ‘successful’ transitions to privilege the lived experience of those youth who are transcending adversities to make transitions to secondary education in India.

Secondary education is crucial as it is a stage of multiple transitions. Transitions from childhood to youthhood and transitions from basic education to secondary education. Transitions to secondary education sets the stage for youth to develop their capabilities and skills (Jacob and Lehner 2011: 3). Secondary education also establishes spaces for learning, introduces youth to new technologies and can also potentially create opportunities for their further education, skilling and jobs (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2011: 16). Youth and their families can also be better prepared to “cope with economic shocks” (ibid: 19) and exercise their rights and capabilities to challenge or alleviate themselves from structurally embedded social inequalities within societies (ibid, Harper et al. 2018: 5). However, despite the relevance, demand and expansion of secondary education; approximately 40% youth from especially marginalised groups do not make it to the secondary level in India as in several parts of the world like South Asian countries, Sub-Saharan Africa and North African countries and the Middle Eastern countries (Jacob and Lehner 2011: 3).

The transition point to secondary education is a pivotal stage that can propel youth forward or heighten their vulnerabilities. More so, if the youth belong to groups that are subject to marginalisation and exclusion including those living in urban poor locales and particular social categories (castes)<sup>3</sup> that have been historically disadvantaged in India. This research paper aims to focus on urban poor youth who reside in notified urban slum dwellings that are under the local jurisdiction and have an access to a government secondary school in India (Kundu 2009).

Urban poor youth and their families are vulnerable populations that negotiate overcrowded living conditions, poor provisioning of social protection systems and limited access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, health, education and livelihoods (Kundu 2009, Munene and Okwany: 2016: 2). In developing contexts, these complexities are being further exacerbated with the rising phenomenon of “urbanization of poverty” (Kundu 2009). These spaces have constant “in and out migration” (Munene and Okwany: 2016: 2) and very uncertain livelihood opportunities. In India, 600 million people are projected to reside in cities and towns by 2030 (ibid). These persistent challenges of difficult living conditions, uncertain livelihoods and inequitable opportunities to education in marginal urban poor spaces often impede transitions of youth to secondary education in India (Chugh 2011: 1).

There is substantive literature and quantitative studies on supply and demand related factors that impede transitions and force dropouts at the secondary level (Siddhu 2011: 395-396). The literature on secondary education predominantly highlights the structural deficits like unavailability of schools, affordability of education (transport, books, opportunity costs of education), poor infrastructure in schools, inequity and quality of education with a rise of

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<sup>3</sup> Caste: The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes are recognised as socially and economically disadvantaged in India (Deshpande 2000: 322).

private schools, poor learning outcomes, fewer teachers, poor classroom transactions and inability to cope with secondary education (Chugh 2011: 20, Siddhu 2011: 400). However, very little research brings to the forefront the perspectives and narratives of urban poor youth who have struggled and managed to be in secondary education and to understand the processes of their transitions to the secondary level (Chugh 2011: 9). Therefore, this research paper aims to focus on narratives of youth to enable a sharper understanding on how urban poor youth and their families are overcoming adversities by negotiating and challenging socio-cultural norms to ensure successful transitions to secondary education in India.

## 1.1 Contextual Background

India has made significant progress in enrolments at the elementary level with a Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) of 88.94% in 2015-2016 (NUEPA 2016: 67). However, at the secondary level in 2015-2016, the NER in India was 51.26% with males at 50.66% and females at 51.93% (ibid). India lags behind on secondary education and adult literacy indicators in comparison to other nations like Brazil, Russia and China (BRIC); East Asia and Latin American countries (Biswal 2011: vii, Kingdon 2007: 169, World Bank 2009 as quoted in Siddhu 2011: 394).

Secondary education is highly inequitable and not everyone in India is able to make a transition to the secondary level. Inequity is deepened by the type of secondary schools' youth go to. The Government of India recognises three types of schools: government, government-aided and private un-aided schools (Singh and Bangay 2014: 143). Among the private un-aided schools, there are the high fee-paying schools and there is also a new trend of what Härmä (2011: 351) terms a rise or “mushrooming” of low-fee paying private schools which are aimed to absorb and enrol children belonging to low-income families. Different low-fee private schools have different fee structures due to a lack of regulations in the National Policy on Education (NPE) 2016 (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 35). Further, the quality of education could also be determined by the type of school. Government schools are often criticized for providing poor quality education (Singh and Bangay 2014: 145).

Against this backdrop, socio-economic status, socio-cultural norms, social category, gender and spatial location intersect to define the chances of transitioning to secondary education and to the type of secondary school for specific groups. Government schools are most likely within the reach of the poor and they are largely becoming spaces for girls and the socio-economically marginalised creating “hierarchies of access” (Ramachandran 2004: 75). A World Bank Report in 2009 stated that 70% of highest expenditure quintile youth are enrolled in secondary schools as opposed to 30% from the lowest expenditure quintile (as quoted in Singh and Mukherjee 2015: 4). Such inequity in secondary schooling further reproduces, reaffirms and segregates an already segregated society by social category, gender, spatial location and socio-economic status of families making secondary education and transitions to secondary education “divisive and exclusionary” (Biswal 2011: vii, PROBE 1999 and Balgopalan and Subramanian 2003 as quoted in Chugh 2011: 27, Ramachandran 2004).

Most of the literature in the realm of education research refers to students as children or adolescents or boys and girls. However, this paper chooses to address students as ‘youth’ for two reasons. First, while youth definitions have several variations globally, in India it includes those between the chronological ages of fifteen and twenty-nine which constitutes 27.5% of the population (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports 2016: 3). Second, the National Youth Policy 2014 places special emphasis on the need for youth of India to realize their potential through education and skill-development among other priorities (ibid: 5). This research paper defines youth as a socially constructed heterogeneous category that is gendered

and shaped by context-specific experiences, roles and responsibilities, socio-cultural norms, social categories (caste) and spatial location (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 4). Honwana and De Boeck (2005: 2) highlight that the “voices, views and visions” of youth are often not heard which is why very little is known about them. Hence, this paper listens and presents the perceptions and experiential processes of urban poor youth in their transitions to secondary education in India.

## **1.2 Secondary education – The weakest link?**

In 2009, the central government established the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), a program intervention that was aimed to cater to and address issues of secondary education in India (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 23). RMSA aims to improve the quality of secondary education, create universal access by 2017 and envisages to “remove gender and socio-economic” disparities (ibid). The irony of the current policy on secondary education is captured in The Report of the University Education Commission in 1950 stating that “secondary education is the real weak spot in our entire educational machinery” (as quoted in Rani 2007: 2). The Indian education system continues to grapple with issues like inequity in education, transitions to secondary education and development of skills of youth (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 2). Despite these persistent challenges, The National Policy on Education (NPE) 2016 does not articulate a clear action-plan to tackle issues of inequity in transitions to secondary education in India.

### **Silences: The National Policy on Education 2016**

The National Policy on Education 2016 states that education can play the role of a “leveller” (ibid: 3) to address issues of social, gender and regional disparities in India (ibid). It also highlights that youth; especially female youth are challenged with social and gendered norms that act as barriers to their transitions to secondary education (ibid: 28). Further, disparities in secondary education are related to social categories of youth, socio-economic conditions or socio-cultural practices like early marriage and child work that are context specific. The issues and experiences that youth have to negotiate to successfully transition to secondary education are diverse. Therefore, it is worrisome that the policy states and recognises the issues relating to secondary education but it does not ‘speak’ or articulate clearly on how it aims to address these issues.

Further, the policy calls for a collaborated effort by public and private actors to work together to improve the status of the school systems in India (ibid: 35). However, the policy remains ‘silent’ on regulations and requirements for private actors working in the education sector (ibid). The national data shows a rise in private provisioning of secondary education in comparison to government provisioning. In 2012-2013, India reported 43.5% of government schools and 35.06% of private schools. In 2015-2016 the data shows a near 6% increase in private school provisioning that rose to 41.16% as against 42.26% of government schools, a decrease from the 2012-2013. (Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan 2016). The lack of a clear guideline for public-private partnerships or private actors in the school systems has added to the complexity of inequity in the provisioning of secondary education in India.

With 65% of the Indian population below the age of 35, the NPE 2016 has a major focus on the skilling of youth in secondary education. (ibid: 168). In order, to cater to the growing young population of India, RMSA in collaboration with the National Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Policy, 2015 has begun to encourage teaching and building of vocational skill-sets of youth in government secondary schools (ibid: 83-84). By 2022, 25%

schools all over India are required to be covered under the vocational skills project (ibid). This move must be filtered through cautious lenses for the following reasons.

- a. Large numbers of government secondary schools do not have the infrastructure or resources to impart vocational skills and training (ibid)
- b. Vocational education is not an aspired route for youth in India. Also, there has been no effort made to bring vocational fields on par with other academic qualifications consequently opportunities for employment are extremely limited (ibid: 35).

The NPE 2016 is comprehensive as it recognises and states key issues of secondary education like disparities by gender, social categories and spatial location. However, the policy is problematic as its recommendations are incomplete and the policy is 'silent' at crucial junctures like elucidating an action plan in recognising the plurality and diversity of experiences and issues of youth. Further, the policy takes a one size fits all approach, leaving no room for a context-specific intervention to tackle ground-level realities.

## **Dynamic complexities of youth in transitions**

Transitions to secondary education are dependent on a confluence of factors. A large body of education research has extensively studied the factors that impede transitions to the secondary level. These factors are usually understood as supply and demand factors or they are further nuanced in a complex web of "push out, pull out and opt out" factors that influence transitions at the secondary level (Siddhu 2011: 395, Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 5). The push out factors encompass systemic and structural problems like distance to school, indirect costs to education like stationery and notebooks, poor-quality teaching, unavailability of teachers, abysmal learning outcomes, curriculum relevance, medium of instruction, poor infrastructure like lack of classrooms or toilets for girls or distance to schools (Chugh 2011: 8-9, Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 5), the pull-out factors include socio-cultural practices like early marriage, paid work, domestic chores or constrained or restricted mobility of female youth in public and the opt out factors are a combination of several push and pull factors which eventually lead youth to the ultimate act of discontinuing their education (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 5).

