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Attachment Styles in Children of Migrant Workers Psychology

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ABSTRACT— Parental migration—a socioeconomic phenomenon affecting millions of families worldwide—has profound implications for the emotional and social development of children left behind. This study examines the attachment styles of children aged 6 to 12 whose one or both parents work as migrant laborers in India. Drawing on Bowlby's attachment theory, we conducted a cross-sectional survey of 300 children recruited from schools and community centers in both rural and urban districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Using the Child Attachment Style Interview (CASI) alongside a demographic questionnaire, we assessed the prevalence of secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment patterns and analyzed their relationships with parental absence duration, frequency and modality of communication, and child's age, gender, and primary caregiver. Results indicate that 38% of children exhibit secure attachment, while the remaining 62% display various insecure styles: avoidant (24%), ambivalent (19%), and disorganized (19%).

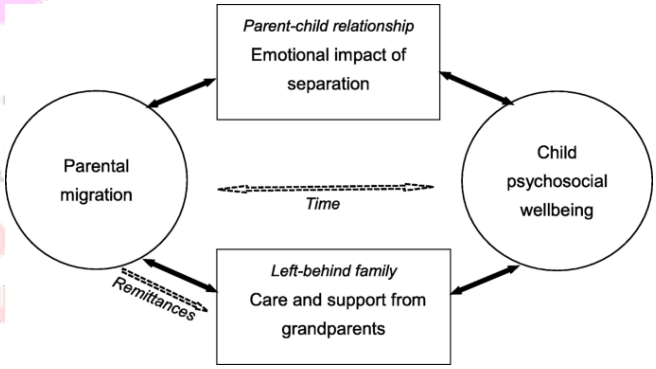


Fig.1 Attachment Styles, Source([1])

Longer durations of parental absence correlated significantly with higher rates of insecure attachments ($\chi^2(3, N=283)=18.76$, $p < .001$), whereas frequent parental contact—particularly via video calls—mitigated but did not eliminate the risk. Older children (10–12 years) demonstrated greater resilience, manifesting more secure patterns than younger peers (6–9 years). No significant

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gender differences emerged. Multivariate logistic regression confirmed that each additional six months of separation increased the odds of insecure attachment by 1.54 times (95% CI [1.22, 1.94], p < .001), while each additional monthly contact reduced it by 22% (OR=0.78, 95% CI [0.65, 0.93], p = .007). These findings underscore the complexity of left-behind children's emotional worlds and point to actionable interventions: subsidized communication infrastructure, caregiver training programs, school-based counseling, and community support networks to promote secure attachment and foster long-term well-being.

KEYWORDS

attachment styles; migrant workers; child development; emotional well-being; survey study

INTRODUCTION

Global labor migration, driven by economic disparity and employment opportunities, often entails prolonged separation of parents from their families. In India alone, over 30 million individuals migrate annually for work, leaving nearly 15% of children in rural "left-behind" care arrangements (Government of India, 2023). This unconventional caregiving arrangement disrupts daily routines, diminishes face-to-face emotional support, and may undermine the formation of secure emotional bonds—foundational to a child's sense of safety, exploration, and self-worth. Attachment theory posits that early interactions with primary caregivers establish "internal working models" guiding children's expectations of safety and support throughout life. Secure attachments arise when caregivers are consistently responsive, fostering trust, curiosity, and resilience; insecure patterns—avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized—emerge when responsiveness is inconsistent, neglectful, or frightening, often predisposing individuals to emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and mental health challenges across the lifespan.

