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# EDUCATION, MARGINS AND CITY:

Examining the Linkages through an Ethnographic Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

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City's relationship with its margins in the context of how state affects the lives of the people has increasingly become an important site of research—especially how pressures of governance split the nature of power and violence of the state at the margins vis-à-vis the city—where the experience of the state and how it operates is starkly different from how it unfolds for the middle-classes of the city. Education in this context has been an under researched area. This research aims to examine how education unfolds in the informal settlement (*basti*) of south Delhi. Literature on education has established how it plays a hegemonic role in maintaining the existing status quo. The project explores the role that the educational processes at the margins of the city play in maintaining the subservient status of margins vis-à-vis city. It aims to understand the lived experiences of children and examines the wider public meanings of education in its relationship with the state apparatus.

This research started with the construction of a learning group being where the researchers worked with and observed the students. The engagement with the children has slowly developed into a meaningful space where as researchers we encounter the problems of education in the margins of the city within the slum itself, and children are exposed to a space where they can express themselves and find connections between their everyday lives and school knowledge. It has become a place for the exchange of ideas and learning with the children and also the adults of the *basti*. Around 20–22 children ranging from ages 3–17 come to us, and we address their learning difficulties, reading, writing, understanding of scientific concepts, and mathematical thinking. We also tell stories, recite poems, and sing with them. We go with story books and a lot of drawing and colouring material. Depending on students' needs and interests for the day, they either study with us or do their own reading or colouring or drawing. Research methods in this project on slums is informed by an ethnographic lens and hence includes documenting and examining intensive observations (participant as well as non-participant) of the *basti*.

The split in governance materially visible in the informal space of the *basti* is also demonstrated in the differential character of education in slums and needs to be understood not just through the lens of the failure of the state. The growing body of literature, especially ethnographic work, which sees the sustenance of the asymmetries that recognise margins through the order-making function of the state—order being understood as a supplement to the legal apparatus in the name of enforcement—shows that the state itself undermines its legal apparatus and constitutional duties. Order is never mapped perfectly onto the legal apparatus of the state. Foucault (1990) termed this problem of excess in law as governmentality. Present research finds education important to understand this precarious urban order. Education stands at an inflectional point in relation to the state where on one side it is tied to ideals of citizenship and the becoming of a nation, and on the other, it finds continuity with the disciplinary and biopolitical ends of the state. This project will explore how education at the margins helps us understand how the state functions and uses education in its rational technical avatar to enforce discipline and order in the margins.

The current study visibilises experiences of children at the margins in the realms of policy and practice. Though state and civil society plan many educational interventions for these children, they often neglect their complex life experiences and thereby reproduce various exclusionary dynamics in the educational landscape of the country. By studying experiences, perspectives, and aspirations of children, this study informs policy and practice in ways that can engage with marginalised communities through socially just and sustainable educational interventions. By basing itself on the anthropology of margins, the research changes the perspectives through which margins are to be seen and understood. Instead of viewing them as a 'lack', the present research advocates seeing them for what they stand for. This helps capture the richness of the texture of life in the margins. The research is able to understand the hopes and also the repairs required in the margins.

## INTRODUCTION

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The education sector in India has gone through unprecedented changes since the 1990s. On the one hand, education has been linked to exploding social and economic aspirations leading to the increasing demand for it, and on the other, it finds itself as a part of the order-making function of the state. This expansion alongside the biopolitical inertias of the state has brought the concerns of 'quality' and 'equality' to the centre. The predominant challenge education has been facing in this explosion is the balance of quality and equality with the quantitative expansion (Sharma, 2021). Margins emerge as an important site to examine this tension.

There is growing empirical evidence that far from countering and challenging social inequalities like class, caste, religion, region, and gender, education has instead been reproducing them (Raina, 2020; Ramachandran, 2018). In this context, the urban landscape has become an important site to study the questions of social inequalities and hierarchies in education. Researchers have found that urbanised spaces—especially spaces on the margins of the city that struggle with informality and precarity—use education as a means to modernity, meritocracy, and equality to reintegrate the same social hierarchies of caste, class, religion, gender, etc., into the modern secular worldview (Deshpande, 2017; Madan, 2017).

Slums, marked with informalities, share a peculiar relationship with the city. They neither stand completely inside the city nor on the outside and so have been classified under the conceptual apparatus of margins. Margins that demarcate the outside from the inside act as a border through which separation is possible but cannot be defined by the inside-outside binary.

The formal site of the school is considered to be where education reaches children at the margins. The larger section education research restricts itself to studying schools to explore the unequal foundation of education. This project affirms that studying the school in isolation from the community that children come from is inadequate to understand how exclusionary pressures of urban order translate to the schooling apparatus and add to sustaining and creating the margins of the city.

A notable consequence of the economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s has been a widespread movement of labour from rural areas to urban spaces. The majority of these migrants work in the unorganised sectors and are badly underpaid. They do not receive even basic civic services and are thus pushed to the peripheries of urban spaces. This, as Gunjan Sharma points out in her recent work "Schooling and Aspirations in the Urban Margins" (2021), has led to the development of urban slums. These urban slums become important sites to be examined, as these spaces carry the burden of the city that is critical for its everyday functioning and sustenance, and yet are invisibilised and ignored by the "legitimate" residents of the city. There is a crucial link between the economic reforms of the 90s and the changes in the education sector of India since then. The need for education has expanded as a result of a significant increase in the social and economic aspirations across the unequal social fabric of India. It is against this backdrop that our fieldwork delves into the questions of urban marginality and education. How education at the margins helps us better understand the rubric of urban education becomes important.

In literature, slums have been classified as sites that represent disorder, chaos, and statelessness, and are seen on the margins of the city. Centre-periphery distinction forms a graded terrain on which presence and absence of the state can be marked. What we learn from the present work resonates with the insights of literature on the anthropology of margins. That literature informs us that the margins are not just sites of statelessness, chaos, and disorder, and that the state in its anxiety to complete itself at the margins reveals its techniques and practices most fully in these spaces. Thus, margins are also a site to study the order-making function of the state (Das & Poole, 2004). In this thesis, education in the margins and the role the state plays in shaping education practices in this space will be explored. The role education plays in the order-making function of the state will also be studied.

To understand the nature of exclusion as manifested in schools that cater to children coming from marginalised backgrounds, one cannot only look at the schooling structure. Exclusion also exists in the structural relationship the state shares with the margins. Das (2004) and Agamben (1998) are now identifying this problem of exclusion not only as something that affects the margins but as a challenge that plagues our whole political system. Agamben (1998) locates this problem in the fragmentation of the city into smaller, camp like structures that struggle to share a relationship with structures outside of it. The porous outside boundaries of the city are compensated for by closed communities that do not allow outsiders to enter. The emergence of gated communities, cordoning of slums, different public spaces for the poor and the rich—formal and the informal settlements, and differential hierarchies in citizenship are part of this fragmentation of the city, and this fragmentation that can also be seen in other cities.

## RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

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### Rationale of the Research

The project aims to examine the relationship between education and the margins of the city. Such a project acquires increased pertinence in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has disempowered children from marginal backgrounds more than ever before. Yet the importance of studying the margins isn't just about exploring singular experiences, but of forms of lives in the margins shaping the changing urban landscape itself especially in its intersection with education. This project aims to bring to light the role education can play in stitching the gap. The paradoxical role that technology plays in shaping education in the margins will be explored by examining the links between discourses of 'quality' and 'choice' and the educational success of children. The research acknowledges that the concerns of quality and equality need to be adequately addressed for a better and inclusive educational experience of children. This calls for an informed inquiry within which questioning the assumptions around the quality-choice-equality paradigm, beliefs around teacher education, and techno-rational interventions towards imagining social and educational change becomes possible.

Sustainable futures depend on and call for education that is committed to transformation, empowerment, progress, and growth. These aspirational ideals of education are constantly under the pressure of utilitarianism and market-led discourse that gives priority to mechanical and instrumental education as well as segregated access. While this double-edged nature of education is detrimental to the progress and development of children and youth, its effects are most visible at the margins. As the techno-market rationality determines the educational success of children, this has clear implications for perceptions that schooling holds for children at the margins. Their experiences and expectations are determined by the larger discourses of neoliberalism and socio-political marginalisation. By studying these effects, knowledge can be generated to make way for education that is transforming and empowering.

The present obsession around the market defined 'quality' parameter and the 'choice' paradigm influence the educational experiences of students in the margins of the city. It shapes how children and youth in the margins make meaning out of their educational experiences as well as their life chances and social mobility. This acquires further importance in the light of the National Education Policy 2020 (GoI, 2020) that prioritises quality over the constitutional goal of equality. The techno-rational, market-induced nature of this quality calls for further examination.

It is important to study the experience of education in the margins not only in the interests of social justice, but also because margins symbolise the practices in the centre. Margins in this sense are not the exceptions to the rule but are the points on the inside that throws open the structure of the rule itself. Thus, the way education unfolds in the margins has a major role in the way the education system shapes itself through processes of domination and exclusion. For social justice, it is important to understand the discriminatory education processes that shape the experiences of children at the margins. Formal educational spaces claim to be institutions for social justice and the advancement of truth and knowledge. Hence, it becomes important to critically examine these spaces so that collaborative work becomes

possible to help them attain their purpose as a social institution. This project aims to understand how formal schooling, with questions of epistemic justice, translates to the lives of children in the community. What role does knowledge play in shaping life experiences at the margins? How does knowledge, instead of being inclusionary and emancipatory, become the sight for epistemic inequalities? How do the institutional sites of schools interact and engage with communities at the margins of the city? What is the nature of the relationship between school and community in the light of 'education for all' as claimed by global and national developmental actors?

Being subservient to neoliberal city formations, the living conditions, and the life-chances of people at the margins have been precarious. Education in its reductionist form has been responsible for this imbalance and the larger inequalities that define a city. Instead of being treated as disposable, people in the margins need to be acknowledged for their indispensability and have a life of dignity—a possibility that can be explored through education. As the centre of knowledge production, it is important for the educational spaces to be sensitive to the lives that are lived at the margins and allow for their better functioning and growth within the model of a city.