As more youth in India are progressing from elementary to secondary schools, this has created a demand for access to secondary schools and thus the need for greater number of secondary schools. However, there is a supply bottleneck as India has evidently lower number of secondary schools as compared to elementary schools (Kingdon 2007: 6, Singh and Mukherjee 2015: 3; Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 10). The ratio of primary to upper primary schools is 1.99 whereas the ratio of upper primary to secondary schools is 2.54 in 2015-2016 (NUEPA 2016: 5). Lower numbers of secondary schools can be co-related to factors such as inequitable opportunity for all youth to move to secondary education defined by distances between places of residence to government secondary schools. These factors contribute to "pushing out" youth from schools (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 5). Further, long distances to schools increases vulnerabilities of female youth and youth belonging to socio-economically disadvantaged communities thereby adversely affecting their transition to secondary education (Siddhu 2011: 394).

## ***A labyrinth of transitions in youthhoods***

*Ladka hain hamara aur ladki paraya dhan*, a common Hindi saying that means male youth belong to us (the family) and female youth is like a wealth belonging to someone else highlights the distinct gendered experiences of youth. Female and male youth may go to the same secondary school and yet have very different experiences determined by gender, socio-cultural norms, economic status of families, social categories (caste) and spatial location. As noted in

the phrase, female youth are often treated as another's wealth, *paraya dhan* and are burdened and weighed down by several socio-cultural norms that accelerate their adversities which constrain their chances of transitioning to secondary education (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 19-20). Being a *grown-up* or attaining menarche can socially invisibilise female youth as their physical mobility (like a casual stroll outside, visiting their friends or neighbours) gets extremely restricted or monitored (Aarthi 2018, personal interview). Parents begin to fear for the security of their daughters and longer distances to secondary schools can increase potential risks to their safety, impeding their transitions (ERU Consultants Pvt Ltd as quoted in Singh and Mukherjee 2015: 5-6). Female youth are 2.7 times more likely to drop out if they have to commute for more than five kilometres to reach a secondary school (Singh and Mukherjee 2015: 5).

Socio-cultural norms impose multiple roles on female youth ranging from care-work that involves looking after younger siblings to domestic chores like cleaning, cooking, filling or fetching water (Okwany 2008: 11, Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 19-20). Such roles and responsibilities can adversely affect their transitions in secondary education. Further, for specific youth these responsibilities create swift transitions in girls' lives where they move from girlhood to adulthood at a very young age and are thrust into 'social adulthood' (Okwany 2008: 11). Early marriage, a deep-seated socio-cultural norm in India also threatens transitions of female youth in secondary education. Some parents tend to pull out female youth from secondary education as they see educating a girl as bad investment as she is wealth that belongs to another family. Such families prefer that female youth stay back at home, do domestic chores and eventually get married (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 12). This is consistent with the finding by the Young Lives Project (India) when they reported that 43.5% of its female cohort had dropped out of secondary education due to early marriage, the most cited reason for their dropout (ibid: 18).

While females face disproportionate household burdens and social restrictions, urban poor males also face challenges such as long leaves of absence from school and the need to engage in paid work which push them to discontinue their secondary education (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 13-21). Engaging boys and male youth in paid work usually stems out of the economic needs of families (Singh and Mukherjee 2015: 15). Male youth are not necessarily pulled out of school but they are constantly pushed by the family to take long leaves of absence from school to engage in paid work to contribute to the family income (ibid: 16-17). Families may understand the importance of education and the need for attending school regularly but the opportunity costs of secondary education weigh greater thereby affecting participation of male youth in secondary education. Long leaves of absence could be tricky as this could result in male youth not being able to cope with their education which can lead to the eventual act of dropping out. However, if parents can afford the opportunity costs of sending their children to school and not to work, then they are intrinsically biased towards the education of their sons and not daughters. As a son is considered to be the future breadwinner of the household, someone who takes forward the family's lineage unlike a girl who gets married and has a family of her own to take care of (ibid: 21-23).

There are direct negative implications between engaging boys and male youth in paid work and girls and female youth in domestic chores to their successful completion and transitions in secondary education (ibid: 15). Young Lives (India) data highlights that 77% of male youth who did not engage in paid work completed class X as opposed to 49% of those who engaged in work. Similarly, 81% female youth who did not participate in domestic chores had successfully transitioned in their secondary education as opposed to 35% female youth who engaged in three hours or more in domestic chores did not transition in their secondary education and had dropped out at this level (ibid: 15).

## **An intrinsic relationship between socio-cultural norms and education**

Socio-cultural norms are contextual, highly subjective and are deeply entrenched within societies. Socio-cultural norms, in this paper, is understood and defined as practices that are socially acceptable within communities whether or not they are legitimized by law (Sunstein 1996: 914-915).

The practice of certain socio-cultural norms can hinder transitions in secondary education. In India, norms such as early marriage, domestic chores, constrained mobility (freedom to move around in public spaces) of female youth and paid work can heighten adversities thereby impinging on transitions in school. Yet, for most children and youth, doing paid work or bearing the burden of domestic chores while also attending school is an everyday phenomenon (Singh and Mukherjee 2018: 274). The complexity of socio-cultural norms is that communities begin to practice and normalise them over a period of time. Such normalisation leads to the reproduction of socio-cultural norms through generations affecting the education trajectories of young people in India.

As earlier argued, secondary education in India poses not only structural but also socio-cultural barriers. The structural barriers to education are tangible markers which can usually be acted upon. Hence, many project interventions in India work towards improving these gaps in provisions which can otherwise lead to youth discontinuing their education (Singh and Mukherjee 2017: 13). These interventions are necessary but not sufficient. In fact, it is the more complex pull factors (socio-cultural norms) and opt-out factors which play a bigger role in youth discontinuing education (ibid). Unless, the socio-cultural aspect of a young person's life is also addressed: negotiated or challenged; the well-being of youth in their transitions to secondary education and beyond will be jeopardised.

Over the last two decades, the focus on education in India has moved from elementary education to secondary education (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 2). Successful large-scale, grass-root organisations in the 1990s created an environment that mobilized communities, challenged socio-cultural norms, pushed for universal elementary education and supported existing government school systems. Program interventions led by MV Foundation or the Mahila Samakhya programme of Government of India did not isolate the socio-cultural context from education but recognised the key role that families and communities play especially in a female youth's life in India. They intrinsically linked socio-cultural norms to education. For this, they created support mechanisms at the community level such as youth groups, empowered women's collectives to mount the challenge to socio-cultural practices such as early marriage and child labour which led to sustained innovative educational interventions (Jandhyala 2003: 1-15, Wazir 2002: 5225-5229).

The literature on 'the shifts in socio-cultural norms' and the push for elementary education tells a story of hope. I say 'hope' because these programs on elementary education not only made significant progress in the education sector but also are context-specific. However, in a large diverse country like India, how could a program intervention target or challenge socio-cultural norms to promote elementary education at a large-scale? The lessons that can be drawn to analyse their success and potentially be used for secondary education in India are: first, there are strong symbiotic linkages between local communities, district, state and national-level bodies to dialogue about context-specific issues (like child marriage or child labour) and push for education (Wazir 2002: 5225-5229). Second, the dialogue to send a child to school started with an approach to shift socio-cultural norms by recognising the context and potential breeding grounds for the reproduction of such practices (ibid). A family and a community were approached to ensure a child is sent to school. The child was not seen as an isolated being who is required to go to school. Third, program interventions moved away from the argument that socio-cultural norms are practiced because they stem out of poverty-

related issues and hence poverty must be tackled before anything else. Instead, they promoted education by encouraging dialogue and collective responsibility by including families and communities to send their children to school. This created a ground-swell for education for all while the program interventions simultaneously supported the government school systems and strengthened the interlinkages to other relevant stakeholders (ibid). By intrinsically linking socio-cultural norms to education, program interventions at the elementary level were strategized to be “context-specific” (Jandhyala and Ramachandran 2015: 54). The success of these interventions gives precedence to how issues in secondary education can be tackled.

### 1.3 Research objective, questions and sub-questions

This research study aims to examine the successful transitions to the secondary level of education in India by highlighting the perceptions and narratives of youth in an urban poor locale of Hyderabad in the state of Telangana (India) and understand how they negotiate several socio-cultural factors to ensure transitions to and transitions in secondary school. To achieve this research objective, the study will answer the following research question.

#### ***Research question:***

How do urban poor youth successfully transition to secondary education?

#### **Sub-questions:**

- What are the family and community level factors that define successful transitions in secondary education?
- What is the lived experience of urban poor youth who transition to secondary education?

The sub-questions are designed to speak to youth currently in secondary education and to those who have successfully transitioned through secondary education. Further, this question will also aim to understand the external factors that facilitate transitions at the secondary level.

### 1.4 Narrative inquiry: A qualitative study

The nature of my research which aims to privilege the voice of urban poor youth would be best addressed through an extensive qualitative study. Narrative inquiry in education research is a widely used methodology as narratives have a “holistic quality” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990: 2). Narratives tell us stories of lived experience (Clandinin et al. 2007: 22). Further, a narrative inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of the processes, details and trajectories of transitions in my research. Therefore, I have designed a methodology adopting the ideas of a narrative inquiry using semi-structured interviews and activity-based tools to facilitate conversations with youth (See Annex 2 for profile of research participants). This allowed me to address my research question within the limits of the time available (over a month between 11 July and 14 August 2018). Further, I also incorporated research tools such as focus group discussions (FGD) with youth and parents and key-informant interviews with teachers, the principal of the school and non-state actors.