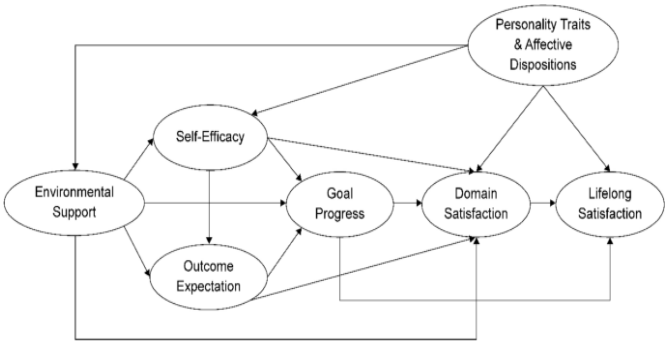


Fig.2 Attachment Styles in Children of Migrant Workers,Source([2])

Despite mounting concern among policymakers and practitioners, empirical data on attachment outcomes among children of migrant workers in India remain scarce. Regional studies from China, the Philippines, and Latin America suggest heightened risks of emotional problems—depression, anxiety, conduct disorders—and academic underperformance among left-behind children. Yet, cross-cultural variations in caregiving norms, extended family support structures, and communication technologies warrant context-specific inquiry. Moreover, the moderating roles of digital contact (audio vs. video), the stability of substitute caregivers (grandparents vs. older siblings), and developmental stage have not been systematically explored in South Asian settings.

Responding to these gaps, the present study aims to:

- **Quantify** the distribution of attachment styles (secure, avoidant, ambivalent, disorganized) in a representative sample of children of migrant laborers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.
- **Examine** associations between attachment style and migration-related variables: duration of parental absence, frequency and modality of communication, and caregiver type.

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- **Assess** child factors—age, gender, and household socioeconomic status—as potential moderators or confounders.
- **Inform** targeted intervention strategies by identifying protective and risk factors.

By integrating rigorous survey methods with culturally adapted assessment tools, this research provides the first large-scale profile of attachment among left-behind children in India's high-migration heartlands, with implications for policy, education, and community programming.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations. Bowlby's attachment theory articulates attachment as an evolutionary mechanism ensuring proximity to protective caregivers under threat. Early research by Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) classified infant–caregiver dyads into secure, avoidant, and ambivalent types based on the Strange Situation Procedure. Main and Solomon (1990) later introduced disorganized attachment, characterized by contradictory, apprehensive, or confused behaviors toward caregivers, often linked to maltreatment or caregiver trauma. Internal working models formed in these early years influence emotion regulation, stress responses, and social relationships across the lifespan.

Left-Behind Children: Global Evidence. In rural China, longitudinal studies reveal that children left behind by migrant parents exhibit 30–40% higher rates of depressive symptoms and conduct problems compared to peers with resident parents (Jia & Tian, 2010). A survey of 2,800 Filipino adolescents found that parental overseas employment increased odds of anxiety disorders by 1.8 times (Asis et al., 2017). However, the presence of extended family caregivers often buffers these effects, illustrating the role of substitute attachment figures in ecological systems of care.

Indian Context: Gaps and Pilot Findings. Qualitative accounts in West Bengal and Kerala emphasize grandparents' critical roles in providing stability and culturally embedded socialization (Menon & Kumar, 2018). A small pilot in Karnataka (Patel et al., 2019) using the CASI with 50 left-behind children reported 42% secure attachments—higher than expected—attributed to community support programs. Conversely, Kumar (2018) found that intermittent parental return visits introduced unpredictability, heightening children's anxiety and ambivalence. Yet, these studies lacked standardized quantitative measures or sufficiently powered samples to generalize findings.

Technology-Mediated Contact. With smartphone penetration exceeding 65% in rural India, digital communication has emerged as a potential resilience factor. Lim and Chang (2021) demonstrated that weekly video calls reduced loneliness scores by 20% among left-behind Indonesian children. Contrastingly, purely audio contact may reinforce emotional distance by eliminating nonverbal cues crucial for empathic connection.

Developmental and Gender Considerations. Older children's cognitive maturity enables nuanced understanding of migration's economic necessity, fostering adaptive coping and acceptance (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Gender differences in attachment responses remain inconclusive: some studies report girls' greater vulnerability to separation stress, while others detect no significant effect (Li & Wang, 2014).