## Research Objectives

- To understand how education unfolds at the margins of the city; its role in maintaining the precarious urban order as well as hope, endurance, and reparations in the city.
- To understand how marginal status of children in the city affects their educational experiences.
- To problematise exclusionary experiences of education through the lens of intersectional identities constituting multiple axes such as caste, class, religion, region, gender, and language.
- To explore the modern ways of governance through which the state operates and how these interact with lives at the margins.
- To explore the connection of the informal lives at the margins with the illegality that is attributed to them by the formal spaces of the city.
- To develop ethnographic sensibilities that eschew an instrumental, technical approach to the field and data collection.
- To develop a research culture that facilitates the attitudes and skills required for ethnographic work, helping them encounter the research organically.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Analysing NSSO data, Bose, Ghosh, and Sardana (2020) point out that in urban India, between 1995 and 2018, there was a decline of 19 and 14 percentage points in elementary age group children attending government schools from quintile 1 and quintile 2 classes, respectively. Presence of top quintiles in government schools is almost negligible. A similar pattern is observed when social categories are considered, with overrepresentation of SC and ST communities in government schools. The authors argue that such representation determined by the socio-economic profile of communities will have direct



consequences for voice and accountability in the government schooling system. While the situation in Delhi is slightly better than in the rest of India, it is found that the overall proportion of children attending government schools has reduced from 68 per cent to 51 per cent between 1995 and 2015, and 81 per cent of children attending government schools in 2015 belong to the two lowest quintiles of households. Between 2006 and 2018, the average trend of annual growth of government schools and aided schools in the city was also observed to be static. Furthermore, half of the children who go to private schools for elementary education in Delhi depend on the low-cost private schooling sector where expenditure incurred by families is at least three times more than that of government schools. These trends indicate three important aspects: 1) decline in the supply of government schools, 2) growing social differentiation between government and private school, and 3) exploitation of such socially segregated systems by the low-cost private sector.

In the following sub-sections, we explore how such trends in education are manifestations of larger patterns of exclusion and how margins are engaged with by the state in the urban social order.

### Conceptualising the State and the Margins

The state had been ignored for a long time as an anthropological object of study. It has been studied as a political organisation from its centre. For the state to be an object of ethnographic study itself is a recent phenomenon. Anthropology in its earlier forms has long deployed ethnography to study non-state societies. State in this sense was an unlikely object to be brought under an anthropological lens. Even when we turn our gaze to study state practices, we do in state institutions. Thus, the natural place for us to study education would have been a school. However, there is growing literature such as the edited volume of Das and Poole (2004) that argues for looking at state in the everyday lives of the people. Within this conceptual apparatus, margins have emerged as a pertinent site for such a study.

Margins are traditionally thought to be places where the state fails, becomes less fully articulated or weakened. Both in their territorial and social nature they are recognised through the failure of state, which thus become the default common trend of research. Another aspect typically studied is the state as a political organisation as seen from its centre. These two strands—state being studied from its centre and state's failure in the margins—of our default common understanding complement one another and form a system. Thus, it has taken some time for us to see state as an ethnographic object of study that favours a gaze from the everyday lives at the margins rather than the gaze from the centre.

This research breaks away from the common and tries to look at how the state becomes visible when it is seen bottom-up from the everyday lives of the margins rather than top-down from state institutions. Talal Asad in his illuminative article "What are the margins of the state" gives three ways to understand margins in relation to the state— "... First, as peripheries or territories in which the state has yet to penetrate"; the second, as "spaces forms, and practices through which there is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words"; and, finally as the "space between bodies, law, and discipline" (Asad, T., 2004, p. 279).

All the three categories reveal to us three different aspects of how the state enters into margins and the everyday lives of the people living there. The *basti* is an informal settlement, a slum, where as we read before, the state doesn't have the same kind of penetration as it would in the formal locality that surrounds the slum. Water and electricity are not provided in the same way as in any other authorised space. Even the paperwork for the houses in the neighbourhood are different.

In literature, slums have been classified as sites that represent disorder, chaos, and statelessness and are seen on the margins of the city. For instance, "The modern history of 'improvement' schemes in Delhi is closely tied to colonial and post-colonial projects of producing clean spaces—through 'slum clearance' and the demarcation of 'criminal' spaces, for example—and the making of urbanized bodies to occupy urban spaces." (Srivastava, 2014). Centre-periphery distinction forms a graded terrain on which presence and absence of the state can be marked. What we learn from the present work resonates with the insights of literature on work on the anthropology of margins. This literature states that the margins are not just sites of statelessness, chaos, and disorder and that the state in its anxiety to complete itself at the margins reveals its techniques and practices most fully in these spaces. Thus, margins are also a site to study the order-making function of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). In this report, education in the margins and the role the state plays in shaping education practices in this space will be explored. The role education plays in the order-making function of the state will also be studied.

### Violence at the Site of Margins

Schools at the margins in India emerge as the site of violence, disorder, and chaos, and this has been covered by journalistic and academic body of work. The traditional approach of examining the violence looks at it in the categories of physical or the non-physical manifestation of it. It is also burdened with the culpability matrix, as the attempt is to capture the agent who carried out the act of violence. Finding the perpetrator becomes central to this approach with the aim of finding a complete zero violence zone. The disturbing aspect of the violence has to be eschewed.

This approach is lopsided as it doesn't help us understand the prevalence of violence in education or the larger scale legitimacy that it enjoys. All the actors are convinced of its usage in the field, and this holds for teachers, NGO volunteers, parents, and even children (Anand and Dalal, 2022). They all unabashedly state the need for violence to ensure order and the discipline among children and in their lives. How do we understand the legitimacy that violence enjoys in the field despite the legal framework against it? The present approach that tries to eschew any trace of violence is unable to capture its inner logic, in Bourdieu's (1990) language.

In contrast to this approach, Žižek (2008) points out two ways of approaching violence. Firstly, violence can be understood as a violation, and this can be captured in the physical and the non-physical manifestation of it. This subjective form of violence is visible and will also have an agent associated with it and is directed towards the violation of the body and can be immediately recognised as violence. The other, the objective form of violence exists in the command 'to obey'. Modern state and its machinery, i.e., the schools, need this obedience for it to function. For Žižek, this is the background violence that is required in the 'normal' state of functioning, and it works on the ground level. Systemic and symbolic violence are the two forms within which this objective violence appears.

Together they sustain the very zero-level standard against which something is perceived as violent. Systemic violence is not the overt outbursts of intentional violent acts, but the inert background that marks the conditions for the visibility of violence itself. Drawing the distinction between objective and subjective violence, Žižek (2008) understands subjective violence as experienced against the background of a non-violent zero level condition when such form of violence is seen or is visible as a perturbation of the normal state of things. Objective violence on the other hand, for him, is invisible since it sustains the zero-level condition of non-violence against which subjective violence can be perceived (Žižek, 2008, p. 2).

For Žižek, in objective violence, "We're talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustains relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence" (Žižek, 2008, p. 9). If systemic violence is the violence sanctioned by the social, political, and ideological apparatus, symbolic violence is sanctioned through the use of language. It is this capacity of language to become violent against the people that use it by imposing certain walls and boundaries that defines the people who use them. This frame has been deployed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) to explore the peculiar ways in which language works in institutions like schools. In this sense, systemic violence and symbolic violence are not only interrelated, but also interdependent, and thus together called objective violence by Žižek. For instance, corporal punishment and psychological aggression are definitely subjective acts by teachers, but they cannot be understood without the backdrop of the schooling's political and ideological apparatus. Hence, it becomes necessary to consider the social conditions and the political and ideological apparatus of schools to explain not only the normalisation of corporal punishment and psychological aggression, but also the active support that these practices have from both teachers and parents.

Obedience and disciplining evoke the systemic violence of the school. Research has shown how disciplining children—their bodies and their selves—has become the primary goal, more important than education itself. Schooling becomes a way to reach out and regulate the families of children and the neighbourhoods that they inhabit. In other words, margins are regulated and ordered, a way to maintain urban order. Teachers often tell children how the school should not look like their homes, streets, and neighbourhood. These are seen as places where civic discipline does not exist and are marked by physical disorder, filth, congestion, noise, and chaos—qualities that the children are blamed for bringing into the classroom.

This systemic violence shouldn't be seen in opposition to explicit violence or the visible forms of violence. Instead, the latter becomes the manifestation of this. Žižek's understanding of subjective (visible – clear victim and perpetrator) and objective (systematic and symbolic) violence, points out how overt and covert are not two forms of violence. Subjective and objective violence are woven in with each other. The manifestation in the form of the subjective violence becomes possible because of the objective violence that is already there. Even when the subjective form of violence cannot be captured, the objective violence continues to exist.

In the sociology of education, the important body of literature has gone beyond the explicit and physical forms of violence to highlight the systemic and symbolic violence that can be seen in the school. Its relationship with disciplining children's selves and bodies as well as running the school in an orderly fashion has also been looked at (Dalal, 2014, 2015; Dalal & Das, 2018; Iyer, 2013; Nambissan, 1996, 2010; Nawani, 2013; NCPCR, 2011; Talib, 1998). By drawing from the work of Veena Das, the present article extends this argument by locating marginality and the relationship that margins have with the state to understand the privileging of violence whenever the state interacts with its margins. The state uses its regulatory nature in its interactions with the margins. Margins then become the sites where the state fully reveals the violence associated with its order-making function rather than places where the state has failed or is seen as absent. Instead of focusing on blatant and obtrusive forms of violence, which for Žižek (2008) has its own mystifying nature, it is important to pay attention to the violence that exists in the subtle folds of mundane everyday life.

Examining systemic violence demands dealing with the marginal position of children and the neighbourhood that they inhabit. This nuanced understanding of violence helps explore the forms of exclusion that are built into the inclusionary practices of the state through which the state aims to order and manage its populations. Agamben (1998) becomes important to understand the different types of exclusions that are structured through the state's inclusionary impulse. He explains how by providing citizenship, even if state claims to be inclusionary, the simultaneous presence of poverty, challenges posed by informality, and the differential axis of determining nationality erodes the citizen's rights (Anand and Dalal, 2022). Thus, the state manages to exclude its specific population not outside itself, but within the matrix of inclusion that it provides. Schooling, through the right of education, is conceptualised within the inclusionary apparatus of the state mechanism. However, studies on schooling have demonstrated exclusion and violence in the margins of the city (Dalal, 2014, 2015; Dalal & Das, 2018; Iyer, 2013; Nambissan, 1996, 2010; Rajan, 2021a, 2021b; Sarangapani, 2003; Talib, 1998). It becomes important to conceptualise the gap between membership and belonging in an institution where mere attendance can be seen as a criterion of membership but does not ensure belonging. This exclusion after and through inclusion is always a product of large-scale indifference of the state. It is this indifference of the state—revealed in the margins—that calls for exploration. Exclusion is exercised not as an opposite of inclusion, but through systemic and symbolic violence.

### **Aesthetic Rationality and Margins**

Routray (2022) in his latest book, "The Right to Be Counted: The Urban Poor and the Politics of Resettlement in Delhi" points out that calculative rationality of the state—'enumerating, collecting statistics, and categorising populations'—is central to understanding the political economy of urban planning in contemporary times. It is essential not only for its development projects such as provision of resources, but also for demolitions and surveillance.

Education, when linked to the order-making function of the state through its disciplinary and biopolitical apparatus, has always invoked calculative rationality as its point of analysis. As an extension of this, our analysis of the intersection of education with society has always asked the question of whose knowledge is privileged and what forms of knowledge are legitimised through the practices of the state.



Here our thinking of politics constituted categories of rationality, but aesthetics remained unthought of in this process. If the 20th century was the age of rationality, then the 21st century is fast becoming the age of aesthetics.