#### **Research site: Hyderabad, Telangana**

The research was conducted in the city of Hyderabad which is the capital city of Telangana, the most newly formed south Indian state that was created in June 2014. Hyderabad’s urban

poor constitute 28.65% of the total population of the city (Kannabiran et al. 2017: 11). Hyderabad has 23% notified urban poor dwellers making it the second largest population of notified urban poor dwellers in India (Kannabiran et al. 2017: 1, Soares 2017, no page). The urban poor population in Hyderabad rose sharply by 38% in a decade between 2001 and 2011 (Kannabiran et al. 2017: 1). Also, 30% of all urban population of Telangana lives in Hyderabad (ibid).

The selected government school is known for its high enrolments and is one of the larger government schools in Hyderabad (District Information System for Education 2018). The school has close to a thousand students who belong to different social categories and reside in the neighbouring slum dwellings (DISE 2018). Research participants are either from Hyderabad or are migrants from rural Telangana or from neighbouring states in India. In terms of socio-economic status, parents of the children and youth studying in this government school are predominantly daily-wage labourers. Although, the regional language of the state is Telugu, a lot of youth in Hyderabad and this school also speak in Hindi. Further, as the school teaches in Telugu or English; some research participants speak in English as well.

Telangana reports a NER (2015-2016) of 52.39% (males: 51.24% and females: 53.62%) which is marginally better than the national average of 51.26% at the secondary level (NUEPA 2016: 67). However, the transition point from class VIII to class IX (elementary to secondary) is a key drop-out point in the state; 18% children do not transition to secondary education (Kannabiran et al. 2017: 137). Among those who have ever enrolled and dropped out, 63% were enrolled in government schools (ibid: 137-138). The provisioning of secondary education in Telangana is highly inequitable. 52% of students are enrolled in private fee-paying schools whereas 45% are enrolled in government schools (ibid: 107).

The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data in India highlights that the main reasons for dropout in Telangana are being engaged in paid work, not interested in education, doing domestic chores and early marriage of girls and female youth (ibid: 137-139). However, at the city level in Hyderabad, early marriage is the biggest reason for dropout for 21% of female youth followed by 18 % not being interested in education, 15 % being engaged in paid work and 7 % being engaged in domestic chores (ibid: 139). Both the national and state level data (NSSO) cites the aforesaid reason, 'not interested in education' among children and youth who have dropped out in different levels of their education. However, why young people cite 'not interested in education' as a reason for dropping out, is not unpacked in this report used for citation and in fact, requires further research (ibid). This research paper, however, limits itself to understanding transitions to secondary education and does not delve into the subject of unpacking reasons for children or youth not being interested in education. While there is abundant data such as the NSSO and the Telangana Social Development Report (Kannabiran et al. 2017) to understand secondary education indicators at the city, state and national level; there is very little research highlighting voices of young people to understand their transitions to secondary education.

### ***Research Sample***

My research sample was purposively chosen and highlights the voices of seven female and seven male youth in classes IX and X in the selected government secondary school in Hyderabad, Telangana. My first point of contact to the school was a non-governmental organisation or NGO (referred as NGO2) that is working in the school. Through them, I was introduced to the principal of the school. I spoke at length about my research to the principal who then gathered a few students of classes IX and X. My study participants were purposively chosen from among the students who were gathered. To ensure diversity in my sampling, the selection criteria included: youth who were from different social categories, youth whose original home was Hyderabad and youth who had migrated to Hyderabad.



Additionally, I also conducted informal semi-structured interviews with two youth who are the siblings of two study participants (one male, Aarthi's older brother and one female, Sitara's eldest sister). They are both currently working and had dropped out after class X and class XII respectively. They were forced to drop out because their families could not afford their continued education. Their perspectives add another layer of understanding of constrained transitions through secondary education.

## **Research tools and techniques**

### ***Narrative inquiry with semi-structured interviews and activity-based tools***

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) state that "arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories" (as quoted in Clandinin et al. 2007: 22). I used narrative inquiry with a semi-structured interview along with activities which involved a bit of drawing and writing to show a story of school transitions.

I found narrative inquiry with semi-structured interviews to be an extremely personal and useful tool as participants had the space to go back and forth in their stories of school transitions and therefore, were able to share their feelings, experiences, processes and factors which define their transitions. I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with fourteen youth. Two of my research participants chose to write down an essay titled "*my journey, my feelings*" which became the basis of more conversations and repeat interviews later on. I conducted repeat interviews with five secondary school going youth. The papers, writings and drawings made by all participants were used throughout the process of interviews and repeat interviews (Connelly and Clandinin 1990: 5). All narrative inquiries were conducted in school except two repeat interviews which happened in the research participants places of residence.

### ***Focus Group Discussions***

I wanted to start conversations through FGDs so that it allows space and time for the youth participants to feel comfortable with the process of listening and sharing their experiences of transitions in their school journeys (Kitzinger 1995: 299, Ritchie et al. 2013: 56). Also, through FGDs I wanted to be able to contextualise the problems of transitions of urban poor youth which I subsequently teased out through individual narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews to understand how they are *transcending* these challenges to make successful transitions to secondary education happen.

### ***FGD with youth***

I went to the field with the intentions of conducting FGDs with youth in secondary school only (classes IX and X). However, after I went to the school and had the time to reflect and prepare for the field work, I decided to conduct FGDs with elementary level children (classes VI, VII, VIII) as well. I realised that to start a conversation on transitions with youth in secondary school, I had to equip myself with a basic understanding of the perceptions of elementary level children on what transitions means to them. While the voices of elementary school children were not used as part of field findings, they helped me gain a deeper insight on my research topic.

I began my research in the school with three FGDs. Two of the FGDs were with boys and girls of classes VI-VIII and the other FGD was with female youth from class IX. All FGDs were conducted in school in an empty classroom chosen by the participants. The FGDs with classes VI, VII and VIII were quite difficult as all children wanted to participate

and talk to me. I was able to spend almost three hours for two FGDs with classes VI, VII and VIII as they did not have many classes scheduled for the day. However, I conducted an hour long FGD with female youth in class IX in two parts as they had a class to attend in between. I was sensitive to the schedules of students in school and conducted my research in a manner to avoid disrupting their classes. I planned in advance along with my youth participants in particular to meet at a time convenient for them. The female youth participants would plan the interview dates with me so that they could also inform their parents at home. Also, I made myself available in the school from 10 AM to 4:30 or 5 PM to conduct my research.

### ***FGD with parents***

I also conducted two FGDs with parents: one with a group of only mothers and another with a mixed group of fathers and mothers of secondary school youth. I had planned to conduct in-depth interviews with parents but was unable to schedule them as most parents of children and youth of the school are daily-wage labourers. Their work timings and places of work cannot be predetermined. Therefore, to accommodate their schedules, I chose to conduct FGDs in school on the day parents were invited for a meeting by the school. I spent a little over an hour for both FGDs.

### ***Key informant interviews with adult stakeholders***

Key informant interviews provide vital information and a sharper understanding of ground-realities (Kumar 1989: 1). I conducted interviews with adult stakeholders like teachers in school and non-state actors working in secondary education to understand their perspectives on transitions to secondary education in India.

#### ***Teachers***

As I spent a month in the selected government secondary school, I scheduled to conduct interviews with five teachers including the principal at the beginning and end of my research schedule. I interviewed the principal and purposively selected two female and two male teachers in the secondary school who have at least three years of experience in this school. The scheduled interviews were in addition to the several informal conversations I had with teachers in the school on a regular basis during the month. By spacing out these interviews, I was able to incorporate questions based on the perceptions of youth and parents and juxtapose it with the voices of the teachers. The teacher interviews happened in their staff-rooms and lasted between twenty minutes to forty-five minutes.

#### ***Non-state actors***

The selected government school has five non-state actors or non-governmental organisations (NGO) working in the school. Except for one NGO which focusses on life skills and plans to follow a current cohort of elementary school children through secondary education and beyond; none of the other NGOs work with the youth in secondary school. I conducted in-depth interviews with two NGOs that work with the selected government school and three NGOs that work with secondary education in India.

I believe that the opinions of NGOs are pertinent in my understanding and better articulation of my research on successful transitions to the secondary level in India. When asked about the current status of secondary education in Hyderabad (the research site), a non-state actor said, “We are working and trying to create alternate spaces to re-enrol dropouts from elementary education to transition to and complete their secondary education. Honestly, nobody knows what to do and how to work with this age group in the city” (NGO2 2018, personal interview).

## Ethical considerations on research with youth

My research study aimed to elucidate voices of youth below the age of eighteen years who are not mere informants that facilitate the process of mining data. On the contrary, I take the stand point that my research participants are active, “knowing subjects” (Children’s Rights International 2005 as quoted in James 2007: 261) who are not children or adults (Punch 2002: 322). Although, youth are more comparable to adults, they have a distinct set of characteristics, skill-sets and capabilities that are unlike adults (ibid).

During the course of my research, I realised that I need to reflect more clearly on ethics related to research with youth. Ethical clearances for research with children or youth take a “universal” (Ebrahim 2010: 289) stand point and socio-cultural contexts, diversity and grass-root complexities get lost out in this larger picture (ibid: 289-290). To value the diversity and heterogeneity of voices, Ebrahim (2010: 297) advocates for ethics to be situated based on the environment of the research. Obtaining a written informed consent in India, requires a more context-specific conversation and debate. Adult stakeholders in India generally do not like to give a written consent. I make this observation based on my previous work experience in this sector and also this research study in particular. Adult stakeholders prefer to give their consent orally. However, they do insist on a detailed explanation and conversations about the research. They often ask questions, they demand for more information and they like to see and/or read documents with information regarding the work concerned. They need clarity in the research they participate in. Adult stakeholders in school and the NGO (NGO2) that helped me gain access to the school checked and verified documents before I was given their informed consent and assent to conduct research in the selected school. This highlights the importance of situating ethics in specificities of a context which can allow for an open discussion around ethical clearances.