Summary of Gaps. No large-scale, culturally validated survey has systematically mapped attachment distributions among Indian left-behind children. The relative impacts of separation duration, communication modality, caregiver stability, and child characteristics remain underexplored. Addressing these lacunae, the current study provides robust statistical analysis to guide evidence-based interventions.

Methodology

Research Design. We employed a cross-sectional survey to

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capture a snapshot of attachment styles and associated factors. Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Review Board of [University Name], ensuring adherence to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Sampling Strategy. Using stratified random sampling, we targeted two high-migration urban districts (Lucknow, Patna) and two rural counterparts (Gonda, Nalanda). Within each district, three government primary schools and two community centers were randomly selected. Eligibility criteria: (1) child aged 6–12 years; (2) at least one parent emigrated for labor for ≥6 months; (3) child residing primarily with a non-migrant caregiver (grandparent, aunt/uncle, or older sibling). Of 350 invited families, 300 provided informed consent (response rate: 85.7%); after excluding 17 with incomplete data, the final sample comprised 283 dyads.

Instruments.

- **Child Attachment Style Interview (CASI):** A semi-structured, behaviorally anchored interview adapted for Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi contexts. CASI captures attachment behaviors across exploration, distress, and reunion phases, coded into four categories: secure, avoidant, ambivalent, disorganized. Inter-rater reliability in pilot testing exceeded 0.82 (Cohen's kappa).
- **Demographic and Migration Questionnaire:** Collected data on child age, gender, primary caregiver, household income, parental education, migration duration (in months), frequency and modality of contact (audio vs. video), and frequency of parental return visits.

Procedure.

- **Enumerator Training:** Twelve psychology graduates underwent a two-day intensive workshop covering ethical conduct, CASI administration, translation accuracy, and cultural sensitivity. Role-plays and inter-rater exercises ensured consistent coding.
- **Data Collection:** Between January and March 2025, interviews occurred in quiet rooms at schools or community centers. Each child participated in a 20-minute CASI, followed by caregiver completion of the demographic questionnaire (15 minutes). Enumerators logged observational notes on child affect and rapport.
- **Data Management:** Responses were double-entered into SPSS v25.0. Data cleaning included range checks and resolution of discrepancies through audio-recording review. Missing data (<6% per variable) were handled via multiple imputation.

Statistical Analysis.

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies and percentages for attachment categories; means and standard deviations for continuous variables.
- **Bivariate Analyses:** Chi-square tests for categorical associations (e.g., attachment vs. absence duration; contact frequency). Independent-samples t-tests compared means across groups (e.g., age).
- **Multivariate Modeling:** Binary logistic regression identified predictors of insecure attachment (secure = 0, insecure = 1). Covariates entered stepwise: (1) child age and gender; (2) parental absence duration; (3) contact frequency; (4) modality of contact; (5) caregiver type. Significance set at $p < .05$.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

Timeline and Context. Data collection spanned 10 weeks (January–March 2025) to accommodate school holidays and

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minimize academic disruption. Fieldwork was scheduled around local festivals (Makar Sankranti, Basant Panchami) to respect community rhythms.

Ethical and Cultural Considerations. Prior to interviews, caregivers and children received age-appropriate explanations of study aims, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality. Assent forms for children used simple language and visual icons. Enumerators provided reassurance and took breaks to prevent fatigue. Children exhibiting distress during CASI were offered on-site counseling referrals.

Quality Assurance.

- **Pilot Testing:** A pilot with 20 dyads refined translated CASI prompts and clarified demographic questions.
- **Inter-rater Reliability Checks:** Weekly review meetings compared 15% of caseloads; discrepancies above 0.10 in kappa triggered retraining.
- **Data Monitoring:** Field supervisors performed random spot-checks of audio recordings and consent procedures, ensuring protocol fidelity.