As Asher Ghertner writes in his book *Rule by Aesthetics* (2015):

*"Rule by aesthetics is a process of translating broad aesthetic codes into a governing lens for organizing urban space. Land uses that conform to dominant aesthetic codes thus appear as sensible features of the urban landscape, even if they violate the law. In contrast, land uses that defy these codes appear out of place .... In this way, rule by aesthetics sets in place a certain 'hegemony of form'— what I have been calling a world-class aesthetic in Delhi." (Ghertner, 2015, p. 125)*

Education has ignored this aesthetic dimension of how our societies are being ordered. Literature in philosophy and urban sociology is fast acknowledging the growing relevance of aesthetics to understand urban governance, but this thinking hasn't yet come into our analysis of education. The earliest conceptualisation of aesthetics in the western canon is commonly attributed to Kant's critique of judgement. The link between aesthetics and politics, however, came to the fore in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay—"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935)". In this essay, Benjamin is meditating upon the changing nature of art when it can be reproduced, especially with the coming of photography and the political and social conditions this development would bring to the fore. For the first time the link between changing aesthetics in modernity and massification was drawn. It was also seen that it is in forms of authoritarianism and totalitarianism like fascism that this mass aesthetic becomes visible in constituent links to politics.

It is later in Ranciere's (1991) work that we see a two-fold development of this process where on one side we find aesthetics collapsing and emerging as a political category, and on the other, art becoming separate from politics. The receding role of art then becomes the other side of aestheticisation of politics, as Benjamin (1935) had called it. Ranciere (1991) conceptualised art as always linked to politics. He coined the term "the distribution of the sensible" to articulate this matrix of aesthetics and politics. In many ways, this linking of aesthetics and politics is the other side of Foucault (1990) linking knowledge and power. Foucault (1982, 1990) argued that all power no matter how brute its ways of functioning be, is always backed by some knowledge to legitimise it and vice-versa. In the same vein there is always an aesthetic dimension to politics and vice-versa.

Bernard Stiegler, after Ranciere, has expanded upon the role of aesthetics on our social lives. Daniel Ross, translator of most of Stiegler's works writes in his recent essay:

*"..... aesthetics here is to be taken in the widest sense, that is, as sensation in general, not only perceptibility but taste, feeling and sensibility. The point here is that perception, sensation, feeling, taste are not only individual but immediately social phenomena, and thus that the question of living together, of becoming together, of living in common with the other through a process of common becoming, is something that can only occur through an understanding of, and a feeling for, one another, and which can therefore only occur .... (via) aesthetic medium" (Ross 2009, p. 2)*

Bernard Stiegler develops further upon Ranciere's work and has argued that Ranciere's work needs to be supplemented by the fact that aesthetics—as feeling and sensibility—has become the means to calculate and control all aspects of our lives. One large aspect of this control is the development of aesthetic and affective technologies that are configured to synchronise experience and desire such that desire itself gets destroyed. This is what we are seeing in slums with social media taking most of children's imaginations.

*"..... sensibility and feeling, has become the very means by which every aspect of life is calculated and controlled through invention of aesthetic and affective technologies configured toward synchronizing experience, and therefore desire, and therefore behaviour, to the point of becoming counter-productive, that is, to the point of threatening the destruction of desire itself, and therefore politics, if not economics." (Stiegler in Venn et. al., 2007, 335)*

It is in this context that one has to read the emergence of aesthetics in urban sociology, the most prominent work in this space being "Rule by Aesthetics" by Asher Ghertner. What Ghertner is showing us as a mode of governance of the city in the context of Delhi is a much wider development of our politics which affect different parts of our lives. This research hopes to see the role aesthetics plays in the everyday lives of children and do some preliminary work to show how aesthetics is emerging as a category in our education system.

## RESEARCH SITE

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The research is centred on a slum *basti* that has mixed population of 300 households. This is a Jhuggi-Jhopri (JJ) *basti* (slum)<sup>1</sup> and is notified. It is in one of the middle-class areas of the city that has government flats. It is physically distinct from the neighbourhood that surrounds it, and a wall separates it from the middle-class colony of government servants. This big wall hides the slum from the outside. The main outer ring road of Delhi and a CNG petrol station border the other side of the slum. The main entrance to the slum is an opening in the wall bordering the government flats. There is also a huge garbage dump right outside the neighbourhood. Despite its dominant physical presence, the location of the slum is such that it faces certain invisibilisation. The labyrinth of streets and the pulsating life within are not visible. Houses are cramped together along with small lanes. The houses here are of varying quality—some on the outside are better built, while many in the interior are just small single rooms with shared toilets or not even that. The public and the private fuse in the space of the slum.

The entrance forks into streets divided by caste and religion. Mobility of children and adults are restricted across streets. Adults as well as children maintain strict divisions of caste and religion. One area is seen as Muslim, and the other as Hindu. While referring to Muslim-dominated homes, people from the other

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<sup>1</sup> Jhuggi-Jhopri means temporary and small house/dwelling/shelter typically made of mud, wood or metal having thatch or tin sheet roof covering. Slum means an area consisting of many such aforementioned houses or in other words a Jhuggi-Jhopri cluster.

part often say, "This is India, and that is Pakistan". The slum is marked by the strong stench of the drain that flows right through the middle of it. It flows parallel to the main streets and is visible from the houses. Despite being visible and marking the entire slum, it is the Dalit households that are identified with this drain. People living on the *naala* becomes a term that is used for Dalit households.

In terms of jobs, men work as cleaners, guards, or drivers. There is a visible caste divide in the *basti*. Women work as house help, cooks, and cleaners in parlours, schools, and malls. Many have stalls at weekly markets and also around the neighbourhood selling vegetables, clothes, and other stuff. A couple of NGOs work in the slum. Children go to nearby state-run or low-fee private schools. A sizeable chunk avails the tuitions provided by NGOs and social workers. There are also children who have not yet resumed schooling post pandemic. Many children of the *basti* belonging to a better economic background than others go to private schools.

The slum is home to all kinds of animals – chickens, goats, pigs, caged birds, and of course dogs. Befriending dogs in the field has been pleasant. There are pedigrees in addition to street dogs. Taking biscuits for them, interacting with them, and discussing them gives us entry into the lives of people in the slum. There is clear differentiation between street dogs and breeds. While street dogs can be found in the open, purebreds are always chained, and in most cases within the homes of their owners.

This is an informal settlement and is not considered legal. The informality of the space plays a considerable role in the lives of these children and their interactions with schooling and the city. In this sense, school emerges as a site that exclusively deals with the informality of the slum. The slum is also surrounded by big walls that hides it from the outside. A small entry finds its way through the slum with a drain (*naala*) that flows through the middle of the slum, visible through the households of the *basti*.

For Routray (2022), the social space that urban poor in Delhi inhabit can be arranged in descending order of precarity and vulnerability as: "the urban homeless; the urban poor in unrecognized, unidentified, and un-surveyed settlements; the urban poor renting rooms in villages, unauthorized colonies, designated slum areas, or planned colonies; the urban poor in government-recognized *jhuggi jhopdi* settlements; the urban poor in old resettlement colonies and transit camps; and the urban poor in new resettlement colonies established since 1990". According to this categorisation, the current study being conducted is of a low-income settlement that can be considered to be in the category of the urban poor in a *jhuggi jhopdi* settlement.

At the same time, as Routray warns us, it is important to unpack the homogeneity of people living in a neighbourhood (and their impoverishment), for their experiences are related to identities of caste, income, gender, and regional origin and thereby result in diverse political struggles. Even if we disregard heterogeneous identities that mediate social spaces in the slum, it is difficult to label any city neighbourhood ethnographically because they are simply not bound by easy decipherable boundaries and junctions. In the introductory chapter of his book "Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community, and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon", Srivastava (2014) captures this problem rather well. In his own words,

*"How does one study 'the city'? How is it even possible to construct an 'arrival scene' to a place that—in the sheer, sprawling, gigantic physicality of its presence—escapes the mind's eye as the 'typical visage' that seduces and convinces one to stay? Such inaugural moments as those indicated by Srinivas's evocative description are, in the case of the city, impossible to articulate; they are, quite simply, beyond ethnographic capacity. Rather than a totality, then, a city might best be understood through focusing on specific spaces and times, and on processes that make urban spaces and temporalities the viscous form within which human lives unfold."*

Such an observation is pertinent even when the canvas of analysis is not the entire city but a specific neighbourhood that is 'informal'. Therefore, it is through rather unconnected descriptions of spaces and temporalities that we have ethnographically engaged with our research sites. In the following pages, we navigate the characteristics of the site with ethnographic descriptions.

## METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

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This is an ethnographic work and relies largely on participant observations. The anchoring and the entry point for us in the *basti* became children and how education unfolds in the space of the margins. We have one research associate and two fieldworkers who visit the field regularly with the co-PI. We make three to four visits per week for six months to a learning centre we have started in the slum during evening hours. About three hours are spent in the field either at the learning centre or engaging in interviews or both. While the work is based in the slum, our work focusses on the children of the Dalit community. These are 50 households, and most of these children go to the nearby state-run school.

Largely children from the Dalit community—ranging from ages 5–17—come to the learning centre. Based on their level and interest, we engage with them in activities ranging from drawing to helping them to read and write. We also help some older students with mathematics and sciences. We make ourselves available to address students' interests and struggles. Children, most often with their parents, come over to ask us to help them with reading and writing. "*Ma'am please help him read*" seems to be the common request from parents. Children also demonstrate similar anxiety asking "*Ma'am, will I ever be able to read?*" They also make fun of each other about not being able to read. Interestingly, the same anxiety cannot be seen with writing, as the culture of copying seems to be a big part of the education system. In schools as well as at tuition classes, a lot of time is invested in copying, which to them amounts to writing. Unfortunately, the writing is not related to thoughts and ideas. We also provide students with colours and paper for drawing, and story books for different levels. The learning centre helped us grasp the role that education plays for children at the margins. As we participate in the process of education with them at the learning centre, what unfolds is their imaginations, expectations, challenges from education. The details of the methods and participants are as follows:



**Participant/Non-Participant Observations:** In-depth ethnographic observations of the slum were carried out for a period of six months. The research staff visited the field, and by immersing themselves in its natural surroundings, they collected data in the form of observations and conversations. During these six months, the research staff visited three to four days in a week for three to four hours each time.

**Interviews with Adults and Children:** We interviewed 10 adults and 15 children from the Valmiki community.

**Focus Group Discussions:** There were a total of 15 focus group discussions with children and adults. Of these, 10 were with children, and five were with adults. Some of the themes that were discussed with children ranged from school, learning difficulties, violence in different spaces—homes, schools, streets, parks, market areas, religious practices they followed and their involvement in the cultural activities of the community. Furthermore, we have observed that in the aftermath of the pandemic, children are increasingly spending more time on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Their anxieties regarding, school admissions, caste and religious politics of the neighbourhood also came to the fore.

Some of the themes that emerged with adults: the nature of their employment and challenges faced by them; the monetary concerns and the money lending practices that had them trapped; hygiene-related concerns; anxiety around visiting different government offices for slum affairs or their own contracts; education of their children; problems with the head of the school and other teachers; personal family struggles; Covid-related problems and how livelihoods were affected by it; medical problems; and violence and the bullying present in the *basti*.