In order to conduct my research in the school, I approached the NGO and the school authorities to seek their consent. Further, I took the assent and consent from youth and their respective parents. I promised anonymity to all research participants: youth and adults. In collaboration with my research participants, we then decided to present their narratives and views with pseudonyms that I have chosen. The research participants and I also decided to not present any photos in public, although we did take photos of our work in progress. I have spent time to transcribe my field notes, go back to my youth participants and have debrief sessions with them during the course of my field research.

Ethics and research are a continuum (Christensen and Prout 2002: 477, Ebrahim 2010: 291) and my positionality as a researcher affects youth and thereby, their narratives in this research. How I listen to these narratives and how I perceive and present these narratives is and could potentially be reflective of my positionality and can directly affect the quality, interpretation, presentation and analysis of narratives of youth. Therefore, it was pertinent that I constantly engaged with ethics during the course of my research with all my research participants. Further, this pushed me to be reflexive, to create safe-spaces for participants and to share information openly with them (ibid).

Power asymmetries, in my research study are reflected in my positionality as an adult who shares a commonality of being a *Hyderabadi* like my research participants. However, I belong to a middle-class family, who has had the opportunity to be a graduate student and a researcher studying in graduate school in The Netherlands. My research participants, on the other hand, are youth in a government school who predominantly belong to marginalised social categories and poor families. I had to recognise and be aware of these differences so that I could reflect on any ethical or power asymmetries between the participants and I. Such differences, did not create an imbalance in our conversations. Instead, it began an interesting set of conversations with a lot of my research participants. Some of them asked me, “*what do*

*I have to study, to get to work like you?”* While one other female participant said, *“if I can transition and eventually do work like you do, that will mean I would have made many successful transitions.”* I believe that such conversations highlighted the space for positive role models in the lives of youth. Youth in secondary education making successful transitions are looking beyond differences and show an intent to make this education count; make this education matter. I do not intend to simplify a complex education system as I recognise, that *transcending adversities* and making *successful transitions* for urban poor youth is much more difficult than for people like me, who did not have to fight and struggle for opportunities.

## **A preview of the research paper**

In chapter 2, I will discuss relevant concepts that I have used as an overarching critical lens to analyse my field findings. Chapter 3 highlights and analyses the narratives of youth who are continuously negotiating socio-cultural norms to transition to secondary education. The voices of youth will then be juxtaposed with those of the adult stakeholders. Finally, in chapter 4, I will present my conclusions on the impacts of socio-cultural norms on transitions to secondary education in India.

## 2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

This research study draws on concepts such as youth and transitions, intersectionality and human rights approach to provide an analytical framework that will help tease out how youth negotiate and challenge socio-cultural norms within families and communities to transition to secondary education.

### 2.1 Youth and transitions

Childhood, youthhood and adulthood are socially constructed chronological stages of transitions of life. Adulthood is viewed as an end stage of transitions while transitions itself are “trajectories” that flow from one to another (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 4, Sinha-Kerkhoff 2011: 68, Wyn and White 1996: 95-102). All young people transition through different life stages and physical changes. This paper understands youth and transitions as mutually reinforcing and interlinked concepts because youth move through different stages of schooling like transitions from elementary to secondary education and there is also a notion of youth transitions where youth in secondary education prepare to transition from dependence to independence and from school to skilled or vocational labour (Wyn and White 1996: 95-96). The concepts youth and transitions intersect with and are defined by gender, lived experience, socio-cultural norms, socio-economic contexts, social categories and spatial location (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 4, Okwany Forthcoming: 4).

Definitions that box ‘children, youth and adults’ by chronological age do not necessarily consider their subjective lived experience. Socio-cultural norms and practices contextualise concepts of who a child, youth or adult is and when and how transitions take place (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 4, Wyn and White 1996: 95-102). As some youth can have prolonged youthhoods with longer years of dependency or constrained youthhoods while other youth are thrust into the adult-world and adult-responsibilities making them “adults-too-soon” (Okwany Forthcoming: 4). However, youth definitions in India are normative: youth are categorised by chronological age. Skill-development and education are recognised as essentials for youth and the youth of India are perceived to “become” (ibid) the future torchbearers of the country (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports 2016: 3-5). This definition is inherently problematic as it homogenizes the youth population in India without considering their plurality and diversity.

Therefore, I analyse youth and transitions as interlinked concepts drawing upon the views of Honwana and De Boeck (2005: 4) who deconstruct youth as beings and not just becomings, that all young people live, feel and transition through a different experience and several intersecting factors like gender, socio-cultural norms, socio-economic conditions, social categories and spatial location influence the current being of youth. Young people’s narratives in this study will be contextually analysed by situating youth at a juncture of transitions: transitions to secondary education and transitions in secondary education which also prepares them to transition from school to work and by situating youth among intersections of gender, socio-economic conditions and social categories which make their experiences of transitioning to secondary education in India, distinct and diverse.

### 2.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a popular “buzzword” (Nash 2008: 3) that is used as a theoretical and analytical framework to examine and understand the lived experiences shaped by race,

gender, class and sexuality (ibid: 2). While, intersectionality provides a framework to express “lived experiences” (ibid); McCall (2005) further nuanced and contributed to the understanding and analysis of intersectionality by three approaches: anticategorical complexity, intracategorical complexity and intercategorical complexity (ibid: 5). Anticategorical complexity challenges categorisations as a whole, intracategorical complexity brings to the fore the experiences of marginalised communities and allows for categories to emerge from their contextual experiences and intercategorical complexity analyses existing categories and inequalities among social groups (McCall 2005 as quoted in Nash 2008: 5-6).

Intracategorical complexity is relevant for this research paper because it enables a focus and analysis of intersecting experiences of specific communities that have been otherwise marginalised (Winker and Degele 2011: 52). Youth are not isolated from a community and the marginalisation of a community also means marginalisation of youth. Youth, in this paper, are central to the axes of intersections of gender, socio-economic conditions and social categories. Gender plays a crucial role in creating diverse experiences of youth transitioning to secondary education. This research study understands gender and gender relations as a social construct (Agarwal 1997: 1-2).

Gender can also be understood by the power relations, symmetries and asymmetries between male and female family members (ibid). These relations allow for certain gendered roles and socio-cultural norms to be practiced within families and communities (ibid). Often, such roles and socio-cultural norms are normalised, accepted and reproduced within communities and are practiced inter-generationally. The prevalence of early marriage is one such example of a gendered socio-cultural norm. As stated earlier, youth in my research study are an integral ‘belonging’ to a family, a community and a school. Therefore, gendered roles and socio-cultural norms affect and influence their transitions in school and their transitions in life making their experiences contextual but plural. Further, the research participants belong to low-income or poor families and also belong to social categories that have been historically oppressed and marginalised in India. The socio-economic conditions of families and social categories apart from gender strongly influence the opportunities of youth transitioning to secondary education and to the type of secondary school (Ramachandran 2004: 75).

The intracategorical complexity further problematizes those groups and communities that have been excluded and privileges the experiences of “doubly marginalised” (Nash 2008: 5) communities. An intracategorical complexity as a methodological tool is particularly helpful for a contextualised qualitative analysis (Winker and Degele 2011: 52). I adopt the ideas of the intracategorical complexity to use it as an analytical framework to situate youth participants in the study who have been doubly or even triply marginalised among the intersections of gender, socio-economic conditions and social categories. By using an intracategorical intersectional lens, I will try to understand how such youth and their family members belonging to ‘doubly marginalised communities’ (or ‘triply marginalised communities’) navigate, negotiate or challenge gendered roles and socio-cultural norms to ensure successful transitions of youth to secondary education in India.

## 2.3 Human Rights Approach = Rights + Capabilities

*Human Rights Approach is inclusive of Rights to, within, through education and Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum 2006 as quoted in McCowan 2011: 287).*

Education plays several roles either intrinsically or instrumentally through three models namely human capital theory, rights and capabilities (Robeyns 2006: 71). I situate the views and limitations of the human capital theory to show the relevance of the shift towards the human rights which is broader and more encompassing in its approach.

Education for human capital theorists is “entirely instrumental” (Robeyns 2006: 73). The World Bank since the early 1980s played a huge role in advocating the human capital theory and measuring education through cost-benefits for people in developing countries (McCowan 2011: 284, Mehrotra 2005: 301). The World Bank (2018) in its recently launched Human Capital Project continues to point out how countries can turn their “losses into profits” through education so that young people can get jobs which increases the economic growth of the nation leading to better productivity and wages (ibid). Robeyns (2006: 72-74) critiques the human capital theory as “limiting and damaging” because it perceives education to be an investment for the future leaving no scope for the socio-cultural aspects to be taken into account. Following this argument, Gillis et al. (1992) furthers the critique by stating that families then will invest where they will have the highest returns (as quoted in Robeyns 2006: 74). In an Indian context, where son preference dominates, the adoption of such an approach can further reproduce and normalise socio-cultural norms like preferring a son to be educated as opposed to a girl. A son, who is seen as the family’s own torchbearer of the future, will be encouraged and sent to school and a girl’s education trajectories will be perceived as inconsequential as her future is to be married off into another family (Robeyns 2006: 74). Another limitation of the human capital theory is that even if equitable education is provided to all children and youth; there is no guarantee that it can enable their transition from school to work (ibid).

The human rights (rights and capabilities) approach is more encompassing where the capabilities of people, the rights of education and their socio-cultural contexts are considered as intrinsically important to education as opposed to the instrumentalist view of the human capital theory. Education began to be perceived as a fundamental human right of the child with the rights-based approach gaining momentum the world over including India since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequently the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989 (McCowan 2011: 284, Robeyns 2006: 75). Although, India follows a rights-based approach to education, it is problematic because the fundamental right to free and compulsory education is mandated only for children in elementary education (classes I-VIII) between the ages six to fourteen years (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 17). The rights framework in India does not take a life-cyclic approach to education as it neglects both Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and secondary education (ibid: 59-87). Therefore, the conceptualisation of the rights-based approach in India needs to be viewed through cautious lenses as it impacts transitions to secondary education as follows. First, the right to education privileges creating access to schools at the cost of working towards improving the quality of education (McCowan 2011: 286). Poor quality education and learning at the elementary level is carried forward for youth who transition to secondary education (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 27-29). Second, a mandate like the right to education does not automatically translate into action. Several factors like gender, social category, spatial location, socio-cultural norms and socio-economic contexts mediate and play a role in people’s “ability to construct, exercise and defend rights” (McCowan 2011: 287). These intersecting factors can often impede transitions to secondary education in India.