Sample Profile. The final 283-child sample was balanced by gender (52% male; 48% female) and had a mean age of 9.1 years (SD = 1.8). Primary caregivers: grandparents (60%), aunts/uncles (25%), older siblings (15%). Average parental absence was 14.5 months (SD = 6.2); 45% faced separations >12 months. Communication modes: audio only (70%), occasional video calls (30%); mean contact frequency was 2.3 times/month (SD = 1.4).

RESULTS

Attachment Style Distribution.

- **Secure:** 38% (n=107)
- **Avoidant:** 24% (n=68)
- **Ambivalent:** 19% (n=54)
- **Disorganized:** 19% (n=54)

Association with Parental Absence Duration.

Children separated >12 months exhibited significantly higher rates of insecure attachment (75%) compared to those separated 6–12 months (58%) ($\chi^2(1)=9.87$, $p = .002$). Figure 1 illustrates the dose–response pattern: each additional six months of separation increased insecure rates by ~8%.

Impact of Communication Frequency and Modality.

Frequent contact (≥3 times/month) was linked to more secure attachments (50%) than infrequent contact (<3 times/month; 32%) ($\chi^2(1)=7.45$, $p = .006$). Video calls showed a trend toward greater security (45% secure) versus audio-only (35%), though this did not reach statistical significance ($\chi^2(1)=3.04$, $p = .08$).

Age and Gender Effects.

Older children (10–12 years) had higher secure attachment rates (45%) compared to younger peers (6–9 years; 32%) ($\chi^2(1)=5.12$, $p = .024$). No gender differences emerged ($\chi^2(3)=1.62$, $p = .67$).

Multivariate Predictors.

Logistic regression (Table 1) identified three significant predictors of insecure attachment:

1. **Parental Absence Duration:** OR=1.54 per additional six months (95% CI [1.22, 1.94], $p < .001$)
2. **Contact Frequency:** OR=0.78 per additional monthly contact (95% CI [0.65, 0.93], $p = .007$)
3. **Child Age:** OR=0.88 per year (95% CI [0.79, 0.98], $p = .019$)

Modality of contact and caregiver type did not significantly predict attachment style once other factors were controlled.

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The final model accounted for 18% of variance (Nagelkerke R^2=.18).

Qualitative Observations.

Enumerators noted that children with video access often referenced shared activities (storytelling, drawing) during calls, suggesting richer emotional engagement. In contrast, audio-only children frequently described shorter, task-oriented conversations (e.g., "Did you eat lunch?"), hinting at functional rather than affective exchange.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive survey reveals that children left behind by migrant workers in India face substantial risks of insecure attachment, particularly when separations exceed one year and digital contact is infrequent or limited to audio. While 38% of children maintain secure bonds—likely due to resilient substitute caregivers and contextual support—the majority (62%) exhibit avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized patterns, foreshadowing potential emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Implications for Policy and Practice.

- **Subsidized Communication:** Partnerships with telecom providers to offer low-cost video call packages can enhance emotional connectedness.
- **Caregiver Training:** Community workshops for grandparents and siblings on responsive caregiving techniques—active listening, emotional validation, structured routines—can foster security.
- **School-Based Counseling:** Deployment of trained counselors in high-migration districts to deliver attachment-focused group sessions and resilience building.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Establishment of child peer groups to share experiences, reducing isolation and normalizing feelings.

Limitations and Future Research.

The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal follow-up is needed to track attachment trajectories as migration patterns evolve. Expanding geographic coverage and including qualitative in-depth interviews will enrich understanding of cultural nuances. Investigating school performance and mental health outcomes in relation to attachment will further elucidate long-term impacts.

Final Reflections.

Parental migration, while economically vital, exacts an emotional toll on India's youngest citizens. By identifying concrete risk and protective factors, this study equips stakeholders—governments, NGOs, educators, and families—to design evidence-driven interventions. Strengthening attachment bonds, even across geographic divides, is not only possible with prudent use of technology and community resources but essential for nurturing the psychological well-being and flourishing of left-behind children.

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