**Learning Centre:** We developed this learning centre on a raised platform between the *baratghar* (i.e., the community centre) and the public toilet. We have about 3–17 children, and at one time had around 20–22 come to us. We help them with their learning difficulties, helping them read, write, understand scientific concepts, and also engage in mathematical questions. With this we also tell stories, poems, and sing with them. We go with story books and lot of drawing and colouring material. As per students' needs and interests for the day, they either study with the research staff or do their own reading, colouring, or drawing.

Deciding on the location of the learning centre provided an important insight. We realised that the space of the *basti* doesn't open equally to all children. We explored the slum and found that the nature of the population changes depending on the area. Some of these spaces are near the *naala*, the central park just outside the entrance, the main park in the government flat area, in Rafiq Park, or near *baratghar*. The location of the learning group is indicative of which children will come based on caste, religion, and gender. All spaces in the slum do not open up for the children in the same manner.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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### Identification with the Place Image: Informal-Illegal Matrix

Children of the *basti* go to neighbouring state-run primary schools or low fee private schools. In some of our interactions with the schoolteachers, what emerged was the negative attitude towards the *basti*, i.e., the place-image. These adults—largely from the formal world of the city—call them *basti ke bachche* (children from *basti*). Pronouns like *yahan ke*, *ye*, are often used pejoratively to address them. The differences of caste, class and religion are obfuscated as they are seen *en masse*. Homogenised with a single identity, children from the slum are seen as one. This is also being identified by other research on the sociology of education (Dalal, 2014, 2015; Iyer, 2013; Rajan, 2022). This dissolution of the differences amongst the children is not neutral, as space emerges as an important category that calls for examination. The physical markers of the space are attributed to the children. They are seen as the carriers of the filth, mess, and chaos associated with the *basti*. Dissociation from it becomes difficult, giving rise to the marker of the spatial identity.

The *basti*, where this work is based, is the site of numerous NGO work and tuition centres. For instance, MA Social Work students spend a few hours teaching children outside the park adjacent to the *basti* a few days week. Additionally, many NGOs operate at some distance from the *basti* where children attend after school. Schoolteachers and social workers generally maintain a certain distance from the children, as cultural and class differences between the teachers and the children are evident through remarks about hygiene, beauty, order, and behaviour. The teachers' caste, class and spatial distinctions are largely unconscious, and the blame for any shortcomings is often placed on the child or their cultural background and parents. Consequently, the differences between the middle-class values of the teachers and cultural background of the child are perceived as a lack on the child's part. Furthermore, caste, class, and religious distinctions are obfuscated by the marker of the space. Space emerges as a seemingly neutral marker, which becomes the starting point for other forms of exclusion. For example, one can see caste and class translating into spatial markers in the language of the teachers: "*ye toh suar ke saath rehte hain* (they (children) live with the pigs)" or "*pura Parivar ek hi kamre mein rehta hai* (the whole family lives in one room)" or "*inke sab kuch government se free milta hai fir bhi nahin padte* (They get everything free from the government but then also children don't study)." These remarks hide the teachers' caste and class bias behind language that signifies the spatial identity of the child. The representation of a slum and its location in the city has legitimacy in the discourse of teachers, and often spatial markers replace caste and class markers as a result. The city functions on this discourse of spatiality, which also intersects legal-illegal continuum and is used to maintain a precarious urban order. Emerging from the work of urban sociologists like Amita Baviskar (2020), Asher Ghertner (2015), Sanjay Srivastava (2014), and Gautam Bhan (2016), one can understand how space has become the marker with which the city maintains its inequalities.

Instead of identifying with the school or the educational space, children negatively identify with the spaces that they occupy (Reay, 2007). These spaces form the ecosystems that are interwoven with the lives of children and are explicitly referred to by the teachers, NGO workers, or tutors as the marker of an undesirable identity—one that must be denigrated and tamed at the site of education. The field shows how caste, class, and religion are strongly anchored on the spatial demarcations of the city.

The 'bourgeois gaze' (Baviskar, 2020) that pushes the working class to the peripheries by using the categories of order, hygiene, and beauty is active in the space of the school as well that then finds its way in the language of the community too. Teachers with their middle-class sensibilities find the lives of children crowded, dirty, and unhygienic. At school, children are constantly reminded of their failing backgrounds. This identification based on place-image translates into spatial illegality where the spaces children come from are considered unwanted and are even blamed for marring the beautiful, formal, clean, and orderly world of the school, and as an extension of the city. The spaces of the city these children come from are considered illegal in the larger sensibilities of the dominant middle class. These sensibilities are anchored on appearance. The technical rationality is sustained by 'how things appear', and there is an aesthetics that governs the rationality with which schools discipline their children, and through them bring order among the larger population. Community itself identifies with these aesthetic sensibilities that demarcate the boundaries between the city and the slum. Even the children themselves exhibit discriminatory attitudes, often citing poor hygiene and sanitation practices of their peers. For instance, they might say that someone in their group does not take a bath or that they spend time in drains or with animals, using phrases like: "*ye toh naale mein pada rehta hai*" (he spends time in the drain) or "*ye toh suar ke saath khelta hai*" (he plays with the pigs). In one case, we observed discrimination against a child whose father was responsible for cleaning toilets within the community complex. His family lived within the complex of the community toilets, and the other children refused to interact with him and made disparaging comments about his background and hygiene. When we spoke to the child's father, he explained that even within the Dalit community, there was discrimination against those who cleaned toilets, and the rest of the community did not want his child to mingle with them. The father had to leave his job at a petrol pump during the pandemic. His Dalit identity made it difficult for him to find jobs easily and eventually he had to take up toilet cleaning. He also struggled with alcohol addiction, from which he was recovering with the help of his wife. He saw education as a means for his son to overcome their caste and class background. However, he also recognised that the claims of equality in education were often unrealistic and that his son would need to find alternative ways to integrate into the community.

One can see that the morality of governance based on the scientific rationality of Foucault (1982, 1990) is strongly anchored on the aesthetic categories. Both scientific rationality and the aestheticisation that is evoked in the space of the school, NGOs and the community make the transition from the identification based on this informal place-image to the 'spatial illegality'. The illegality, abnormality, and the aberration that seems to be associated with low-income urban settlements vis-à-vis the city passes over to the children in the space of education. Bhan, while tracing the evictions, notes the rising salience of the category of 'spatial illegality' that has obfuscated the categories of caste and class in understanding one's access to citizenship that goes beyond the simple liberal understanding of the haves and have nots. He uses the logic of spatial illegality to demonstrate how it mediates contemporary urban citizenship. By

drawing from this idea of 'spatial illegality' the present research points out how in the site of education the 'place-image' is translated into this spatial illegality which then legitimises the discriminatory axis that maintains the urban order.

Informal translates into illegality giving shape to spatial illegality. The appearance of it becomes predominant in the present governance. The earlier rule-based rationality is giving way to aesthetics, and this can be seen in education too. To use Agamben's language, they all then appear as bare bodies for the state and for the larger city. The matrix of invisibility is such that they have to be present, yet not seen. A slum is the politically abandoned, the "part with no part" (Ghertner, 2015, p. 17), where it is a part of the city but is simultaneously perceived as not belonging to it. This in-between status of the slum places it within the city, yet it is not fully integrated into it and therefore cannot be considered a proper member of the city.

If the discourse of city as well as the legal framework looks at the populations of the settlements as 'encroachers' or as a burden on the state and the city, a similar pejorative attitude is passed on to children in schools and other educational spaces. Their unwanted, undesirable bodies are seen to be a burden on the state and seen as corrupting and contaminating the space of schooling. Like the body of the encroacher, the body of the child from the margins is despised and seen to have the potential to contaminate their surroundings. They are seen as free loaders who don't deserve the benefit of the state. There is a patronising approach towards children and their families indicative in statements like these by the teachers at government schools and even NGO teachers occasionally, *"How they come to school only for food; They have completely spoilt the atmosphere of the school; Like their parents they have to become thieves only. From the filthy basti emerges these filthy bodies"*.

Seeing children and their families as unscrupulous elements of society, teachers see themselves as guardians and well-wishers of the city. Their bourgeois gaze is activated and they put themselves at the other extreme as honest citizens vis-à-vis the dirty, abominable presence of margins that have encroached their neat, orderly, formal city.

One can observe that the state's presence in the slum is not through its legal framework but through the decrees of various state actors, such as teachers, police officers, local politicians, school administration, and state document authorities for Aadhaar card and pan card. During our field work, we noticed that children were fascinated with jobs like police officers, army personnel and teachers because these jobs represented the state's authority to them. Simultaneously, these jobs were also viewed as powerful because the children saw their parents and community bend to the arbitrary demands of these officials. For instance, a child once told us that *"policewale ki baat sab sunte hain (everyone listens to the police officer)"*. The informality of the slum often takes the shape of illegality not because people living in the slum know that what they are doing is illegal but because they understand that they can be abandoned by the law if they do not comply with the decrees of the state, which are given by petty officials. This blurs the distinction between legality and illegality, where illegality becomes an extension of the legal itself.



For example, parents have informed us that they are aware of the incorrect rules that teachers enforce but cannot question them because the teachers can make the child's life terrible at school. This structuring of the teacher-parent relationship is consistent with how people in the slum interact with other state functionaries like police officers or government offices. The relationship of the parents with the teachers also gets structured with how parents engage with the state in other parts of their lives. We encountered more than one case where a child was expelled from school, and the school refused to provide a transfer certificate, barring the child from getting admission in another school.

To understand the state's relationship with people at the margins of the city, we need to comprehend the nature of the relationship people have with the state's representatives, whom Judith Butler (2004) has referred to as petty sovereigns. These officials may not hold senior positions in the state's functioning, but they can come to hold sovereign-like power over the lives of people in certain contexts. What must be noticed here is that the arbitrary decrees of the school administration or other state representatives also fall within the force of law. Even though many of the decisions by these officials are entirely illegal, they come to people of the slum with the power of the law. Agamben (2008) distinguishes between the force of law and the content of law and argues that under certain exceptional circumstances the force of law separates itself from the content of the law. In that case, any decree from any bureaucratic official takes the form of law. In this light one finds petty sovereigns emerging. This matrix constructs the affinity between informality and illegality, producing the category of spatial illegality.

What is hidden in the arbitrary decrees of the bureaucratic officials is the ideological fervour that the lives of children living in slums themselves are illegal. This becomes evident in the language used by schoolteachers and school administration. For example, we have been told by several children how schoolteachers tell them that if a child hasn't bathed, they will not be allowed on school trips. Or a child can be failed if they do not meet some arbitrary requirements set by the teacher. Parents can be told to take their child out of school if the child is difficult to manage or has some physical or mental challenges in the perception of the teachers. We were informed by a parent of a child coming to the learning centre who had an eye defect that the schoolteachers consistently pressured him to take his child out of school as they felt he was not fit to study there. The parent was a cleaner at the community toilet and thus faced discrimination both at the school and within the community. Such decrees, even if not enforced, structure the lives in the community on an everyday level, and law in these spaces takes a very different texture and form. Law comes to mean arbitrary decisions taken by certain officials that need to be negotiated with on an everyday level.