Therefore, rights need to be further broken down to understand and encompass all rights to education: Rights to education, Rights in education and Rights through education (McCowan 2011: 289). The Rights to education refer to the creation of equal access, survival, transition and completion of school (Subrahmanian 2005: 404). The Rights within education refer to effective participation of children in schools like quality of learning, learning outcomes, teacher-student interactions, classroom transactions, health and nutrition of children, socio-cultural norms that can enable or disable effective participation of children (ibid). Rights through education allows the space for the development of capabilities of people to

rightfully exercise their rights and to be able to use their skills to gain equitable opportunity in the public sphere (ibid: 404-405).

As rights are a legal mandate; rights will always be a *right to something (education)* and the capabilities approach can contribute in the expansion of capabilities of people so that they can practice their *right to education* in their everyday lives (Robeyns 2006: 82). In this paper, capabilities as propounded by Sen (1992, 1999), are understood as intrinsic to education and intrinsic in the lives of youth to create and improve knowledge, to nurture skills, to expand freedoms which can facilitate their well-being and to alleviate themselves from the grips and tensions of poverty, oppression and social inequalities (Robeyns 2006: 70-78, Harper et al. 2018: 5). This approach also aims to systemically involve all stakeholders – at home, community and state which help tackle social exclusion, develop skills of youth and establish social justice through secondary education as youth are an integral part of the community (Harper et al. 2018: 5). The human rights approach is relevant because capabilities are intrinsic to education and rights are instrumental in achieving that goal of education for young people (Robeyns 2006: 82).

The human rights approach provides a relevant framework to critically view and analyse the narratives of youth to tease out qualitatively the extent to which they are able to exercise and defend their rights to, within and through secondary education. Further, by using the capabilities approach, the perceptions and expectations of youth participants in terms of their abilities, skills, future studies or job opportunities can be critically examined. Such an analysis can also point towards gaps in the views of adult stakeholders and youth either regarding transitions to secondary education or gaps in the provisioning of secondary education in India.

## **Conclusion**

The concepts youth and transitions will be analysed by situating youth at a juncture of transitions like transitions to, in and through secondary education and transitions from school to work. Youth and transitions intersect with and are defined by gender, socio-economic conditions and social categories that also influence the experiences of youth to secondary education in India. An intersectional intracategorical complexity provides an overall framework to privilege and analyse the experiences of youth who belong to doubly or triply marginalised communities. Further, the human rights approach allows for an understanding of the extent to which youth are able to realise their rights to education and can point to issues and gaps in the provisioning of secondary education in India.



### 3. Voicing narratives: Interlinked factors defining transition processes of youth to secondary education

“With every transition in school every year, there must be growth and development in the child. That is when (s)he will blossom as a person, that is when this transition will actually count” (Janaki 2018, personal interview).

This research paper focusses on young peoples’ perspectives highlighting the muddled and complex web of factors that define successful transitions to secondary education<sup>4</sup>. Further, the starting point of understanding successful transitions in these narratives is that there is an availability of a government secondary school with teachers and incentives for youth.

#### 3.1 Mother: Supporting successful transitions

A mother’s role is a key determinant in successful transitions of youth to secondary education as she strives to motivate, encourage and support the education of her children. My findings show that three out of four mothers or parents of sons in class X take on extra work or double shifts so that their sons do not have to engage in paid work while studying in class X and can concentrate on their education. The parents take on the extra shift to compensate for the opportunity costs of their son’s education. The fourth family has also pulled out their son from work as he is in class X but no other family member has taken up extra-work. All four male research participants of class X stated that they had engaged in child labour/paid work<sup>5</sup> until class IX to contribute to the family income.

“Either my husband or I do a double-shift. I do not send my son to work. He is in class X and he has his class X board exams. He needs time to study hard and do well” (Mothers 2018, FGD1).

“I do not work now. I worked till last year and earned Rs. 500-600/- per day. Now, I have time to focus on my studies as my mother or father take on extra work” (Mahesh 2018, personal interview).

An underlying factor for the strong role of a mother are her aspirations and hopes for the well-being of her children. A group of five mothers in an FGD1 stated that they are the primary decision-makers of their child’s education and future. All youth participants have also consistently corroborated that their mothers are the ones who decide, support and champion their transitions to secondary education. Further, most female youth highlighted that their mothers promised to not get them married immediately.

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<sup>4</sup> This research paper focusses on narratives of youth and does not present transition rates. Transition rates from class VIII to IX for batch 2016-2017 =  $(\text{NER IX 2016-2017} / \text{NER VIII 2015-2016}) * 100$ . However, the numbers shared with me in school and the data online for the school do not highlight the inflow of number of enrolments from other schools in class VIII and IX and the number of dropouts separately. Therefore, presenting the transition rates would mean reporting an error in values.

<sup>5</sup> Definition of child labour in India: “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development” between the ages of five to fourteen years (International Labour Organization 2017). [https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS\\_557089/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_557089/lang--en/index.htm)

“I tell my children to work hard so they can get good jobs and we can gain respect in the society. I tell them that I will work twice as hard to support them but they have to study” (A mother 2018, FGD1).

“We want our children to become big officers. They should not be doing coolie<sup>6</sup> work” (Mothers 2018, FGD1).

“My mother tells me to concentrate on my education and not worry about neighbours who keep asking us when I will be married off” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview).

While women mostly play multiple normative and submissive roles in families as caregivers, wife and mother; my findings highlight that many women negotiate a decision-making space for herself and for her children’s education. My findings also reveal that women make decisions on matters like their children’s education but all other household decisions are made by male heads of families. Kabeer (1999: 438) states that decision-making is one of the manifestations of a woman’s agency and points out that agency “is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (ibid). Agency or decision-making can also manifest as in the cases of most mothers in my study by “bargaining” or “negotiation” (ibid: 438) on certain matters like pushing her children’s transitions to secondary education while she and her children are still an integral part of the normative family and social structures.

“All matters related to children and their education are her decisions. All other decisions we make” (A father 2018, FGD2).

“When it comes to the future of our children, she takes charge. Mostly, I just follow what she says regarding their education” (A father 2018, FGD2).

In addition, the agency of a mother in my study to support her child’s education and crucial transitions to the next level was not determined either by her education or relationship status. Regardless of their education or relationship status, mothers support both male and female youth participants and are a driving force in their children’s transitions in education. Ten mothers out of fourteen research participants are not formally educated, three mothers had studied till class IV and one mother completed class XII. Out of these fourteen mothers, eight are married and living with their husbands, four are widowed, one woman had separated from her husband and another is a foster mother. It is evident in my study that a mother is a key decision-maker for her child’s education and supports their successful transitions.

“My mother left my father and we moved to the city (Hyderabad). My father was an alcoholic and could not hold on to a job. He was abusive towards my mother. My regularity to school was getting affected. Although, in our community it is unheard of to leave one’s husband, my mother left him. She did this for herself and for my education” (Shaheen 2018, personal interview).

An intersectional analysis of the roles and perceptions of mothers and youth reveals that it is the mother’s aspirations of a different life from hers for her children that makes her an ‘empowered’ woman who asserts her decisions by negotiating gendered and socio-cultural norms while she and her children still belong to the community that practices them. She pushes for the rights of her children’s opportunities to education aspiring that they study further and gain a steady employment and break out of the shackles of their current life condition.

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<sup>6</sup> Coolie work is locally referred to as manual labour

### 3.2 Being a good girl: Negotiations of gendered youth experiences

Socio-cultural norms are reproduced and sustained intergenerationally. Female youth participants strive hard to constantly appease families and the community by abiding to several “good girl” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview) roles like cleaning, cooking and making themselves invisible in public spaces to be able to continue with their transitions to and transitions in secondary education. All female research participants seemed aware of the expectations placed on their behaviour, being and actions within the community.

My findings show the normative expectations that shape the ‘ideal’ characteristics of who a ‘good girl’ is. By these normative standards, my findings reveal that a good girl is one who engages in domestic chores every day, who is invisible in public spaces as her movement is restricted and constrained to going to school and being at home only and who does not engage in conversations or relationships with male youth. In addition, a good girl never attracts male gaze on the streets (sexual harassment on streets) and if that happens, a good girl manages it by herself and does not report or confide with family or teachers or any adult stakeholder as the repercussions of such an act results in her being pulled out of school or being married off. As most female youth in the study stated their families believe that the onus of sexual harassment on streets lies on the perpetrated and not the perpetrator. Further, a good girl is one who is given a chance by her parents to transition to secondary education. Parents expect that she will abide by the ‘good girl’ norms and if she fails to abide by any one of the characteristics of being a good girl, the threat of early marriage will loom large over them. Singh and Sarkar (2014 as quoted in Singh and Mukherjee 2018: 269) state that “the entrenched gendered role played by expectations of girls and boys can be a primary contributory factor to gender differentials” in the distinct experiences of male and female youth in secondary education. A female youth in class IX, Aarthi, furthers the understanding of gendered differentials by summarizing how she has internalized the role of being a good girl. Aarthi has also stated that most of her female friends abide by the same roles to ensure that they are ‘doing their part’ to continue transitioning to secondary education.

“My life changed in class VI... But growing up in primary school was quite fun. We (referring to most female youth in her class) would play, do our school work, laugh loudly, go to our friends’ place, run and tease each other. There was a lot of joy in primary school but once we hit puberty all this had to end. We were told that we have grown up. Our parents said that school is important. So, we are sent to school, to study and hopefully get jobs. They have promised to not get us married if we keep passing in school. But, we are not allowed to visit other peoples’ homes. We are not allowed to play outside. We are only allowed to go to school and come back home. Even if it gets five-ten minutes late, the neighbour aunties or uncles will complain to our parents when they come back from work and then.... We are finished. That is why, we try to never be late” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview).

My findings highlight a strong co-relation between being good girls and being sent to school. Four out of seven female research participants in my study have specifically stated that there is an impending threat of early marriage if they did not meet the characteristics of being a good girl; although, all research participants highlighted that their mother plays a crucial role in pushing for their transitions to secondary education. In such cases, it does not mean that mothers do not play a strong role in their education transitions; it means they do but with conditions. All seven female participants stated that they fear that if they do not or cannot fulfil at least one of the characteristics of being a good girl, it ‘may’ lead to parents pulling them out of school. Further, they pointed that their fear stems out of the fact that some female youth of their age in their neighbourhood have been pulled out of school and did not

transition to secondary education because they are either doing domestic chores or are married off.

In my study, female youth who have so far successfully transitioned to secondary education have had the support of their parents. “Parents often shielded their daughters from the community censure directed at their rejection of restrictive gender norms and traditional marriage age” (Kelly et al. 2015: 7). This support from parents is very crucial for female youth as the prevalence and practice of early marriage is a worrisome trend in India. “45 percent of young women in India marry before the legal age of 18, and this figure rises to 53 percent in rural areas. By the age of 20, 63 percent of Indian women marry” (Moore 2009 as quoted in Bhabha and Kelly 2013, no page).

Male youth in my study are not curbed, restricted or monitored by family or community. The entitlement of being a son of the household is something that is gifted to male youth by families. Even among low-income families, as is the case of all the male research participants, they are freely allowed to roam around, hang out with friends or have relationships with no questions asked. This socialisation or being exposed to spaces outside of home and school makes most male youth seem more confident about their education transitions to and through secondary education. However, not all male youth in my study enjoy the same entitlement, experience or share the same confidence. One male youth out of the seven stated that he will have to engage in paid work after he transitions from class X to contribute to the family income. The additional income he can bring in is crucial for his family. He, therefore, is planning in the future to try and balance work and study by working before and after school hours. However, such a complexity can probably threaten or impede his transitions beyond secondary education. Yet, all male youth unlike female youth have articulated very clearly where they intend to study after class X, what incentives they can avail to achieve their target and what kind of jobs they would like to have.

“After class X, I have already decided what I am going to study. I will study Math because I want to be an engineer. I might need some scholarships but that I can get. After that, I want a job that can pay me well” (Venkataramana 2018, personal interview).

“We (referring to his fellow male classmates) all have cell-phones and bicycles. We have a huge group of friends. On Sundays we plan to go and eat out. We love fashionable clothes and hair styles. For all this we need money. We work on some Sundays to earn around Rs. 500-600 per day for our personal expenses. This way we don’t have to ask our parents for money. Some of us over the last summer saved enough money to plan a trip through the Telangana Tourism” (Shyam 2018, personal interview).

“For us guys, everything is okay. Even being attracted to girls or falling in love is not a problem. It becomes a big deal if girls parents know... She will be forced to drop out and will be married off. Nobody says anything to us. They (female youth) have more problems in such matters” (Mahesh 2018, personal interview).

In my research findings, it appears that male youths’ negotiations with socio-cultural norms is around the issue of paid work. As stated earlier, four out of seven male youth had engaged in paid work until class IX and one out of these four youth, is probably doubtful of further transitions in education because his family requires him to engage in paid work. Otherwise, it is predominantly female youth that carry the brunt and severity of negotiations of socio-cultural norms and its related implications on their education transitions. These gender asymmetries are clearly evident in the gendered inequity in completion rates of secondary education. 76.8% of male youth and 66.3% of female youth in the Young Lives cohort have completed secondary education highlighting the accelerated *adversities* for female youth at this level (Singh and Mukherjee 2018: 265).

Youth lead intersectional lives. My analysis of the experiences of female youth in secondary education shows that female youth are burdened by societal and socio-cultural norms and expectations that invisibilise them in public spaces. Yet, female youth participants have so far asserted their rights to education by successfully transitioning to secondary education; they struggle with their rights within education as they have to deal with day-to-day negotiations of socio-cultural norms that can in turn threaten their rights to education. The negotiations of gendered socio-cultural norms for most female youth participants is a slow work in progress. Their burdened and invisibilised youthhoods does not, at this stage, allow them to confidently exercise their rights, enhance their skills and capabilities and acknowledge the potential of future job opportunities. Such is not the case with male youth. Their socialisation processes give them an added advantage over female youth to seek for opportunities in their journeys of transitions to secondary education and beyond.

### **3.3 Older siblings facilitating transitions**

Older siblings create pathways for younger siblings of the household to make successful transitions in secondary education. In my study, there are seven research participants out of fourteen who have older siblings. Of these seven, four families have all siblings who are making successful transitions to secondary education and transitions beyond secondary education. Among the remaining three families, two families have one oldest sibling each who had to discontinue their education after class X (male) and class XII (female) because the family could not afford their further transitions and education. Both older siblings of these families are equally working hard, have jobs and are ensuring they support the transitions of their younger siblings financially and emotionally. However, one of the dropouts, a female youth, was married after her class XII examinations.

My study shows that among families that have older siblings who have made successful transitions to secondary education; younger siblings within these families have more room for dialogue and further opportunities as the new norm within this family is to make successful transitions in education for both male and female youth. Even in the cases where older siblings have dropped out, they are acting as facilitators for transitions of their younger siblings to secondary education. As Emerson and Portela Souza (2002) stated in reference to dropouts and birth order that “there is evidence that in developing countries the cost of high fertility is borne by older siblings, rather than by parents” (as quoted in Chugh 2011: 20).

Sitara’s eldest sister, Tara, is the first female youth in her family to transition to and through secondary education and higher secondary education. She was a student who always managed to perform well in class and she had the support of a teacher who knew Tara since class VI. I interacted with the teacher, Sitara and Tara’s entire family. Although, Tara was a student with good grades, she had to dropout as the fee for her engineering undergraduate programme was very expensive. She took up a job and that is helping her younger siblings to continue their education. Further, Tara told her mother that she would like to continue working for the next three years to ensure her younger sister completes her undergraduate studies. It is after these three years that Tara may consider getting married when she would be twenty-two years old, quite in contrast to the female youth in her community who are married by fifteen years.

Tara is a strong independent youth, who works and supports her family and has on many accounts, challenged prevalent socio-cultural norms. Sitara, the third in birth order, is an equally strong female youth who displays a strong streak of confidence and an agency to make her own choices that can challenge socio-cultural norms (Kabeer 1999: 438). For instance, Sitara was keen to learn football in school and was the first female football player who enrolled for practice in her school.

“Why can’t I play football? I refused to back down, even if I had attained puberty and was expected to lead a restricted life. I wanted to play football at a time when there was no female football team. I took the help of the NGOs working in school and asked them to enrol me for practice. I told my elder sisters who helped me talk to my mother. I am now part of a team that wins accolades for the school in inter-school competitions in the city and state” (Sitara 2018, personal interview).

Most older siblings in my study are not only invested and interested in the education transitions of their younger siblings but are also becoming positive role models for their younger siblings. My findings show that most older siblings provide extra academic support and guidance for their younger siblings. Three out of four families have older siblings pursuing their higher education and also regularly checking on the education progress of their younger siblings. Two older siblings who have taken up jobs do not have the time to engage with their younger siblings on an everyday basis. Yet, their younger siblings (Sitara and Aarthi) state that they feel lucky to have older siblings who guide and facilitate their transitions to secondary education.

“Anna (older brother) has very long working hours. He cannot spend much time with me. But he keeps telling me that he is working this hard so that I can keep studying. I want to study for myself and I want to study for him” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview).

“My brother usually says the same thing about my education over and over again...He says that if I study well, I do not have to do menial jobs like him. He tells me that if I study well, I can get good jobs and that will change my life” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview).

“My older sister is always there if I have any doubts in my studies. She is very strict and insists I study for a few hours in the evening every day” (Niharika 2018, personal interview).

“My older sister lives in the university hostel but whenever she calls me, she asks me how I am studying and doing in school. I hope I can be like her and go to big colleges and universities” (Kavya 2018, personal interview).

The birth order of youth in my study is an important category that influences transitions in secondary education. For instance, Sitara and Aarthi (who has an older brother who dropped out after class X) benefit from being the third and second in birth order respectively. Further, both of them state that they are confident of their transitions beyond secondary education as well. Winker and Degele (2011: 52) state that in an intersectional intracategorical complexity, categories emerge or can be “reconstructed” while analysing doubly marginalised communities. Such a category emerges from the role of older siblings (like Tara) in transitions of youth to secondary education. The findings show that the experiences of youth are not only characterised by their gender, social categories, prevalent socio-cultural norms and socio-economic conditions of families but also their birth order. However, for some youth who are the oldest sibling, navigating socio-cultural norms has begun with them transitioning to secondary education as first generation secondary educated people in their families.

My findings draw attention to the critical role of older siblings. Most older siblings in my study show tremendous interest to ensure their younger siblings are motivated to do well in secondary school. Further, through my findings, I can deduce that older siblings who have made successful transitions through secondary education have been able to exercise their own rights to education and they also play a supportive role in defending the rights to education of their younger siblings. Some older siblings in my study who are either helping their younger siblings emotionally or financially also recognise the importance of rights through education which means that transitions to secondary education is seen as a critical stepping stone to further opportunities in higher education, skilling and jobs.

### **3.4 Role of parents, teachers and non-state actors in defining transitions of youth in secondary education**

The perceptions of adult stakeholders (teachers, parents and non-state actors) in my study shows that they all have a role to play in influencing transitions of youth to secondary education. For instance, my findings show that teachers have a role to play in teaching well and ensuring all children perform well in class, parents have a role to support male and female youth equally to send them to school and facilitate their transitions to secondary education and non-state actors, ideally, should plug gaps in the existing school system.