### **City, Space and Aesthetics: Aestheticisation of Education**

Appearance has emerged as a category in education. It governs the way everyday life in school is structured. There is constant concern around the look of schoolwork, copies, classrooms, and so on. This aspect is prioritised during frequent visits by school inspectors. Ignoring the lives and the worlds of children, how things appear has become a central category. This aestheticisation is also internalised by the children. In our learning centre, one of the distinctions that children make among themselves is handwriting. Whether a child can read what they have written becomes secondary and the focus is on how beautifully the letters are written.

In the learning centre, they ask us, *"How well have they written? Is it beautiful or not?"*. The same can be seen with drawing. Instead of expressing their thoughts and ideas, the attempt leans towards beautiful drawing. *"See, isn't this beautiful?"* seems to be the larger concern. This leads them to internalise their failure at a very young age. Many have already given up on drawing saying, *"I cannot make beautiful things; I do not know how to draw"*.

This also stretches to the kind of body that is approved in the public sphere. In the learning centre, children guard each other's behaviour as well as posture. How to sit and talk in front of us seems to be a concern. Seeing us as legitimate members of the city, they try to conform to approved aesthetics. Ghertner observes how people at the margins try to become a part of the city and to feel a sense of belonging by internalising the discourse of the city and its categories. However, this discourse and its categories are inherently exclusionary towards those living in slums. As a result, speech acts are structured in a manner that excludes the speaker and creates internal divisions within the *basti* itself. For example, children feel compelled to adopt a language that allows them to distance themselves from slum life and disassociate themselves from it. They develop a sense of detachment from the slum and also feel the need to morally police each other.

In our research we found that many of the binaries plaguing our education system today function as an aesthetic code that legitimises certain education practices and delegitimises others. The teaching approach that unfolds for the margins ranges from forms of rational techniques like rote memorisation to aesthetic codes that separate *"achha bacha"* (good child) from *"ganda bacha"* (bad child).

The intersection of margins and the city in the context of education is characterised by various aesthetic categories, but this is also where the danger of viewing the "other" as uncivilised is evident. The people from marginalised areas are often labelled as unhygienic, deviant, and even sexually deviant. In one interview, a teacher shared that "these children do dirty things in the toilet. They engage with such practices because they are brought up in one room, their whole family sleeps in one room". This information was likely shared to shock us and to elicit empathy for the biases of the teachers towards the children. The aesthetic categories of hygiene, beauty, and order have already been discussed, but a new shade of this aesthetic is seen when schoolteachers draw an affinity between the slum and crime. Some teachers overtly or covertly express their bias that these children from the slums are closer to a life of crime. This discourse becomes more evident when something gets stolen in the school, and teachers blame it on the children, saying "these children are like this only". But this bias is present in the community as well, where children themselves warn us to be careful in the slum and even take care of our belongings to protect them. The other side of this aesthetic is not repulsion but a desire to be aesthetically desired, and education becomes the site where this desire is most visible. This will be discussed in the last section.

### Internalising the 'Bourgeoise Gaze'

Margins have internalised the 'bourgeoise gaze' and the middle-class sensibilities with which they are seen by the city. If the formal educational spaces of the school, NGOs, and tuition centres see these children as contaminated, this practice of looking at children, their *basti* lives, and livelihood as dirty is internalised by children and adults at the *basti* also.

Some of the responses:

# "I don't play with these children, they are filthy. Do not sit with them".

# "They are going to spoil you also. Our teacher also avoids them".

# "These kids are not good, and they have spoilt the school also. It used to be a good school earlier".

# Ravi, who maintains the public toilet says about his children: "Madam main inko badalna chahta hoon. Main chahta hoon ki ye padhe likhe dikhaee dein. Koi mujhe dekh ke ye nahi keh sakta ki main school nahi gaya. Main English bhi bol leta hoon. Lekin inko aise hi ganda banke rehna hai. Main inhe samjha samjha ke thak gaya".

("Madam, I want to change my children, I want them to look educated. By looking at me, nobody can say that I never went to school. I can also speak English, but they have to keep looking filthy and uneducated, I am tired of making them understand".)

# "Didi, aap na bura mat manna, par is jhuggi me koi bhi shareef nahi hai. Ye na kahin bhi jate hain toh apni jhuggi jhopdi wali harkatein zarur dikhte hain, gaali bakna, marna peetna, paise mangna haye haye karke, bas yahi sab aata hai inhe".

("Didi, please do not mind, but nobody is decent in this JJ settlement. Anywhere they go, they make sure to show where they come from, all they know is using lewd language, being violent, begging for money, etc".)

If the educational spaces create a distinction between the school going child and the neighbourhood child, this attitude is internalised by the *basti*. As we sit at the learning centre, children point at each other and say, "Do not sit with them, they will make you like them only". The attitude of the city dwellers towards the *basti* is contagious and is internalised by children.

They try to satisfy the criteria set out by the school. How they are viewed by the schoolteachers plays an important role in their lives. Children mock each other based on what schoolteachers' attitudes are towards them. Students going to school without the proper uniform, with unkempt hair, or in other words without the right 'schooled body', become objects of ridicule among schoolteachers and children alike.

Children attend different types of schools, including state-run, low-fee private and even private schools in some cases. Within these schools, categories exist, and those attending low-fee private schools are often considered superior. There is an aesthetic dimension to the line separating government and private schools, with many parents expressing a desire to send their children to private schools despite being unable to afford it. Children also take pride in their private school status, even when there is little difference in terms the quality of education. However, children who have not resumed school after the pandemic are worst hit by the stigma of being a school dropout, as it becomes their primary identity in the eyes of their peers.

With that, children have also categorised government schools according to locality. The ones outside their neighbourhood are considered better. There are many children who do not go to schools in their own localities. They take buses and autos to go to other schools. The sentiment of "*yahan ka school madam acha nahi hai* (school over there is better)", comes up a few times. "*Yahan ka mahual hi kharab hai. School bhi acha nahi hai* (school in the neighbourhood has a bad environment and even the school is bad)". The

fascination with faraway schools is a result of a sense of spatial and temporal distancing from the *basti*. They often say their lives were better in the past. This fascination with the distant is matched by shame and disgust towards the present, as is seen by the city also.

Children also divide themselves based on who can read and write and who cannot. Those who can read and write have a sense of pride and confidence and mock the ones who cannot. What goes without saying is that they all want to read, write, and study. This also runs contrary to the narrative of schoolteachers who say *"Ye bachche aise hi hain. Inko padhna nahi hai. In bachon pe kya samay barbad karna"* (These children are like this only. They don't want to study. No point wasting time on these children).

The fault lines of caste and religion also appear strongly within the *basti*. If the city fuses them as one, the divisions of caste, class and religion emerge strongly within the lives in the *basti*. Children identify each other based on their caste. This shows most strongly with the Dalit children. Children from non-Dalit households often tell us, *"Why do all of you always go towards that naala side. That has pigs. We won't be coming there. Our parents don't allow"*. Interestingly the drain flows through the *basti*, yet some homes are associated with it much more than others.

### Engaging with 'Illegality'

Adults take the question of illegality that is ascribed to them seriously and constantly speak of how they are denied a life of dignity. In conversations as well as interviews, what emerges is the desire to have a life of dignity. Here one can see the nuances of the relationship between equality and sustainability. For them to have an equal claim to the city means a life of dignity.

During one of our interviews exploring the challenges posed by COVID-19, we spoke with Manju, a mother in her mid-twenties whose daughter does not attend school due to documentation issues. The child's documents are from the village where Manju's husband resides, and he does not want her to obtain documents in the city. Despite lacking formal education, Manju takes pride in her self-taught literary skills and aspires to complete her education. She has asked us about open schooling multiple times but is constrained by her lack of school certificates. Manju claims to have studied until the eighth standard and is confident in her ability to pass school-level exams with minimal preparation. Like many others, she experienced job loss during the pandemic. During our recent visit, we learned that Manju is pregnant with her second child and has had to return to the village, where she has enrolled her daughter in a school. When we spoke to her after the pandemic began, she expressed sadness about how the households where she and her family had worked for years treated them.

*"You know didi we used to feel very bad."* With hand gestures indicating being pushed away she told us of the instructions that had been given to them. *"Speak from distance ... cover your mouth ... stay away. You know we also have children. We are also worried about our health and your health. There is no need to treat us like that. Hum pagal hain kya* (we are not mad). *Kya hume nahi pata kya theek hai karna* (Do we not know what the right thing is to do). *We know what is good and what is bad"*.

After a while, another woman Barfi, from the same caste and Manju's neighbour joined her and talked about the food that was being distributed. While praising the Delhi government for this, she spoke of the manner in which it was distributed and also the quality of food. *"Khaane ko to khaana mil hi jaata tha. Daal chawal. Lekin aisa khaana, ki bas zinda rehne ke liye kha lo. Nahi khaya ja sakta usse. Agar dena hi hai to acha de do jo mann bhi kare khaane ka."* (*"We used to get food to eat in the pandemic (by the state). But it was only enough for survival. It could not be eaten otherwise. If they had to give, then they should have given good food that we would also want to eat".*)

Food—quality food and its association with a dignified life emerges. To use Agamben's language, they all then appear as bare bodies for the state and for the larger city. The matrix of invisibility is such that they have to be present, yet not seen. They are needed for the city to function, but they must function in invisible ways. The demand for a life of dignity can be seen as they voice the problems of the slum. They demand better hygiene and sanitation, instead of relocation to better households. Their problems with living in the slum largely have to do with the difficult conditions and not the slum per se. The stench of the drain and how it has not been cleaned for a couple of years bothers them and not its presence. What emerges are their struggles, resistances, and negotiations.

### Negotiating with Caste, Class, and Gender Intersectionality

Contrary to the widely held assumption that social divisions and hierarchies fade away in urbanised environments that promote modernity and meritocracy, there is a growing recognition of the intersectionality of social categorisations in these spaces. A demographic landscape that is becoming more and more urbanised has in fact produced new kinds of marginalities. Children of the *basti* are constantly trying to belong to the city while being actively marginalised as their class, caste, religion, region, and gender intersect.