The views of parents on the quality of secondary education directly pointed to a limitation in my study. My research paper focussed on the processes of transitions only but transitions can be influenced by the quality of education and learning outcomes and the quality of education and learning outcomes can in turn influence the quality of transitions to secondary education and transitions in life beyond secondary education. Both of which, I cannot delve into in this research study.

#### **Re-focus on education transitions in government schools**

The functioning of a government school is largely dependent on the resources it receives from the government. My study highlights that the government school I selected is able to sustain large numbers of students and achieve competitive results in class X despite structural deficits like lack of teachers<sup>7</sup> and fewer classrooms. A teacher, Sudhir, pointed out that the school shows the potential to perform well because all teachers appointed in government schools are trained and qualified unlike a lot of teachers in low-fee private schools.

“The government school system is like a tree. The roots are schools and fruits are students. The roots have to be well-provided, watered and nourished by the government for this tree to bear healthy fruits” (Sudhir 2018, personal interview).

“Why should parents send their children to private schools (referring to low-fee private schools) and pay an annual fee of Rupees 45,000-50,000 for class X? Our school is one of the biggest government school’s in Hyderabad. We get results as good as private schools, students got 9.7 GPA in their class X state board examinations last year. Since 2013, the school has introduced English medium of instruction for classes I-X. All this has increased our enrolments tremendously. Many students from nearby private schools are enrolling in class VIII and IX in our school. However, we have our problems too. We recently had 50% teacher vacancies. Also, we have few classrooms for far too many students” (Sudhir 2018, personal interview).

Contrary to the notion that government school teachers need to be constantly monitored, my findings (through the narratives of youth and interviews with teachers) show that teachers are attending classes regularly, teaching well, performing administrative tasks such as distributing free uniforms, checking the budgets for mid-day meal or free lunch, providing transfer certificates to youth who have completed class X and taking more than the stipulated number of classes to compensate for teacher unavailability. The role of teachers is positively influencing transitions in secondary education and improving class X results every year. The good results in class X and the introduction of English medium schooling has created a demand for this government school. All teachers in my study have consistently pointed out that the

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<sup>7</sup> The school had teacher vacancies for over a month in the academic year 2018-2019. Teachers are usually transferred by the state government periodically. On 1 July 2018, 50% teachers of this school were transferred. However, by the first week of August 2018, all teacher vacancies were filled.

school is gaining prominence as a “well-performing school” (Lakshmi 2018, personal interview). Further, teachers stated that it is because of the growing reputation of the school that there are many “lateral enrolments” (Sunita 2018, personal interview) in classes VIII and IX from other private schools to the government school. The functioning of teachers in this school contradicts the general discourse on government school teachers in India where teachers are said to be lacking in motivation to attend school regularly affecting the learning levels of students in school (Ramachandran et al. 2005: 1).

The role of non-state actors or NGOs in this school points to a gap and lack of collaboration among stakeholders like the school, community (parents) and NGOs. This lacuna makes the processes of transitions more complex. While there are five NGOs working in this school; only one NGO (namely NGO2), works in the area of life-skills for elementary school girls and none of them works directly with youth in secondary education. NGO2 plans to work with the same cohort of girls through different levels of their education. Usually, in development contexts, NGOs fill gaps by supporting the existing education systems and functionings (Wazir 2000: 256). However, the perceptions of NGO2 reiterate the need for collaboration among stakeholders, the inclusion of socio-cultural aspects and communities while evolving strategies and interventions to ensure equitable transitions in schools.

“We teach life-skills in this school. We focus on children in school. If we come across cases of early marriage among our students, we try to intervene. But stopping early marriages is not our project intervention; providing life skills is” (NGO2 2018, personal interview).

Parents’ perceptions in FGD1 and FGD2 points to the larger debate on equity and quality of secondary education in India. Parents, especially mothers in my study are quite clear in their stand to support their children in secondary education and perhaps even beyond. They acknowledge that this government school is doing well. However, they expressed concerns of quality of education in government schools in general. As argued earlier, while the policy on secondary education and skill development provides for the introduction of vocational skills at the secondary level in government schools, parents pointed out that nothing has been done in this school.

“We cannot afford private schools so we send them (*children*) here. Let us see how far they can get with this type of education. The school is doing well. It has improved and gets good results. We will support their education but other children who can go to big private schools have an advantage even in the job market; those children have the skills to handle jobs...” (Mothers 2018, FGD1).

“Some parents send their children to private schools but most of them start re-enrolling them to government schools by class VIII or IX because the fee in private schools is too high. We cannot afford private schooling” (Mothers 2018, FGD1).

“Maybe not all children can pass class X in this school. Even if they do, not all children can get good jobs. If they all learn some skills now, they can at least do something with their lives... some vocational job maybe” (Parents 2018, FGD2).

Parents’ perceptions display concern and some scepticism on whether this government school is able to provide the quality of education as other well-performing private schools in the city. McCowan (2011: 286) argues that the credibility of even the basic ‘right to education’ needs to be questioned “if disadvantaged communities are given access to formal education, but confined to low-prestige institutions that cannot confer opportunities for further study and valuable employment, then the right to education has been inadequately fulfilled” (ibid) as it can impede transitions of youth in secondary education and can limit transitions of youth in their lives beyond secondary education.



The debate on equity and quality of secondary education in India has clearly two opposing views. Tooley and Dixon (2006: 443-462, 2007: 206-215) support the rise of private schools in India and state that the rise in private schools plugs the demand for greater availability of secondary schools, creates an affordable choice for poor families and that private schools are a response to poor quality government school provisioning. A counterpose to this was the observations of mothers I interacted with, “those schools (referring to low-fee private schools) are very small; there are no playgrounds, no space for children to move... Government schools have all facilities. If they improve quality of education, have better maintenance and make the building and area look ‘posher’; all parents will just send their children here” (Mothers 2018, FGD1).

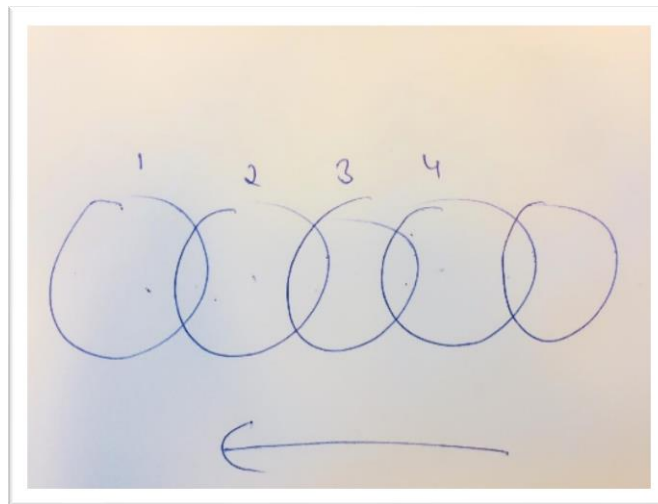
However, another school of thought argues that a rise in private schools will make secondary education more “exclusionary” (Biswal 2011: vii). It will immediately increase disparities within families and the society (Singh and Bangay 2014: 142-145). Further, they argue that the quality of private school education is only marginally better than government schools (ibid). Although, the public perception is that private schools are better in quality (ibid).

I contend the claims of Tooley and Dixon (2006: 443-462, 2007: 206-215) who advocate for the rise of private schools. My research findings show that in some cases sending youth to government secondary and higher secondary schools (even with fee waivers and incentives) is not affordable as the opportunity costs of sending that young person to school is too high. Further, even low-fee private schools are not affordable by poor or low-income families (like my research participants). Moreover, the support for the rise of low fee-paying private schools undermines and limits spaces to showcase well performing government schools (example: the selected school for research).

This section highlights that all adult stakeholders have crucial roles to play to guarantee that youth exercise their rights to education and ensure that their transitions to secondary education propels them for further transitions in life like higher education, building the capability to exercise and defend their rights, the ability to negotiate socio-cultural norms and seek equitable opportunities in jobs. However, the efforts of adult stakeholders, especially NGOs in the study also points to the urgent need for more collaborative action in education transitions. Such collaborations will ensure that the burden of responsibility for equitable and smooth transitions is shared. Wazir (2000) elaborates that strategies for better education by state and non-state actors cannot isolate the family and must also involve the larger community. Further, she states that these interventions must not only incorporate the tangible fixes at the school level but also leverage against any biases or inequalities that intrinsically impinge transitions and quality of education.

### **3.5 Concluding thoughts: “Linkages and de-linkages” influence transitions**

“If I were to explain the process of successful transitions, I would say that each of the factors that influence our transitions are not working independently. They are linked one to another. So, as students who want to transition, we have to be very strong and responsible to do everything right on our part. Because, as long as the links are in place and supporting us, we can make transitions happen. However, even if one link, de-links, that’s it... That will be the end of our transitions in secondary education or in the future” (Aarthi 2018, personal interview).



(Linkages and de-linkages: Aarthi 2018, personal interview)

Negotiations of socio-cultural norms can positively influence transitions from one level of education to another. My study shows that the experiences of which can be different for male and female youth due to distinct challenges. In fact, like Aarthi explained several factors need to link one to another to form a tight interlinking web to ensure a continuous process of successful transitions takes place. The interlinking factors as established in this study could be the role of supportive families and siblings who negotiate socio-cultural norms like early marriage and paid work, a well-performing government school where teachers regularly attend school and teach, a government school that provides incentives and ideally, a non-state actor to support both the school and involve communities to ensure smooth transitions.

The narratives of youth in this study when juxtaposed with those of the adult stakeholders display a 'character' and a 'will' to make their transitions to secondary education matter to them despite their adversities. Most female youth participants in my study are socialised to be 'good girls' and pass their exams to avert the threats of early marriage while male youth work hard to ensure they do not fall short of the expectations of becoming the future breadwinner of the family who will in turn help the family out of the cycle of poverty. The findings point out that youth view their transitions to secondary education as a stepping stone or a "forward link" (Ramachandran 2003: 960) for building further skills and knowledge which can prepare them for their transitions to further education and equitable job opportunities.

The study reveals that families play a key role in successful transitions to secondary education. There are several interlinking factors at home, school and at the community level that are structured by socio-cultural norms which youth and their families have to negotiate. The perceptions of few parents raise questions and concerns on inequity in transitions and the systemic and structural deficits in the provision of quality education for all young people. These concerns point towards a) the burden of negotiating socio-cultural norms to ensure successful transitions and b) limited resources available at home (financially and academically) and in school to push for transitions of all children to, through and beyond secondary education. Lastly, the study highlights the need for collaboration and linkages among all stakeholders to ensure equitable transitions in secondary education.

## **4. Socio-cultural norms a crucial link to successful transitions**

This study aimed to bring to the fore the narratives of how certain urban poor youth in Hyderabad (India) negotiate socio-cultural norms to make successful transitions in secondary education despite adversities. The inter-linkages between socio-cultural norms and successful transitions in secondary education were established by reviewing the National Policy on Education 2016 and literature on the complexities of gendered youth experiences in education transitions in India. Further, the research findings showed that the family, especially the mother plays a key role and shoulders the burden of negotiating socio-cultural norms to facilitate transitions of youth to secondary education. The study also revealed a lack of collaborations among different stakeholders to improve transitions in secondary education. The youth narratives pointed to the need for viewing transitions to the secondary level beyond education per se. The concluding chapter presents the intersectional lives of youth in this study and highlights the implications of negotiations of socio-cultural norms in education transitions of urban poor youth in policy and practice.

### **4.1 The role of families in transitions to secondary education**

The family, especially the mother plays an important role in negotiating socio-cultural norms and supporting transitions of youth in secondary education in India. My study showed that most mothers, irrespective of their education or relationship status are the primary decision-makers who facilitate transitions of their children's education. While socio-cultural norms affect and define distinct experiences for both male and female youth; my study showed that female youth carry the brunt and burden of negotiating socio-cultural norms such as the impending threats of early marriage. My study showed that parents took on extra-shifts to compensate for the opportunity costs of sending their son (class X) to school and not paid work. While parents also support female youth in their education transitions, female youth are expected to perform burdensome domestic chores, conform to the roles of being 'good girls' and have highly monitored and restricted physical mobility. Further, female youth narratives highlighted that they are expected to be 'good girls' and balance school and domestic work to have the continuous support of families in their education transitions. These expectations make transitions of female youth specifically complex because even families support comes with such conditions.

The burden of negotiating socio-cultural norms and ensuring youth transition to secondary education is largely on families. Although, all families of research participants have so far facilitated their transitions in education, there are cases of older siblings among these families who had to drop out (Tara and Aarthi's older brother) as the families could no longer afford their education. Regardless of their own successful transitions in education, most older siblings in the study supported the transitions of their younger siblings. Further, most youth participants and families have recognised that transitions to secondary education can prepare youth for further transitions in higher education, skills and jobs. The findings showed that youth in secondary education have so far been able to exercise their rights to education. By negotiating socio-cultural norms and by making successful transitions, youth are also able to protect their rights within education. However, as parents pointed out, youth require quality and equitable secondary education provisioning to fully realise the potential of transitioning to secondary education and to build capabilities and skills that can propel them to transitions beyond secondary education. Ramachandran (2003: 960) used the phrase "backward and

forward linkages” for a similar conceptualisation for children in elementary schools. Ramachandran stated “... 'backward and forward linkages' are today seen as being essential to create an environment where every child not only goes to school but also benefits from schooling” (ibid). Further research needs to be conducted to understand how the quality of education and learning outcomes interplays and affects youth in their transitions to, in and through secondary education and how the quality of these transitions impacts their transitions in life beyond secondary education.

## **4.2 Need for collaborations among stakeholders to improve secondary education transitions**

The perceptions of adult stakeholders (teachers, parents and non-state actors) in my study showed that all stakeholders are working in silos to ensure equitable transitions to secondary education. Teachers in the study pointed out that the functioning of a government school is dependent on the resources provided by the government. Further, the selected school is said to be consistently improving in performance, results and enrolments. The non-state actors in the school are not directly working with secondary education. Parents’ perceptions showed that they recognise the importance of secondary education to propel youth for transitions beyond secondary education (further education or jobs). The perceptions of all stakeholders clearly point out the lack of collaboration among relevant stakeholders to ensure equitable transitions to secondary education.

Symbiotic collaborations among stakeholders that include communities need to be established to bridge the complexities of socio-cultural norms and its impacts on education transitions. Such collaborations will ensure that the responsibilities for equitable and smooth transitions in education are shared and families are de-burdened. As Kelly et al. caution that “reliance on exceptional families is not a good or universally scalable strategy for social change because it leaves out those who most need support, including those with weak or dysfunctional families” (Kelly et al. 2015: 7).

The intrinsic link between socio-cultural norms and education as established in the study show the need for collaborative and “context-specific interventions” (Jandhyala and Ramachandran 2015: 54) and strategies to be evolved. At the elementary level, grass root organisations like MV Foundation and the Mahila Samakhya programme supported existing government schools, recognised and challenged specific socio-cultural norms like early marriage and child labour and included communities to engage in dialogue (Jandhyala 2003: 1-15, Wazir 2002: 5225-5229). Such non-state actors acted as a cohesive bridge among different stakeholders: school authorities and local, state and national government bodies to successfully ensure improvement in enrolments in elementary education at a large-scale. In development contexts, where governments have limited resources; the role of non-state actors gets amplified in such interventions as creating collaborations among all stakeholders takes strategic, effective and consistent planning and execution. The knowledge produced by such interventions can be modified and used to address the challenges of secondary education in India in scale. However, the silences in policy to elucidate clear action-plans or draw on the experience and knowledge resources of non-state actors to improve transitions in secondary education makes transitions to secondary education tenuous in practice (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 2-3).

## **Policy implications on gendered differentials in secondary education**

My study showed that the gendered differentials of youth are exacerbated due to prevalent socio-cultural norms especially in their transitions from elementary education to secondary

education. The NPE 2016 recognises disparities in secondary education but does not state a clear action-plan to address them (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016: 2-3). The lack of an action-plan in NPE 2016 could possibly indicate that the policy assumes that the extensive efforts of programme interventions like MV Foundation and Mahila Samakhya in elementary education which included and enabled communities to address gender and socio-cultural norms and barriers affecting young people's education would have also resolved these issues for all youth at the secondary level (Jandhyala and Ramachandran 2015: 52). Such an over-arching approach of NPE 2016 fails to de-burden families and youth in particular who are currently facing the brunt of negotiating socio-cultural norms and ensuring transitions of youth to secondary education in India.

## **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to highlight the experiences of urban poor youth in their negotiations of socio-cultural norms to ensure successful transitions to secondary education in India. The study shows that urban poor families are being stretched to their limits to support the education transitions of their children making these transitions successful yet fragile. The narratives of youth point out the gendered complexities of transitioning to secondary education where the socialisation processes have made male youth seem more confident of their transitions to and transitions through secondary education and female youth seem burdened by normative gendered and socio-cultural norms that limits their confidence in acknowledging future opportunities that could potentially stem out of their transitions to secondary education. The study indicates that the policy needs to adopt a context-specific approach and an action plan to address restrictive socio-cultural norms to ensure that successful transitions to secondary education are smooth and equitable for youth in India.

# Appendices

## Annex I School Organogram in India

School levels	Class (Grade)	Age
<b>Elementary</b>	<b>I-VIII</b>	<b>6-14</b>
Primary	I-V	6-10
Upper Primary	VI-VIII	10-14
<b>Secondary</b>	<b>IX-X</b>	<b>14-16</b>
<b>Higher Secondary</b>	<b>XI-XII</b>	<b>16-18</b>

## Annex II Profile of research participants

### Female youth participants

Name	Age	Class	Date of interview
Shaheen	17	IX	19-07-2018
Aarthi	15	IX	20-07-2018
Sharanya	15	IX	20-07-2018
Niharika	15	IX	21-07-2018
Sitara	14	IX	24-07-2018
Apoorva	14	IX	24-07-2018
Kavya	16	X	25-07-2018

### Male youth participants

Name	Age	Class	Date of interview
Ramesh	16	IX	21-07-2018
Sooraj	16	IX	21-07-2018
Praveen	14	IX	31-07-2018
Mahesh	16	X	26-07-2018
Vikas	16	X	26-07-2018
Shyam	16	X	27-07-2018
Vankataramana	16	X	27-07-2018

### Older siblings and Sitara's mother

Name	Current Age	Dropped out	Date of interview
Tara	19	after XII	03-08-2018
Aarthi's older brother	20	after X	03-08-2018
Janaki (Sitara's mother)	NA	after IV	03-08-2018

### Teachers

Name	Subject	Class	Date of interview
Sudhir	Physics	IX-X	06-08-2018
Suryakanth	Maths	IX-X	06-08-2018
Navya	Biology	IX-X	19-07-2018

Sunita	Biology	IX-X	08-08-2018
Lakshmi	Principal	VI-X	08-08-2018

## Non-state actors

Name	Focus of work	Intervention area	Date of interview
NGO1	Eradication of child labour, ensure education till class X	Telangana and Andhra Pradesh	11-07-2018
NGO2	Life skills for the girl child	9 states in India	04-08-2018
NGO3	Urban poor, secondary education	Telangana	19-08-2018
NGO4	Provide full-time teachers in low-income schools	7 states in India	10-08-2018
NGO5	Life-skills community centres, ensure education till class X	12 states in India	14-08-2018

## FGD with parents in school

Group	Numbers in each	Date of interview
FGD1: Mothers only	05	07-08-2018
FGD2: Mothers and fathers	09	07-08-2018

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