During one conversation where we were discussing the physical boundaries that separate the slum from the urban housing settlements, Lucky, a 13-year-old boy, said:

*"Pata hai didi, is wale parak me meri chhoti bua ki shaadi hui thi, tent laga tha isi parak me, yahan stage saja tha, mala bhi yahin dali thi, mai DJ pe nacha tha Sumit sang. And then Sumit says: background bohut achha tha iski chhoti bua ki shaadi ka. Lucky continues par meri Anju bua ki shaadi road pe hui thi, road par hi tent laga tha, aur vo quarter wale chilla rhe the ki kyu allow kr rakha hai ye sab DJ-VJ hum logon ko. Aese hi jab humne road pe jagran kara tha, tab bhi police walon ne band karaya tha. Anju bua ki shaadi ke usme humne bhandara bhi kiya tha gareeb bchchon ke liye, ye kalkaji mandir nahi hai, vahan pe".*

*("Didi, you know what, my younger aunt got married in this very park, the tent was arranged in this park itself, the stage was erected here, and garlands exchanged. I had also danced with Sumit on the DJ." And then Sumit says, "the background was really good in his younger aunt's wedding." Lucky continues, "but my older aunt Anju got married on the road, the tent was erected on the road itself. And those people in the quarters were protesting why all such celebrations were allowed to us. In a similar instance, when we had organised a religious ceremonial night on the road, a few police officers had made us stop the celebration. In aunt Anju's wedding, we had sponsored free food for poor children, in the nearby Kalkaji temple.")*



Another time Lucky told us about a 3-year-old girl who had been kidnapped from under the nearby flyover.

*"Didi, aapko pata hai, yahan pul ke neeche se 3 saal ki ek ladki kidnap ho gayi, vo pul ke neeche ghum rhi thi, ek bike wala aaya, usne ladki ko bulaya ki cheez dunga, ab aapko toh pta hi hai ki ye rainbasere ke chhote bachche kaise hote hain cheej veej ke chakkar me, toh chali gayi vo, aaj tak nahi mili didi vo, ab hume kya pta use kaat-koot ke usse bheekh mangwa rhe ho!"*

*("Didi, do you know about the 3-year-old girl who was kidnapped from under the nearby flyover? She was roaming under the flyover, a man on his bike tempted her with some candy, and I am sure you know how these little children of night shelters are about temptations, so the girl went with the man. She hasn't been found till date, didi, now who knows if she has been mutilated and forced into begging!")*

Lucky tries to overcome his class when he says *"Humne gareeb bachchon ke liye bhandara kraya tha"* ("we organised a bhandara (religious ceremony involving distribution of food for poor children") or when he talks about *"Rainbasere ke bachche"* (children living in makeshift shelters). However, he is also aware that his exclusion from the city reinforces his class status. The exclusionary structure of the city is such that even though children living in slums find themselves excluded from parks and lanes in middle-class areas, they still find themselves higher in the social hierarchy compared to children who do not have a permanent shelter in the city.

On one visit to the field, our fieldworker along with a few other children decided to walk with an 11-year-old boy, Ashiq, because he didn't feel like going home to get his notebook since it was far away. On the way, Arjun, a boy of 13 or 14, said to the fieldworker while pointing to Ashiq, Abhishek, and Avinash:

*"Didi, ye sare jitne bhi ye teeno hain na, ye bheekh mangte hain batti pe, aur fir ye log rainbasere pe chale jate hain jab inki mummy kaam par jati hai".*

*("Didi, all these three kids, beg at the nearby red light, and then they spend their time in the night shelter while their mother goes out for work".)*

Ashiq, Abhishek, and Avinash immediately contested Arjun's statement, but Arjun's conception of *"ye log"* points to an "us" vs. "them" not with the outside world, but also very much within the slum itself.

Children make sense of their lives through the social categories of caste, class, and region while navigating through the politics of exclusion and marginality in an urban educational space.

When our field worker once randomly said that she was from Haryana, Sumit said that Sapna Chaudhary (who is a famous Haryanvi dancer) was also from Haryana. At this, Angel, a girl of 12 or 13, asked if another fieldworker Arjun was also from Haryana to which he replied that he was from UP. Angel then said: *"Hum toh balmiki hain."* Lucky then intervenes to say: *"Didi, mai bhi balmiki hun, jo bhi in jhuggiyon me reh rhe hain na yahan se vahan tak, sare balmiki hain."* At this point, another girl of 15 or 16, Rubina, then interrupts and

says: "Balmiki bolna zaruri hai?!" Sumit then says: "Didi, mai na har roz mandir jata hu, aur vrat bhi karta hu, aur subah shaam puja bhi." This was followed by the arrival of another boy, Prince of about 14 or 15 years of age who, with an air of superiority, said: "Didi, hum chauhan hain, sabse zyada bade insaan. Hmari mam bol rhi thi ki chauhan ki ijat bohot zyada hoti hai, mam keh rhi thi ki chauhan na bohot zyada vo hote hain... I: kya?... Angel: badi jaati ke... Prince: haan, badi jaati ke, aur na bohot unche khandaan ke bhi, bohot zyada ijat ki jati hai chauhano ki".

(Angel: "We are Balmikis." Lucky then intervenes to say, "Didi, even I am a Balmiki, in fact, all the people living in this JJ settlement from here till there are all Balmikis." At this point, another girl of 15 or 16, Rubina, then interrupts and objects, "Why do you keep mentioning the word, Balmiki?!" Sumit then says, "Didi, I go to the temple every day, I also observe fasts and worship god regularly." This is followed by the arrival of another boy, Prince of about 14 or 15 years of age who, with an air of superiority, says, "Didi, we are Chauhans, the biggest of them all. Our teacher was saying that Chauhans are respected the most, she was saying that Chauhans ... what was she saying ..." I, "what was it?", and then Angel reminds him of the word, "belong to the upper caste," after which Prince satisfactorily completes the sentence, "Yeah, right, Chauhans belong to the upper caste, and thus respected families, and are therefore respected a great deal".)

The conceptual category of caste is clearly accessible to children, and they are trying to negotiate with the city by either (a) asserting their caste (like Lucky telling about him being a balmiki or Prince taking pride in his being a chauhan) or by (b) resisting their caste identity (for example, Rubina wanting to curb the expression of being a balmiki) or by trying to overcome their caste as reflected in Sumit's account of his religious observance. Whatever the negotiation be, their exclusion from the city keeps reinforcing their caste and class status. As Gunjan Sharma also shows through her ethnographic work in the urban slums, education continues to legitimise and reinforce social hierarchies mediated by discriminatory indicators of caste, class, religion, region, gender, and language, which are often reflected in the indices and experiences of education.

Simran and Sumit are two young adults who are unable to conform to conventional gender identities and have thus become victims of gender-based marginalisation. While we could always see the tension Sumit and Simran articulated it one day:

Sumit: "Sab Simran ko tomboy bolte hain kyuki ye thoda ladkon ki tarah rehti hai na, matlab sab aese samajhte hain ki mai ladki hu aur ye ladka"!

Simran: "Didi, maine islye iska sath chhod diya, hum dono bohot achhe dost hain lekin maine kaha dekh Sumit, hum dono sath jate hain toh public dekhti hai hum dono ko aur fir sunati hai, toh rona sa aata hai, toh maine kaha ise ki dekh hum bilkul khtm nahi kr rhe, tu ghar par ayega toh izzat dungi tujhe, bat krungi, par hum sath nahi ghumenge. Didi, mujhe koi farak nahi hai inki baton ka, mera shareer hai, mai iska jo marzi karu".

(Sumit: "Everyone calls Simran a tomboy because she behaves like boys, as in everybody thinks of me as a girl and her as a boy.")

*Simran: "Didi, that's why I stopped hanging around with him. We are really good friends, but then I told Sumit that if we walk together, people look at us and taunt us, which feels really bad. So, I told him that we shall still remain friends and I will treat him with respect whenever we happen to meet, but we will not hang around together anymore. Didi, I don't care much about what people say, it's my body, I can do whatever I like to do with it".)*

One can sense a shared understanding between Sumit and Simran about navigating the violence that shapes their truths and realities as gendered beings as well as slum dwellers. The exclusionary violence of the city itself creates and reappropriates their caste, class, and gender identities.

### Legible Practices of the State

The informal-illegal continuity through which margins are invisibilised takes a concrete form through the documentation that the state demands. What are the legible practices through which state exists? Drawing from the work of Talal Asad (2004), one can clearly see how the state exists through its written practices. Its inscription takes a concrete form through this paperwork. Nobody seems to know better than the people living at the margins. They take inordinate pride in this paperwork and worry about the absence of any documents. Most of their anxieties seemed to revolve around getting the right document. One is reminded of Veena Das (2004) and Foucault (1982) who point out how the state is an incomplete project and constantly needs these fuzzy zones of margins for its own formation. The incompleteness of lives at the margins is necessary for the state to exist. The state will create means to further this exclusion. One of the zones where this is visible is documentation. It never seems enough and always emerges in newer forms.

# Suneeta, a middle-aged woman, gladly flaunts the library card that the NGO running small library and tuition centre before the pandemic had given her. She not only displays the card with pride but is very protective of it. For her, it elevates her status and gives her claim to the city that constantly tries to invisibilise her.

# Surinder worked with a contractor as part of a government project couple of years ago. The money earned went to his PF account. However, he doesn't have the documentation to access the account and contractor has stopped answering his calls. Surinder lost his phone, and the contractor has now refused to acknowledge the new number since the account was linked with the old number.

#The drain evokes the same emotion: *"Hum aapko dafftar bhi dikha denge aur adhikaari bhi. Aap humare saath chalna. Bol hum lenge. Ladna hume aata hai. Itna bol sakte hain ki poocho. Bas aap saath chal padna."* (*"Bhaiya, we go to the bank, and nobody listens to us. Can you please go with us. I will do the talking. You just stand with me."*)

The claim to the city becomes important for their livelihoods, and education with all its problems and concerns still provides that hope. This hope continues even when the promise of social mobility through

education has become illusory for them. Hence margins are not the exceptions to the rule. On the contrary they demonstrate how the rule functions. How the state manages and governs their population can be examined and understood through the examination of the margins. The site of education then becomes important to maintain the urban order. The relationship of the state with the margins is indicative of the inequalities that are sustained by modern forms of power. Hence, how the state manages those inequalities is important to understand sustainable futures.

All households struggle with documentation. These documents tightly police residents restricting their access to the city. Aadhaar cards play an important role not just to access certain kinds of jobs in the city but even to enrol in school. According to Bhan (2016, p.10), "slum residents aspire towards building a 'paper trail of their lives'- on the one hand they existed only in paper as far as the state is concerned, on the other hand they "invested a great deal in existing on paper."

Kirti, a 4-year-old, is exceptionally articulate and bright but is not able to go to school because of the Aadhaarcad. Her mother stays in the *basti* with her own mother because of her job, but also visits her husband in UP. Getting an Aadhaar card made in Delhi would mean that Kirti cannot accompany her mother to UP.

Her mother Manju herself lacks documentation. She wants to stay with her husband but there are no jobs for house help in UP. Anganwadi jobs available there require a class VIII or X certificate. She doesn't have a certificate although she has graduated class VIII. She is unable to go through open school since it requires a last school leaving certificate. School paperwork plays a big role in lives at the margins.

The state-citizen relationship takes the form of policing and regulation or as something from which favours, and benefits can be garnered. The state in its rights-based? welfare avatar is pushed into the peripheries of their lives. They have to make themselves visible to the state. Routray (2022) emphasises the need to focus on political agency and resistance of the poor themselves as opposed to the abundantly available literature around marginalisation and dispossession. For instance, the core thesis of Routray's book is the struggles, processes, and strategies of claim-making by the poor around 'the right to be counted' or in other words 'numerical citizenship', which in turn is not only a politics of presence but also a politics of visibility. Srivastava (2014) points to an important trend in the light of obtaining paper identity documents and the resulting negotiation with the state. In the contexts of uncertainty and precarity, Srivastava shows how and why people in the urban margins engage in a culture of duplication in order to become a part of the system. With these engagements, "people and the state establish each other in their identity" for the relationship between state and people at margins is a "double bind"—"of wanting and not wanting the state". In the author's words, "the relationship between *basti* people and the state is one where the state is both the final court of adjudication as well as the most consistent tormentor" and the state, unlike the market, speaks the language of care and compassion. For children from urban margins the market is like a mirage—"an economic illusion of escape from the current labor status of parents"—but in effect, it only takes advantage of poor parents' aspirations and provides success only to a limited few (Bose, Ghosh, & Sardana, 2020, p.21).

## Educational Aspirations and Opportunities

As we sit in the learning centre, Simran tells us,

*"Didi pta hai kya hai, aaj ki duniya me na padhai zaruri hai, padhai krenge hum toh kahin bhi naukri lag jati hai. Padhai krke naukri karne me aur bina padhai ki naukri krne me antar hai. Agar hum thode padhe likhe honge, toh hmari thodi izzat bhi hoyegi, naukri se paise vaise ayenge toh ghar ki bhi help hoyegi, ab hum ganwar rhenge toh duniya toh kahegi na - ae chal ja, bartan maanj". ("Didi, you know what, in today's world, education is important. If we study, then we shall be able to secure a job somewhere. Working after having completed one's education is different from working without having done one's education. If we are educated, we will be respected, we shall also be able to help our family with the money that our job will get us. Now if we remain uneducated, the world will obviously say "Hey you, go and wash utensils.")*

Adults, not just children, come to us with this desire to read and write. In the initial days, a middle-aged woman named Mamta would discipline children near the *baratghar* so that they don't bother us. When we spoke later, she told us of this strong desire to read, hesitantly asking us if we could teach her.

*"Madam matron main ghoom jaati hoon. Thoda bahut to padh leti hoon. Bahut mann karta hai padhne ka. Ab jaise bachon ki koi kahani padhni shuru ki, lekin khatam nahi kar paati. Fir main sochti rehti hoon, ki kya hua hoga. Gussa bhi aata hai ki main pad nahi pa rahi". ("Madam I get lost in matra (part of Hindi script). I can read a little. I really want to study. I start reading children's stories, but I can't finish them. Then I keep on thinking about the story, what would have happened in it. I get angry also about the fact that I can't read".)*

Another old man Surinder shared his strong desire for knowledge telling us how he had been watching us from the distance. He wondered if we would laugh at his age if he confided his desire to read more. The next day we gave him a book of short stories by Premchand. He beamed and quietly went to his *jhuggi* with a book by the author Premchand in hand. When we left three hours later, we found him still there with the book in his hand.

While education has lacked in creativity, its instrumentality still exists and needs to be further explored. Spending time with children shows how they do not have hopes of employment even after being educated. Despite their claims that they want to be a nurse, doctor, or engineer, spending a little time with them makes them reveal more pragmatic choices. However, they do know that the right to the city comes through education. Here one can see the aesthetics of documentation required by the city, where looking educated and talking like an educated person has value.

This becomes clear from the jobs that they wish to have, the capacity to do violence, and the authority is associated with it. Simran says she wants to become a teacher so that she can silence the children. This appears to be attractive to her. While raising questions on what education has been reduced to, this also captures the hope and the resilience that is associated with education.

Knowing how to speak English also becomes important. People in the *basti* are aware that this will increase their bargaining power in the market. To be able to talk in English has more value than the ability to read in English. They all want to start talking in English as early as possible. They enrol in several crash courses and coaching classes for this.

English is also a marker of caste and class. Children from Dalit households cannot speak English and are looked down upon. Obfuscating the caste and class marker and the ability to speak in English or giving the appearance of being able to becomes important to the children.

Varsha wondered why we spent more time near the *naala* and no other parts of the slum. She wanted us to visit her side of the slum. The desperation to learn English shows as she says, *"I want to learn English as quickly as possible. I have joined the classes also for this."* Pointing to us she says there is no one with whom she can practice. She separates herself from the *basti* finding kinship with us, *"Ye log na aise hi hain, samajhte nahi hain saari baatein."* (These people are such, they do not understand things)." However, this is matched by her awareness of its sheer impossibility, and she quickly adds, *"Ab aap aur main to samajhte hain; matlab aap zada samajhte ho aur jaante ho...(You and I understand. You, of course, know and understand more)"*

Simran, a girl of 15 or 16, who lives in this settlement with her maternal aunt due to conflict with her own parents who live elsewhere told us,

*"Dekho didi, apni padhai puri krke, mehnat krke, kaam pe lagna zaruri hai. Ab padhai nahi krenge, toh paisa kahan se layenge! Kahin hotel me jayenge, toh jhaadu pochha hi marenge na, ijjat kahan hoti hai usme! Prince: bhayi jo log padhna jante hain, unki hi izzat hoti hai. (Didi, see, it's important to complete one's education with hard work and then get a job. Now if we don't study, where will we get the money! Uneducated, if we go to a restaurant, we will only be sweepers there, where is the respect in that!" Prince further adds to what Simran was saying, "Only those who know how to read and write is respected)"*

One sees the emphasis on respect, economic betterment, and more notably, dignified jobs in these children's aspirations, the burden of which has to be borne by education. As a consequence, the purpose of education has been reduced to merely being a means to an end, which is to get a job, and find a sense of belonging in the city. This instrumental role of education also entails conflict and mistrust, as can be seen in Prince's response to what Simran said earlier.

*"Didi, vaise aaj na padhe-likhon ki bhi koi izzat aur naukri nahi hai, mere ek sautele chacha hain, vo 12vi pass hain, par unko koi kaam pe nahi rakh raha aur ab vo beldari ka kaam krte hain! (Didi, in today's times, even the educated don't get jobs or respect, one of my step uncles who is a 12th pass hasn't been able to secure a decent job, and as a result, now he works as a daily wage construction labourer.)"*

Simran's experiences of not being able to secure admission because her last school has not released her transfer certificate despite having struck her name from its records reflect the same disillusionment. Simran: *"Mujhe ab school me padhna hi nahi hai, mai tumse padh lungi didi, TC nahi milegi tab bhi koi dikkat*



*nahi hai, milegi tab bhi nahi hai, dono me sahi hai mujhe. (I don't want to study in the school now, I will learn from you. I am okay whether I get a TC or not. It doesn't matter".)* This disillusionment comes from the frustration of not being able to enrol in school, a state institution, for the lack of documentary proof.

Vaibhav is set to appear for the class X board exams. However, his level is only at class V or VI. Like all the other children, he comes regularly to the learning centre pushing us to teach him. *"Sir, please help me with maths or science"*, he says worriedly as he sits with us with a thick NCERT maths book in his hand. Our research associate seems to give him hope and has him asking questions like *"Do you have a girlfriend? What do I do to be like you? What do I need to read to be like you?"* Like other children, he also goes to other tuitions in addition to school. He wants to pass his class X exam. He wants to start his own business when he grows up, and for him, the understanding of education is limited to passing exams. This is true for many other students of the *basti* as well. For them education is only a means to pass exams. In fact, the pandemic has pushed Vaibhav and others like him further behind and it seems unlikely that he will pass his class X exam. Vaibhav's case is indicative of the times we are living in and the gap that we need to engage with today.

The outcome-obsessed, efficiency-oriented 'quality' education of present times resonates with the techno-rational, utilitarian approach which exploits the gap in education as the means to an end and as an end in itself. Consequently, if on one hand you can trace the promise of social mobility, on the other, children from the *basti* have also already internalised their own imminent failure. For them, the desire to upgrade their lives through education is largely wishful thinking. They are all aware that this social mobility will remain restricted. In-depth interviews reveal careers that they have laid out for themselves, a path separate from the one promised by education. Their imaginations of their social positions in future are not connected with education. They have charted out a path that works, and one finds them looking for alternate paths to have a claim to the city. Social media provides them self-affirmation and potential alternatives to schooling. Almost every child, mostly boys, have YouTube channels, make videos with toy guns, their drawings, videos of songs, or just joke around as well. They flaunt the numbers of their followers.

Like Vaibhav, other young adults in the *basti* are finding alternate mediums, a result of their despondency with their lives and specifically their relationships with education. The constant disappointment erupts as children say softly to us *"You see...I don't understand. I won't be able to do this"*, as we engage with them at the learning centre. They have internalised their failure and the way schools and NGOs attribute their own failure to these children. This then calls for a need to further contextualise what Bourdieu said while researching the working-class lives. For him, virtue is made out of necessity, as the working-class scoff at the lives of the high culture elite. They change their aspirations and expectations depending on the possibility of attaining them. We have seen this in the *basti* where we find children adjusting their own life goals and ambitions accordingly.

The body of the child demonstrates this paradox of hoping to use education for social mobility and a claim to the city and also the underlying disappointment and despondency they feel towards it. In the case of margins, having the right to the city overrides education's unattainable promise for social mobility. Education in both its rational, technical avatar as well as its aestheticisation promises the claim to the city

that is denied them. In other words, the bureaucratisation that has prevailed in the urban today runs hand in hand with the look of it, and it is both these things that are promised by education .

Education becomes a passage for them to have a claim to the city that attributes the status of illegality to them. Literature has already shown how illegality is very much part of the legal framework, and the case in point for this is housing, sanitation, and other aspects of the urban. However, margins emerge as a site that for the larger city concentrates the illegal. The distancing and the compulsion to invisibilise these margins come from there, regardless of their role in making the city function.

## CONCLUSION

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If the city has become the site of inequality—something that we know from literature—the present work informs the scholarship about the city-margin relationship as navigated through education. Education plays an important role in maintaining the unequal foundations of the city. Sociology of education helps us understand the double-edged nature of education. We know that if it can be liberating, it is then also a potent tool to maintain the inequalities that can be mapped to the social identities of caste, class, religion, gender, language, and so on. The intersectionality of caste, class, religion, gender, and language with the spatial aspect has clear consequences on the education that children at the margins receive. This matrix is also important to understand the insidious ways in which these social identities impact the lives and livelihoods of people living in the margins. These insights become important in the context of the neoliberal times that shape inequalities in newer and more obscure ways.

How education unfolds for the children of the margins as well as in the space of margins is defined by the state-margins relationship. Margins cannot be seen and examined without considering that the state has shown systematic apathy towards them. Education emerges as an important site to further unravel the state-margins relationship.

Margins emerge as a site that for the larger city concentrates the illegal. The city takes on the position of the state and looks at margins as spaces of disorder and disgust. The distancing and the compulsion to invisibilise these margins come from there, regardless of their role in making the city function. What one sees is the association of the informal with the illegal. This continuity emerges in our field interactions with the people living in slums—how they conceptualise their experience of the city. In their experience, the city denies them a life of dignity. It is this recognition and dignity that they seek.

The school keeps the child and his milieu at a certain distance. Several studies have shown how schoolteachers, speak of the failing milieu of the children as something that not only legitimises violence against them, but also as grounds to separate them from the life of teachers and school. The pure-impure dichotomy shows in this distancing. It is common for teachers to blame children for their milieu. Our own research studies, preceding the current one, show that conversations with teachers and NGO workers are clearly marked by apathy. The body of the child from the margins is despised and seen to have the

potential to contaminate its surroundings. They are seen as free loaders who don't deserve the benefits of the state. There is a patronising approach towards children and their families.

These beliefs of teachers are not just subjective beliefs of a few teachers, but ideological frames that teachers have to internalise to varying degrees through the institutional practices they have to carry out. Some of these practices are connected with the bureaucratic hold that the state has over the everyday life of the school such as holding the assembly, taking attendance, teaching, following orders from the state machinery, holding PTMs, organising different activities as directed by the MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) office, and bureaucratic inspectors judging the teaching-learning and running of the school.

Our engagements with other people in the neighbourhood and in the market in the current study point out the larger sentiment of the city regarding them. Despite being part of the city, they are denied that status. The labour that goes into constructing such ideology shows the strong need to keep the children's lives separate in the institution of schooling (in this case) when it comes in contact with the margins of the city.

The research also shows that this apathy of the state and the life in the margins is mediated through the shadow of caste. This intermediary relationship between the state and citizenship is always hounded by identities. For instance, Veena Das has argued that alongside social contract in the state-citizen relationship, there also exists a sexual contract which makes gender an important category to understand how the state structures itself vis-à-vis its subjects. Something similar also exists vis-à-vis caste especially when we move from formal to informal modes of living and inhabiting the city.

Exclusion on the matrix of social identities is crystallised through the inclusionary practices of the state. In that context, education becomes important for the state as it becomes an apparatus that in Foucauldian terms ensures the discrimination that can continue while appearing to be egalitarian. With the Right to Education Act, all children go to the school. However, this simple membership doesn't promise belonging.

What has come to the fore in the past few months of research is the relationship between caste and city in the context of education. The children we are engaging with in our learning centre are Dalits and are in one way or another impaired by that identity. The politics of caste in a city like Delhi comes to the forefront when we engage not only with how children view schooling but also how they choose to express themselves through different artistic mediums. Some children draw and many are interested in making reels on social media platforms like Instagram. The angst of these young children and teenagers is reflected in the content they put out on social media. Their artistic expression uses violence to describe frustration and is reflected in the prop guns they use for their content.

The other side of this violence is the lack of opportunities that the city gives youth living in the slums. COVID-19 has only accelerated the disillusionment youth feel with the formal city, and they are instead finding their way through the informal city. It is these intersections that this project will explore further. Education always has two contradictory aspects that are indifferent to each other. This distinction is between education as an end in itself and education as a means to an end. On one extreme we have education being valued for knowledge generation, capacity building, and the larger growth that it

promises individuals and society. At the other extreme we find education becoming instrumental only as a means. The present techno-rational, utilitarian approach emerges from exploiting this gap and covering this gap. It finishes any kind of engagement with it. At the level of policy and theory what is required is an engagement with this gap and not only its covering.

As ethnographic work aims to reflect on the general rather than the particular, the present work on slums in a big city like Delhi tentatively reflect on how it pans out for smaller cities, and those that are in transition. It is the generic feature that must be studied as the specific conditions of the relationship of margins with these cities is examined. What emerges from the present work is the peculiar relationship that the slum shares with the city, as it neither stands completely inside the city nor on the outside. This helps to include slums in the conceptual apparatus of margins. Margins that demarcate the outside from the inside act as a border through which separation between the inside and the outside is possible, but they in themselves cannot be captured through the inside-outside binary.

Adopting the present anthropology of margins approach, the project moves beyond the 'lack' through which margins are generally seen. Despite the grain of truth in the social abandonment that margins experience, it is important to study the lives that emerge from margins. The anthropologist Joao Biehl in the context of her work with psychiatric patients nuanced our understanding of abandonment. "Whether in social abandonment or homelessness, life that no longer has any value for society is hardly synonymous with a life that no longer has any value for the person living it. Language and desire meaningfully continue even in circumstance of profound abjection. Against all odds, people keep searching for connection and for ways to endure." (Biehl, 2014). It is this language of endurance that is attended to in the present work.

## REFLECTIONS THROUGH MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL) FRAMEWORK

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The MEL framework helped us revise our research process at different stages. The spirit of reflexivity embedded in the MEL approach helped the research team keep the feedback loop vital and revisit the ambition statements that have been posed for knowledge, capacities, and people and relationships.

The research specific reflections through the MEL framework are as follows:

### Sharing Lives at the Margins

Our biggest challenge initially was how to study everyday childhood in the slum itself. Ethnographic research in school is easier because we know as researchers that we have to go the classroom when children are in class and the playground during breaks. The school gives us access to the children. But the cost at which this access comes is that the child leaves a part of herself behind when she wears the cloak of a student. The challenge of accessing children in their homes was a big one because we could not just enter their homes and lanes. To overcome this challenge, we started a learning centre in the slum. This not only facilitated capacity building of the children, but also gave us access to everyday lives of the children and their homes and parents.

Parents of children were initially reluctant to share their everyday lives and challenges with the researchers. As ethnographers we also realised that the field would open to the research through everyday work rather than periodical interviews and focus discussions just for data. Our sustained work at the learning centre and with the adults of the community developed trust and intersubjective engagement.

We also took our time to enter the houses. Initially we saw some reluctance on the part of the parents to share their lives with us, but this has changed gradually with some of them. Befriending dogs helped as most families have dogs. Sharing the same space and having an interest in their lives opened up details of lives that are lived there. Allowing the field open up to us instead of artificially pushing the research onto the field helps us develop sustained engagement with the field.

### **Ethnographic Approach**

Our sustained engagement with the field and ethnographic methods shows the need for the right orientation towards research methods. They demand flexibility and vulnerability from the researchers. They need to be woven in with the research, i.e., with context as well as research questions. They cannot be decontextualised from it. This orientation kept us open to the field and allowed us to experience the margins and the forms of lives that emerge.

We believe that research is not merely a technical activity but requires humane and empathetic engagement in all stages. Capacity building in this study includes four dimensions—developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. The team carried out a thorough literature review to understand the landscape of knowledge that examines the links between education, state, and margins as they emerge in the urban context. The knowledge built so far has enhanced the research process and facilitated our engagement with the field. The co-construction of knowledge has been towards building the conceptual knowledge related to the project and towards the methodological insights that are required. Therefore, along with the readings that trace urban sociology and urban education, team building also focused on anthropological insights further sharpen our understanding of the field. Hence, it was ensured that we developed the appropriate skills to conduct ethnographic study, particularly for people engaging in the field work. Attitudes and values such as open-mindedness, honesty, empathy, active listening, accommodating participant needs and preferences, and respectful communication has been emphasised throughout the research process. Furthermore, in our frequent meetings, learnings from the field are used continuous reflections.

Emphasis has been made on developing theory-practice links of which reading groups have been a big part. It had already been written by Bourdieu that certain theoretical frames are already assumed in our understanding of practices and all theory always assumes and corresponds to certain practices. We have consistently tried to make the research team conscious of what assumptions they are taking to the field by seriously engaging with theoretical questions in our reading groups. We also discussed our data and its possible analyses in our smaller reading groups and meetings.

## **Identities and the Margins**

The study was mindful of the heterogeneous identities of the community. The intent was to study the matrix of social identities and how in that context education shapes lives at the margins. The heterogeneous nature of the field is such that different subgroups of the community do not engage with each other. We faced the challenge of deciding which subgroup to focus on. Being divided on caste and religion, it was essential for us to focus on one group and then understand how the matrix of identities emerge.

An ethnography doesn't aim to provide a generalised image of the field and is always interested in knowing the general through the particular. After the initial fieldwork, we decided to focus on the two streets of slum where families from lower castes reside. Since the research examines the matrix of identities and the relation they share with the margins, we focussed on the families of Dalits.

## **Learning Centre and its Location**

To set up the learning centre, we faced the challenge of finding a location. We wanted a space where the greatest number of children from different subgroups could join us. The nature of the field is such that children's movement in the space of the slum is determined by their age, sex, caste, and religion. The slum doesn't open in the same way for all the children. It varies.

As the study focusses on children from Dalit households, setting up the study centre near the community hall seemed ideal. This spot is close to the Dalit households and children from these households can be seen playing and loitering around here. They became part of our learning centre, and while there we share this space with children and adults helping them with reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The learning centre provides a platform for sustained long-term engagement with the participants in the field—children and adults. It facilitates children's reading, writing, and arithmetic skills and helps them explore their artistic side with drawing and storytelling. With that, this space also takes care of engagement with social media, music, and sports. The project helps us develop a complete range of scholastic and co-scholastic knowledge and skills in the research participants. If the scholastic aspect takes care of their basic cognitive skills and knowledge, then the co-scholastic takes care of music and sports, not just honing aesthetic sensibilities but also building a sense of camaraderie in the field.

We also engage in discussions that emerge around different contemporary concerns that our country faces. We bring in an informed sociological orientation to these concerns and are able to develop an ethos that is inclusive, tolerant, egalitarian, and constitutional. This kind of sensibility is required for the times we are living in. Developing sensitivity is also important in the context of this slum that not only has a diverse population but also simmers with tension, especially along the lines of caste, gender, and religion.

## **Differential Learning Levels of Students**

The varying learning needs of students was also a challenge. While a major chunk struggles with reading and writing—some simply copy or can write little bit—there are few children who have acquired primary literacy skills and need further education and training. Alongside these challenges we also had to organise



resources for students so that gaps in their learning could be addressed. This was not possible merely through schoolbooks. We organised story sessions and drawing activities with the students.

To address the differential demands of students in terms of reading, writing, and arithmetic, we divided students in terms of those who can only copy and cannot read; those who can copy and read; those who can read and write; and those who cannot even copy. This kind of distribution facilitated our engagement with them, and we were able to upgrade their position vis-à-vis their needs.

With this, for free expression, creativity, and freedom, we carried drawing sheets and colours with essential stationery. We let children draw and scribble. This becomes an activity that captures everyone's attention and children from all age groups are attracted to our learning centre.

We also acknowledge the lack of space and resources for sports for the children living in the slums. For example, our research assistant started playing cricket with the children and we realised that the equipment children are using to play cricket or volleyball (two sports we saw children play) were not up to the mark and already excluded them from engaging in sports as a learning tool with any seriousness.

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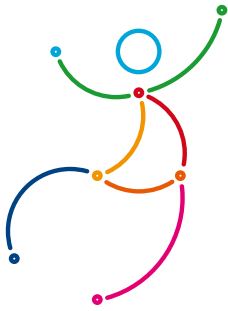
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